'Tell Me What You Eat':

Representations of Food in Nineteenth-

Century Culture

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Abstract

Drawing upon the poststructuralist theories of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, this thesis analyses the multiple significations attached to food in nineteenth-century culture, and the art and literature of the Victorian bourgeoisie in particular. Chapter one utilises Lacanian theories of vision and desire in order to suggest that nineteenth-century representations of food are frequently caught up in a politics of display, constituting a feast for the eyes as well as the palate. It goes on to argue that the preoccupation with display in the middle-class dining room reveals something of the nature of bourgeois desire, as well as the fundamental instability of subjectivity. Chapter two examines the class-specific locations in which food was consumed, focusing on the special status accorded to the dining room in bourgeois culture. It also suggests that the picnic – a phenomenon which transported the middle classes outside of the security of the domestic realm – holds a disruptive, disorderly potential in representation, which ultimately undoes the inside/outside binary used to order Victorian eating spaces. Chapter three considers the relationship between food and nation in nineteenth-century art and literature, arguing that racial and cultural others are often portrayed in terms of food, functioning simultaneously as objects of desire – appetising dishes to enhance the white, British palate – and sources of anxiety, having a destabilising effect upon the hegemonic cultural identity when 'consumed'. Considered collectively, these chapters demonstrate that the act of eating is by no means an innocent one. Freighted with cultural significations both manifest and covert, caught up in complex networks of meaning relating to hierarchies of gender, race and class, food and its associated practices work to construct, as well as to nourish, the consuming subject.

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Introduction – The Power of Myth

What interests the historian of everyday life is the <u>invisible</u>.[1]

It is the peculiar trait of nineteenth-century bourgeois art to render familiar things inconspicuous, almost invisible. Invariably steeped in domestic detail and governed by the laws of mimesis, the classic realist novels and narrative paintings of the era can be seen to abound, on close inspection, with references to food and practices of consumption, yet these references are not immediately apparent to the casual reader or spectator. Instances of eating, though ubiquitous, fail to elicit notice, let alone excite critical attention. How is this curious distortion to be accounted for? Simply by reference to the fact that, in nineteenth-century culture and modern-day reading practices, the act of eating is relegated to the status of the <u>everyday</u>.

Of course, as Michel de Certeau points out, everyday life is, in fact, far from invisible; its routines and rituals surround us, forging the world in which we live, shaping individual subjectivities and social relations.[2] It is because of our total immersion in the everyday that we are blinded to its presence within representation; its very familiarity works to promote its (in)apparent invisibility, to camouflage its insidious existence. To the uncritical observer, the portrayal of a dinner party in a Victorian novel

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[1] Paul Leuilliot quoted in Michel de Certeau, 'The Annals of Everyday Life', in <u>The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking</u>, eds. Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 3-4 (p. 3).

[2] De Certeau, 'The Annals of Everyday Life', p. 3.

functions merely as a device of the plot, a means of establishing contact between the story's hero and heroine; the description of a young girl eating a pear in a garden represents a casual expositional detail, included purely to amplify the realism of the text; and the presence of a fruit bowl in a painting of a Victorian interior acts as a decorative, but meaningless, embellishment, introduced only to amuse the spectator's eye. Food and eating are familiar aspects of the everyday; we recognise and assimilate them without pause. In realist art and literature, their cultural content is not immediately obvious. Consequently, the representational practice of the everyday is able to fix and defuse the meaning of that which it depicts: it naturalises the things it describes and, by implicitly denying the existence of alternative or contradictory readings, neutralises their impact. The everyday purports simply to recreate reality and, in doing so, absents itself from our critical gaze.

However, as this study will demonstrate, everyday practices such as eating are by no means natural or neutral: depictions of food and the rituals of consumption in nineteenth-century culture are invested with ideologically-freighted significations which encompass contemporary ideas about gender, race, class and sexuality. The suggested invisibility of food in the representation of the period masks its involvement in the establishment of cultural myths and social norms, and conceals its complicity in the construction of a hierarchical politics of consumption.

The Politics of Eating

In Capital (1867), Karl Marx defines food as one of humanity's 'natural wants', for although, he argues, the quantity and quality of fare considered necessary to sustain subjects in their existence may vary according to such factors as history and geography, it is nevertheless universally accepted that some level of sustenance is essential to the creation and maintenance of human life.[3] Marx's ideas about food are important inasmuch as they suggest the uncertain status accorded to the act of eating within the epistemological field. On the one hand, food is a biological necessity – a source of nutrition for the human organism, which ensures its continued existence – but on the other, it is a substance whose relationship to the subject is historically and culturally determined. As Roland Barthes points out:

> No doubt, food is, anthropologically speaking (though very much in the abstract), the first need; but ever since man has ceased living off wild berries, this need has been highly structured. Substances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification.[4]

Food represents not only a collection of products that can be used to nurture and sustain the human subject but also, simultaneously, 'a system of

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[3] Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), Vol. 35, p. 181. Capital was first published in German in 1867; an English translation appeared in 1887.

[4] Roland Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', in Food and Culture: A Reader, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 20-27 (pp. 21-22).

communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior'.[5] Food, in other words, is invested with cultural meaning, and its relation to the subject is as much discursive as natural.

In order to explore this contention, this introduction will examine the ways in which representations of food 'mean' in an early-Victorian novel which, as Rod Mengham points out, is forever associated 'in the popular imagination ... with the idea of going hungry': Oliver Twist (1838).[6] In this text, references to food are often overtly politicised: the figure of Oliver, 'desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery', asking the master of the workhouse for more supper, is one of Dickens's most famous creations, and forms part of an open attack on the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, a piece of legislation which led to inadequate provisions being administered in workhouses so as to discourage the able-bodied from entering there as paupers.[7] The act itself came about as a result of the massive demographic changes witnessed in Britain following the Industrial Revolution; these transformed the question of food provision into an explicitly political concern. Successive nineteenth-century administrations were faced with the same insistent problem: how to feed a burgeoning population, which had doubled from almost nine million at the turn of the century to a colossal eighteen million in the space of fifty years?[8] The problem was exacerbated by the

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[5] Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology', p. 21.

[6] Rod Mengham, Charles Dickens (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2001), p. 21.

[7] Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, ed. Angus Wilson (1838; London: Penguin, 1966), p. 56.

[8] For details of demographic changes, see John Burnett, Plenty and Want: A Social History of Food in England from 1815 to the Present Day, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 3-4.

growth of new urban centres. As harvests failed, people flocked from rural

communities to industrial towns in search of work. Thus, as John Burnett

points out, 'not only had an ever-growing population to be fed, but it was one

which, as the century progressed, became more and more divorced from the

land which had formerly supplied it'.[9] New patterns of consumption

demanded new means of food production: Britain, therefore, began to look

to its colonies to supply the levels of food required to sustain its rapidly

expanding population.

However, in cultivating foreign countries to provide for a hungry

population back home, often with little regard for the needs of the indigenous

peoples whose lands they usurped, the Victorians added a new dimension to

the politicisation of food: the question of access. If the nineteenth century

was, for some, an age of conspicuous consumption – a time when the

standard of one's dinner table was a sure signifier of one's affluence and

social status – for others, it was a period of almost continual want. Recent

nutritional analyses of the Victorian diet have revealed that much of the

population (for example, the lowest paid members of the working classes,

along with the inmates of institutions, such as the workhouse) existed on

fare which, today, would be deemed below the minimum level of

subsistence.[10] In <u>Oliver Twist</u>, the 'baby farm' to which Oliver is dispatched

as an infant expends only 'sevenpence-halfpenny' per week on food and

clothing for each of its young inmates – minus the amount appropriated by

the avaricious superintendent, Mrs Mann. As the narrator ironically remarks,

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[9] Burnett, <u>Plenty and Want</u>, p. 4

[10] See Burnett, <u>Plenty and Want</u>, pp. 111-15, 158-88.

'sevenpence-halfpenny's worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be got for sevenpence-halfpenny – quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable'. Mrs Mann, therefore, decides to '[consign] the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them', obliging her wards to 'exist upon the smallest possible portion of the weakest possible food'.[11]

The question of access to food did not restrict itself to conventional class demarcations; there was also a gendered division of consumption at play around the nineteenth-century dinner table. In households both rich and poor, it was the man of the house, in his role as chief benefactor, who inevitably procured the greatest share of any meal provided. When, in Oliver Twist, Fagin, Charley Bates and the Artful Dodger bring a rabbit pie and other sundry eatables to the home of Bill Sikes, it is Bill who tosses the meal 'down his throat without a moment's hesitation', while Nancy, 'pale and reduced with ... privation', goes without.[12] Likewise, when Noah Claypole and his beloved Charlotte decide to raid the pantry of their employers, the Sowerberrys, it is Noah who enjoys the best of the illicit feast. Standing behind him, opening oysters from a barrel, Charlotte declares, 'I like to see you eat 'em, Noah dear, better than eating 'em myself'.[13] Food in nineteenth-century culture was closely connected to issues of accessibility and relations of power: hierarchies of consumption conspired to politicise this necessity of life.

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[11] Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. 48.

[12] Dickens, Oliver Twist, pp. 349, 345.

[13] Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. 251.

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The Pleasure of Eating

Where food was available in abundance, however, the act of eating became enmeshed not in a politics of privation but one of pleasure. In his elegant and witty compendium on the art of fine dining, The Physiology of Taste (1825), Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin persistently associates food with happiness, arguing that the act of consumption is not simply a biological requirement but also a source of gratification in its own right. 'The pleasures of the table are of all times and all ages, of every country and every day', he asserts, adding later, 'when we eat, we experience an indefinable and peculiar sensation of well-being, arising out of our inner consciousness; so that by the mere act of eating we repair our losses, and add to the number of our years'.[14]

Food was certainly a source of pleasure for the financially privileged, who regularly lavished money upon epicurean feasts. Great chefs with commensurately great reputations, such as the Frenchmen Antonin Carême and Alexis Soyer, converged on Britain during the nineteenth century, attracted by the nation's ostentatious wealth and insatiable appetite for fine cuisine. As a result, John Burnett notes,

> the Victorian upper classes, who denounced gluttony almost as vehemently as they did immorality, had their palates educated, and came to be as fond of good food as they were of other sins of the flesh. Probably no civilization since the Roman ate as well as they did. The whole resources of culinary art were at their

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[14] Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, The Physiology of Taste, or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy (1825; London: Peter Davies, 1925), pp. 3, 29.

command, and combined with the achievements of modern science to place the delicacies of the world on the tables of the rich.[15]

The pleasure of eating was not the esoteric preserve of the aristocracy, however. The contentment engendered by commensality, or the sharing of food, ensured that meal times functioned as a potential source of solace for all classes of Victorian society. After all, this was a culture which accorded supreme privilege to the harmony and stability of the family unit. The act of sharing a meal around a communal dinner table came to be seen as the ultimate signifier of familial love, a source of emotional as well as nutritional fulfilment.

Food betokens comfort: when a feverish Oliver Twist is first taken into kindly Mr Brownlow's household, Mrs Bedwin, the housekeeper, uses hot, strong broth (devoured by Oliver with 'extraordinary expedition') to nurse him back to health.[16] Interestingly, in Dickens's novel, the equation of food, cheer and community also holds true outside of the respectable middle-class home. Fagin's gang – a perverse incarnation of the bourgeois family group – are consistently described in the act of sharing food. Oliver's initial encounter with the Artful Dodger is concluded with 'a long and hearty meal' of 'ready-dressed ham and a half-quartern loaf'; in Fagin's den, meanwhile, he shares a meal of fried sausages with the assembled pupils of the old man's school of thieves and later breakfasts on some 'coffee ... hot rolls and

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[15] Burnett, Plenty and Want, p. 83.

[16] Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. 129.

ham' supplied by the Dodger.[17] Although geographically and morally divergent, it seems that, initially, Mr Brownlow's Pentonville home and Fagin's Saffron Hill lair function similarly as sources of food and happiness for little Oliver. Later, however, when the orphan boy discovers the criminal disposition of Fagin's gang, he declines to partake of their meals: the narrator comments that Oliver has 'no great appetite' for the 'dish of sheep's heads' supplied by Nancy prior to a planned burglary.[18] Yet, among themselves, the thieves continue to take pleasure in sharing food. Charley Bates goes into ecstasies about the provisions he brings to Bill Sikes's apartment:

> 'Half a pound of seven and sixpenny green, so precious strong that if you mix it with biling water, it'll go nigh to blow the lid of the tea-pot off; a pound and a-half of moist sugar that the niggers didn't work at all at, afore they got it up to sitch a pitch of goodness, – oh no! Two half-quartern brans; pound of best fresh; piece of double Glos'ster; and, to wind up all, some of the richest sort you ever lushed!'

> ... 'Ah!' said Fagin, rubbing his hands with great satisfaction. 'You'll do, Bill; you'll do now.'[19]

In fictional Victorian households both rich and poor, respectable and criminal, food serves as a potential source of pleasure for hungry residents.

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[17] Dickens, Oliver Twist, pp. 101, 105, 109.

[18] Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. 201.

[19] Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. 349.

Food and Language

As this preliminary analysis indicates, the consumption of food features in

nineteenth-century representation not only as a 'natural' response to one of

the human subject's most basic needs, as Marx proposes, but also as an

ideologically-loaded act enveloped in complex nexuses of power and

pleasure. Barthes explains:

> When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern
>
> man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive
>
> fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it
>
> constitutes an information; it signifies.[20]

Food operates like a language; within its manifold textures, aromas and

tastes, its various modes of production and rituals of consumption, a number

of culturally-coded meanings are inscribed.

The communicative power of food was first theorised in a serious way

by anthropologists in the twentieth century. Mary Douglas, for example,

asserts that food acts as a code, transmitting messages about the 'different

degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions

across ... boundaries' within a given culture.[21] In his seminal account of the

centrality of food to human culture, 'The Culinary Triangle', Claude Lévi-

Strauss also makes a clear comparison between language and food, arguing

that both exist as essential structures of human life. He claims that, just as

'in all the languages of the world, complex systems of opposition among

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[20] Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology', p. 21 (my emphasis).

[21] Mary Douglas, 'Deciphering a Meal', in Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in

Anthropology, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 231-51 (p. 231).

phonemes do nothing but elaborate in multiple directions a simpler system common to them all', so the complex attitudes and behaviours displayed towards food preparation by different cultures and peoples all emanate from a single structure: 'a triangular semantic field whose three points correspond respectively to the categories of the raw, the cooked and the rotted'.[22] According to Lévi-Strauss, this system can be elaborated on to account for the different ways in which the cooking of a society functions as 'a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure – or else resigns itself, still unconsciously, to revealing its contradictions'; crucially, however, the various meanings attached to food are always reducible in the final instance to a single, underlying structure.[23]

Structuralist anthropology of the kind evinced by Lévi-Strauss, then, attempts to locate in the language of food a universal interpretive framework, common to all human cultures throughout time and space. Yet does the structure of language itself support this drive towards the imposition of a single, definitive meaning upon culinary culture? In order to address this question, it is necessary briefly to consider the nature of the linguistic sign.

The Nature of the Sign

For centuries, Western philosophy characterised language as a tool to aid communication. In doing so, it corresponded to the common sense assumption that language facilitates the expression of a concept which

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[22] Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Culinary Triangle', in Food and Culture: A Reader, pp. 28-35 (pp. 28-29).

[23] Lévi-Strauss, 'The Culinary Triangle', p. 35.

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exists prior to it. The structuralist approach to language proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century modifies this model in order to suggest that language is a system of signs which precedes the entities it apparently describes. Each sign in the system represents the alliance of a signifier (that part of the sign which relates to the senses, often conceived of as the sound-image or written figure) and a signified (the intelligible part of the sign, its concept). According to Saussure, the meaning generated by the sign does not result from an intrinsic link between the signifier and the signified, but rather from the differences which exist between any given sign and the others which make up the semiological system: 'whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it'.[24] Put very simply, we understand the signifier 'black', and the concept to which it corresponds, because it differs from 'white', 'red', 'yellow' and so on. The sign works by a process of differentiation: its meaning is made manifest by the privileging of a single signification over all of a language's other potential significations.

However, as poststructuralist theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan suggest, the meaning conveyed by the sign is neither full nor fully present: its integrity is undermined by its very structure. For, if the sign can make itself understood only by reference to the 'absent' significations from which it differentiates itself, these other meanings are, paradoxically, always 'present', threatening to supplant and supplement the supposedly singular, definitive meaning conveyed by the sign. The trace of the

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[24] Ferdinand de Saussure, <u>Course in General Linguistics</u>, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana, 1974), p. 121.

repudiated other 'affects the totality of the sign', as Derrida suggests;[25] it

renders meaning at once plural and partial. Commenting on this plurality,

Lacan asserts,

> there is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if
>
> attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole
>
> articulation of relevant contexts suspended 'vertically', as it were,
>
> from that point.[26]

Meaning, for Lacan, is polyphonic, 'aligned along the several staves of a

score'.[27] The sign cannot support the imposition of a final, fixed meaning:

there will always be an element of play in its significations, as the incessant

differing and deferral of meaning disrupts its very structure.

The Language of Food

If the sign cannot convey meaning in a simple, transparent way, it follows

that the language of food, too, is subject to the inherent instabilities of

signifying practice. In nineteenth-century art and literature, representations

of food and its associated rituals are often invested with multiple

significations. In Oliver Twist, for instance, a toasting-fork illustrates the

potential of culinary apparatus to transmit meanings other than those overtly

stated. The item in question is held by Fagin who, when first introduced to

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[25] Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and
London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 73.

[26] Jacques Lacan, 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud', in
Écrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; London and New York: Routledge, 2001),
pp. 161-97 (p. 170).

[27] Lacan, 'The Agency of the Letter', p. 170.

Oliver and the reader, is occupied with frying sausages over a fire. On a superficial level, the meaning of the toasting-fork here is obvious: it is merely an implement with which to prod and pick up the sausages as they cook. Yet, when read in conjunction with the description of Fagin and his surroundings, the fork can be interpreted in another way. Here is the scene presented by the narrator:

> The walls and ceiling of the room were perfectly black with age and dirt .... In a frying-pan, which was on the fire, and which was secured to the mantelshelf by a string, some sausages were cooking; and standing over them, with a toasting-fork in his hand, was a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villanous-looking [sic] and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair .... [Four or five boys] turned round and grinned at Oliver. So did the Jew himself, toasting-fork in hand.[28]

The presentation of a grinning, old man in blackened surroundings, 'toasting-fork in hand', and framed by fire, artfully demonises Fagin by evoking the figure of the devil. The toasting-fork, with its hellish associations, is instrumental to this process, functioning at once as an innocent kitchen utensil and a subtle but insistent signifier of Fagin's diabolic character. Through the plurality of its language, the text effectively condemns Fagin without making direct mention of his nefarious nature or criminal habits.

Signifiers sustain multiple meanings. As Lacan points out, 'the structure of the signifying chain discloses ... the possibility I have ... to use it

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[28] Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. 105.

in order to signify something quite other than what it says'.[29] Such

supplementary meanings need not be consciously produced: as Catherine

Belsey suggests, 'inevitably invaded by what it sets out to exclude, any

proposition is shadowed by its differentiating other'.[30] It matters little, then,

whether Dickens intended that Fagin be interpreted as a satanic figure: the

text, in its multiplicity, supports this reading. In doing so, it also reveals

something about Victorian attitudes to race, ethnicity and class. An

important element of Fagin's demonisation in Oliver Twist is his Jewishness:

the novel concurs with and promotes a set of stereotypes prevalent in

nineteenth-century culture. In this way, an apparently innocuous culinary

object, like a toasting-fork, can come to be implicated in the construction and

representation of popular values, principles, fears and beliefs: the

establishment of a discursive mode Roland Barthes terms 'myth'.

Myth and Meaning

Myth, according to Barthes, is a language: it is 'a system of communication

... a message'; it is 'a mode of signification, a form'.[31] In keeping with this

formulation, myth should not be defined as the narrative content of the

stories a culture tells itself about itself; rather, the essence of myth – the

source of its durable power – should be sought in the way its stories are told.

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[29] Lacan, 'The Agency of the Letter', pp. 171-72.

[30] Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 118.

[31] Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (1972; London: Vintage, 2000), p. 109.

Cultural myths are to be found everywhere: they produce and propagate the values and ideals which govern our day-to-day lives. And yet, in doing so, they fail to draw attention to themselves and their productive power. Myth, like the imperceptible reference to food in nineteenth-century representation, is a strangely reclusive figure. You need not take any notice of me, it seems to say, for I am merely telling you a truth that you already know; I represent only what goes without saying. The task of myth is to naturalise ideas and assumptions which are, in fact, historically and culturally produced; its purpose is to resist the impulse for change by insisting 'that's just the way things are, the way they've always been, and the way they always will be'. As Barthes suggests,

> myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in
> it, things lose the memory that they once were made .... A
> conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it
> has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature.[32]

Myth claims to be ahistorical: it suggests a certain fixity of meaning which transcends temporality, and yet it is precisely because myth is historically and culturally constructed that it is able to sustain its insidious power. Myth is capable of change: it can transform itself to correspond with the needs and values of a particular cultural moment, while simultaneously proclaiming the essential immutability of its nature. By means of this disingenuous feint, it is able, as Barthes suggests, 'to empty reality': it causes 'a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage ... in short, a perceptible absence'.[33] How does

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[32] Barthes, Mythologies, p. 142.

[33] Barthes, Mythologies, p. 143.

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this relate to the perceived absence of food in nineteenth-century representation?

Food, as previously established, has the potential to function as a language: its constituent elements and associated practices take on the character of signifiers, producing and transmitting culturally-loaded meanings. Occasionally, the signifying status of the literary or pictorial item of food is rendered explicit to the consumer of nineteenth-century culture. More often, however, its meanings are hidden from view, cloaked in the 'naturalness' of myth. In this way, cultural forms fail to acknowledge their own status as representation. Realism is conflated with reality, and herein resides the danger of myth. For, as Barthes asserts,

> it is both reprehensible and deceitful to confuse the sign with what is signified. And it is a duplicity which is peculiar to bourgeois art: between the intellectual and the visceral sign is hypocritically inserted a hybrid, at once elliptical and pretentious, which is pompously christened 'nature'.[34]

Cultural myths refuse to recognise their status as signifying practice: by claiming to represent reality as it is, they deflect attention from the ideological content with which they are imbued, masking their own productive power.

The myth of meat-eating generated in nineteenth-century culture serves to illustrate this point, highlighting the elusive ideological content invested in apparently straightforward alimentary signifiers. Within Victorian bourgeois circles, meat was figured as a comestible best suited to the male

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[34] Barthes, Mythologies, p. 28.

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appetite: its dense, fleshy texture, sanguinity and carnality all combined to connote a certain raw power and sexuality closely associated with the masculine.[35] The consumption of meat by women, therefore, was deemed somewhat inappropriate, particularly within the decorous dining rooms of the middle classes. Of course, this is not to suggest that women in nineteenth-century society never ate meat but rather that, in terms of Victorian values, meat-eating was a male-gendered activity. Interestingly, such cultural ideals often translate themselves into comparative forms of behaviour: in her study of anorexia among Victorian girls, Joan Jacobs Brumberg cites a number of examples in which nineteenth-century women express open disdain for the practice of eating meat.[36]

Whether the myth of gendered meat consumption affected 'real' life or not, its morality certainly infiltrated nineteenth-century bourgeois representation, albeit in a stealthy, surreptitious manner. A sentence from Oliver Twist exemplifies the point: enquiring as to the whereabouts of Nancy, Fagin is told by the barman of 'a low public-house, in the filthiest part of Little Saffron Hill' that the object of his search is 'havid a plate of boiled beef id the bar'.[37] This statement appears to hold little importance in terms of the novel as a whole: it constitutes one of the 'invisible' references to food evoked earlier in this chapter. Indeed, the reader could be forgiven for dismissing it

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[35] The association of meat-eating and masculinity is still prevalent today. See Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil, Sociology on the Menu: An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 53-54.

[36] Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa (New York: Vintage, 2000), pp. 172-74

[37] Dickens, Oliver Twist, pp. 152-55.

as a piece of cheap, anti-Semitic humour (Barney the barman is a Jew, and this accounts for his curiously nasal intonation), before moving on quickly to a more noteworthy part of the text. Yet, to do so would be to disregard the mythology of meat-eating implicit in Barney's words. Nancy's consumption of animal flesh, in a space reserved for male subjects (the bar of a public house), signifies her non-conformity with feminine norms and implies the possession of a contentious, 'unnatural' sexuality. This, in turn, confirms and reaffirms her status as a fallen, criminalised woman within the novel.

None of this is explicit: the reference to Nancy's meat-eating is not designed to stand out from the text in any way, to strike the reader with the immediacy of its mythological status. Rather, the signifier of the boiled beef suggests a natural connection with what it represents ('animal flesh', through its associations with potency and virility, equals 'sins of the flesh'), and, in this way, unconsciously incorporates itself into a set of values already present in nineteenth-century culture. Indeed, prior to this textual moment, meat-eating has already been linked with 'spirit' and a blatant disregard for authority. When, during his time at the Sowerberrys', Oliver rebels against the tyranny of his co-worker, Noah Claypole, Mr Bumble attributes his violent outburst to his new, protein-based diet. 'It's not Madness, ma'am', he tells Mrs Sowerberry:

> It's Meat .... You've over-fed him, ma'am. You've raised a
> artificial soul and spirit in him, ma'am, unbecoming a person of his
> condition .... If you had kept the boy on gruel, ma'am, this would
> never have happened.[38]

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[38] Dickens, <u>Oliver Twist</u>, p. 93.

Mr Bumble's explanation represents an attempt to justify the meagre diet offered to inmates of the workhouse; yet it also draws on contemporary cultural beliefs equating meat with strength and zeal. The veracity of this identification is unimportant: popular myths legitimate themselves by presenting themselves as natural, beyond question, true. Nancy's predisposition for red meat merely confirms what readers already know about women, food and sexuality; however, it does so in such a way as to conceal the efficacy of its signifying capability. It is the peculiar power of myth to assert its universal presence within representation, while simultaneously effacing its existence and denying its status as a producer of meaning.

Food, Myth and Power

Power, according to the theorist Michel Foucault, is to be found everywhere: it infiltrates discourses, institutions, family units, even individual bodies, marking, shaping and controlling their various modes of existence. Power produces: 'it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth'.[39] Yet its productive capacity does not stem from a single locus – the might of an omniscient ruler, or the operations of the state apparatus, for example. Power is everywhere 'because it comes from everywhere': it produces and reproduces itself 'from one moment to the next, at every point,

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[39] Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 194.

or rather in every relation from one point to another'.[40] It functions not in isolation but through the construction of diffuse and elaborate networks, as Foucault suggests:

> Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystillization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.[41]

Myth is closely connected to relations of power: its narratives are invariably implicated in the establishment of hierarchies which work to privilege some while disenfranchising others. Furthermore, like power itself, myth stems from a variety of sources; much of its discursive authority derives from the untraceability of its origins. Myth, then, can be identified as one of the strategies by which agencies of power exert their omnipotence. Myths of food, by extension, represent an important means of producing and regulating bodies and modes of behaviour within a specific cultural moment.

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[40] Michel Foucault, The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Volume One, trans. Robert Hurley (1978; London: Penguin, 1998), p. 93.

[41] Foucault, Will to Knowledge, pp. 92-93.

As previously noted, the myth of meat-eating prevalent in the nineteenth

century worked to curb the carnivorous instincts of bourgeois women

anxious to dissociate themselves from their bodily appetites. In this way,

power can be seen to have worked directly upon those bodies it sought to

order and control.

And yet, are we really to accept that the bodies of nineteenth-century

women submitted, meekly, comprehensively, to the forces imposed upon

them? Of course not, for, as Foucault points out, 'where there is power,

there is resistance', or rather 'there is a plurality of resistances ... distributed

in irregular fashion' throughout the discursive field.[42] According to Michel de

Certeau, such resistances can be attributed to differences in modes of

'consumption': if a culture can be said to feed off the myths it produces about

itself, then these same myths can be consumed in ways contrary to those

intended by the dominant order. Referring to the apparent success of the

Spanish conquistadors in imposing their own culture upon the indigenous

peoples of the New World, de Certeau writes:

> Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians
>
> nevertheless often made of the rituals, representations, and laws
>
> imposed upon them something quite different from what their
>
> conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or
>
> altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and
>
> references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept.
>
> They were other within the very colonization that outwardly
>
> assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected

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[42] Foucault, Will to Knowledge, pp. 95, 96.

its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it. The strength of their difference lay in procedures of 'consumption'.[43]

Similarly, the cultural order nourished by nineteenth-century myths of food can be challenged by differences in modes of consumption. The character of Nancy, for example, does not necessarily reject the myth of meat-eating imposed by Victorian culture when she consumes her plate of boiled beef; rather, she challenges the socially-sanctioned dictum which directs that women should be asexual, ethereal beings with no carnal appetites. If meat imparts 'spirit', then Nancy's consumption of beef enables her to usurp the masculine power traditionally associated with a carnivorous diet; notably, she is later willing to defy both Fagin and Bill Sikes in the protection of Oliver's interests. In this way, the 'stout and hearty' figure of Nancy simultaneously subscribes to and subverts the myth of meat-eating implicit in Victorian culture.[44]

Significantly, though, her act of defiance does not go unpunished in the bourgeois world of Dickens's novel. Her death at the hands of the brutal Sikes later in the story represents a form of textual retribution for her willingness to subvert the dominant cultural order. Unlike Oliver, Nancy refuses to absorb herself into the middle-class world whose authority she has audaciously challenged; twice she declines offers of financial and moral assistance from Oliver's delicate and demure sister, Rose Maylie. Nancy's

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[43] Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and London: University of Los Angeles Press, 1988), p. xiii.

[44] Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. 111.

meat-eating functions as an early signal of her incompatibility with the bourgeois social order, an incompatibility which ultimately comes to justify and necessitate her death in the novel. As the representational practice of <u>Oliver Twist</u> reveals, the mechanisms of power and possibilities of resistance inherent in cultural myths lend a political dimension to everyday items such as food and everyday practices such as eating.

Consuming the Past

In the preface to his collection of twentieth-century myths, Barthes pauses momentarily in the explication of his project to consider the implications of his task: is there, he asks in a moment of self-reflection, a mythology of the mythologist at work in his text?[45] It is a pertinent question, and one that is particularly relevant to this study. Does the critic, in exposing the myths and power relations at work in a given cultural moment, merely engage in a 'pious show of unmasking' the falsely obvious?[46] Does he or she, in aiming to render transparent the opacity of 'what goes without saying', set him or herself up as an irrefutable authority capable of stepping outside of culture in order to objectively explain the world? Is the critic, in other words, guilty of replacing one set of cultural myths with another?

It is, in many ways, a danger more immanent to this study than to that of Barthes, for while <u>Mythologies</u> must recognise its contemporaneity with, and consequent immersion in, the culture of which it writes, my thesis takes

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[45] Barthes, <u>Mythologies</u>, p. 12.

[46] Barthes, <u>Mythologies</u>, p. 9.

as its object that distant and 'unknown immensity', the past.[47] While it is difficult to extricate oneself from the values and beliefs of one's own cultural milieu, it is all too easy, when engaging with the process of historiography, to be seduced by the idea that, because past and present are irrevocably divided, it is possible to approach the past with something like the objective eye of an impartial observer, to analyse it, understand it and recapitulate it as a form of knowledge. The writer of history tends to consume the various, disparate elements of the past and reconstitute them as something whole, ordered and knowable, promoting, in doing so, the policy of 'selection between what can be <u>understood</u> and what must be <u>forgotten</u> in order to obtain the representation of a present intelligibility', as de Certeau suggests. However, something of what is repressed by the determining weight of History will always haunt accounts of the past:

> Whatever this new understanding of the past holds to be irrelevant
> – shards created by the selection of materials, remainders left
> aside by an explication – comes back, despite everything, on the
> edges of discourse or in its rifts and crannies: 'resistances',
> 'survivals', or delays discreetly perturb the pretty order of a line of
> 'progress' or a system of interpretation.[48]

Like de Certeau, I am interested in the 'leftovers' discarded by History in the pursuit of its totalising quest, for these – the bits that don't quite fit – prove

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[47] Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 3.

[48] De Certeau, Writing of History, p. 4.

that the past cannot support the imposition of a single, final meaning: at best, our knowledge of it is partial, fragmented, and contradictory.

How could it be otherwise? When analysing the past, all we have access to are the traces of meaning remnant in historical artefacts such as books (both fictional and factual), paintings and sculptures, and the concrete utensils of everyday life. From these signifiers, we are able to construct and deconstruct the myths, values and ideals that existed in past cultures, often producing, in doing so, meanings that were not consciously recognised at the time. That is not to say, however, that such readings are illegitimate. As Belsey points out, accounts of the past are 'always delimited by the signifier', in which 'not only the real, but meaning too, while not simply lost, is forever differed and deferred, relegated by signifying practice itself to uncertainty and undecidability, difficult, recalcitrant, evasive'.[49] It is the responsibility of the critic to acknowledge both the vagaries inherent in signifying practice and his or her own complicity in the construction of new histories and cultural myths, for only then will it be possible to produce an analysis which does justice to the intractability of the past.

This thesis can be characterised as a work of cultural criticism. It differs from social histories of food in the nineteenth century, such as John Burnett's Plenty and Want for, though comprehensive and authoritative, Burnett's work, like that of food historian C. Anne Wilson, has a 'factual' basis and fails to take full account of the significance of representational practice or the ideological potential of food in art and literature. It also differs

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[49] Catherine Belsey, 'Reading Cultural History', in Reading the Past, ed. Tamsin Spargo (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 103-17 (pp. 112-13).

from the writings of sociologists and anthropologists, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas, who recognise food as a language only to identify in it a kind of hidden code which, once deciphered, can be used to explain the entire system of human culinary practice. By contrast, this thesis contends that the meanings attached to food are historically specific: though continuities can be seen to exist across eras, changes and differences, disruptions and inconsistencies, also emerge between (and within) cultural moments.

In its analysis of the multiple significations of food in nineteenth-century culture, and the art and literature of the Victorian bourgeoisie in particular, this study draws upon the work of four poststructuralist theorists – Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan – whose disparate writings on language, meaning and culture suggest a number of strategies with which to interrogate the everyday. Chapter one utilises Lacanian theories of vision and desire in order to suggest that nineteenth-century representations of food are often caught up in a politics of display, constituting a feast for the eyes as well as the palate. It goes on to argue that the preoccupation with display in the middle-class dining room reveals something of the nature of bourgeois desire, as well as the fundamental instability of subjectivity. Chapter two examines the class-specific locations in which food was consumed, focusing particularly on the special status accorded to the dining room within bourgeois culture. It also suggests that the picnic – a phenomenon which transported the middle classes outside of the security of the domestic realm – holds a disruptive, disorderly potential in representation, which ultimately undoes the inside/outside binary used to

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order Victorian eating spaces. Chapter three, meanwhile, considers the relationship between food and nation in nineteenth-century art and literature, arguing that racial and cultural others are often portrayed in terms of food, functioning simultaneously as objects of desire – appetising dishes to enhance the white, British palate – and sources of anxiety, having a destabilising effect upon the hegemonic cultural identity when 'consumed'.

Considered collectively, these chapters show that the act of eating is by no means an innocent one. Freighted with cultural significations both manifest and covert, caught up in complex networks of meaning relating to hierarchies of gender, race and class, food and its associated practices work to construct, as well as to nourish, the consuming subject. As Brillat-Savarin proclaims in his oft-quoted aphorism, 'Tell me what you eat; I will tell you what you are'.[50]

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[50] Brillat-Savarin, <u>Physiology of Taste</u>, p. 3.

Chapter 1 – A Feast for the Eyes: Desire and Display at the Nineteenth-Century Table

Having stolen 'across the moors, / ... with heart on fire', young Porphyro, hero of John Keats's poem, The Eve of St. Agnes (1820), ventures inside the fortified castle inhabited by Madeline, the object of his desire, hoping to gain sight of his beloved 'but for one moment in the tedious hours, / That he might gaze and worship all unseen'.[1] It is a dangerous quest. Madeline's kinsmen, gathered to celebrate the feast of St. Agnes, are sworn enemies of his lineage; if found within the castle walls, Porphyro will almost certainly be killed. Nevertheless, with the assistance of Angela, an old woman-servant, he manages to evade the assembled revellers and gain access to Madeline's bedchamber, where he conceals himself in an adjoining closet. From this vantage point he hopes to catch a clandestine glimpse of Madeline's beauty and perhaps even win her for his bride.

His wait is not a long one. According to legend, on St. Agnes's Eve, a maiden who fasts, retires to bed and then fixes her gaze heavenwards will be rewarded in her dreams with a vision of her future husband. Beguiled by this myth, Madeline escapes the maelstrom of the feast for the safety of her chamber where, she assumes, she may perform unwitnessed the fabled ritual. She reaches her room breathless with anticipation and excitement, a state shared by the implicit reader of the poem, who must wait patiently, like Porphyro, for her to complete her vespers, unloose her hair, disrobe and

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[1] John Keats, The Eve of St. Agnes, in John Keats: Selected Poems, ed. John Barnard (1820; London: Penguin, 1988), ll. 74-75, 79-80.

take to her bed. There, having carefully performed the rites of the ceremony, Madeline falls into a 'sort of wakeful swoon', a prelude to the lull of slumber which eventually overtakes her.[2]

From the confines of his hiding place, Porphyro gazes entranced at the garments discarded by his beloved, and listens carefully for the alteration in breathing that will indicate she has succumbed to sleep. Once assured of her somnolent state, he creeps across the room to her bedside and there permits himself a fleeting glance at her recumbent form. Before feasting fully upon the vision of the sleeping Madeline, however, Keats's 'famished pilgrim' enacts a curious ritual of his own.[3] The closet in which he has concealed himself is filled with surplus 'cates and dainties' from the banquet below:

> ... candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd,
>
> With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
>
> And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;
>
> Manna and dates, in argosy transferred
>
> From Fez; and spicèd dainties, every one,
>
> From silken Samarkand to cedared Lebanon.[4]

Now, in an almost frenzied state, Porphyro begins to remove these delectable items from their storage place and to arrange them upon a table he has laid, heaping them

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[2] Keats, Eve of St. Agnes, l. 236.

[3] Keats, Eve of St. Agnes, l. 339.

[4] Keats, Eve of St. Agnes, ll. 173, 265-70.

> ... with glowing hand
>
> On golden dishes and in baskets bright
>
> Of wreathèd silver; sumptuous they stand
>
> In the retirèd quiet of the night.[5]

Only after he has completed this strange sacrament, in quasi-religious homage to the oblivious Madeline, does Porphyro sink into the pillow beside her, whispering, 'And now, my love, my seraph fair, awake!'[6] Eventually, she does so and the two 'melt' together into her dream, 'as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet – / Solution sweet'.[7]

The reader has been obliged to wait for this climactic act of union: some eight stanzas separate Porphyro's emergence into Madeline's chamber from the moment of sexual fulfilment figuratively described above. The ceremonial presentation of food undertaken by Keats's hero is not a requirement of the legend of St. Agnes; how, then, is this peculiar prelude to the act of consummation to be accounted for? What is the meaning of the lavishly-described feast and why, having braved manifold dangers in reaching the object of his longing, does Porphyro deliberately delay the attainment of that for which he yearns? The answer is to be found in the thraldom of this 'vassal' not only to the beauty of Madeline, but also to the structure of desire in which he is caught up.[8]

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[5] Keats, Eve of St. Agnes, ll. 271-74.

[6] Keats, Eve of St. Agnes, l. 276.

[7] Keats, Eve of St. Agnes, ll. 320-22.

[8] Keats, Eve of St. Agnes, l. 335.

Desire

'Desire', according to the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, 'begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need'.[9] How might this pronouncement explain the desire of Porphyro in The Eve of St. Agnes?

Lacan suggests that the human organism is endued from birth with a number of biological needs, such as the requirement for sustenance and refreshment. In the earliest stages of life, the satisfaction of these needs is contingent upon the existence of an-other, a figure such as the mother, whose presence and absence the dependent infant cannot control. The satisfaction enjoyed by the infant is, therefore, always endangered, threatened by a want of permanence. The gradual acquisition of language does little to assuage this sense of wanting for, although the child can better articulate its needs in speech, these always 'return to him alienated'.[10] Language is not simply a tool for human expression: in making demands, the speaking subject inserts itself into a system of meanings which both pre-exists and defines its being. Meanings inhere in language, and language resides in culture, a field which is extrinsic, and therefore Other, to the

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[9] Jacques Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious', in Écrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 323-60 (p. 344).

[10] Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus', in Écrits, pp. 311-22 (p. 316).

human subject. By taking up its place in this 'symbolic order',[11] by deviating

its needs in speech, the subject, ironically, distances itself further from the

possibility of full satisfaction because, as Catherine Belsey points out in her

analysis of Lacanian desire,

> language erases even as it creates. The signifier replaces the
>
> object it identifies as a separate entity; the linguistic symbol
>
> supplants what it names and differentiates, relegates it to a limbo
>
> beyond language, where it becomes inaccessible, lost.[12]

In the process of 'turning [its needs] into signifying form', of emitting its

message from 'the locus of the Other' (that is, language), something is lost

irrevocably to the human subject.[13] There exists between need and demand

a gap, an inadequation, which cannot be resolved simply, and it is from the

beyond of this divide, this chasm of loss and lack, that desire emerges.

Unlike demand and need, desire can neither be articulated nor

satisfied fully. To use Lacan's terms, 'desire is neither the appetite for

satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the

subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting

(Spaltung)'.[14] Excessive, eccentric and insatiable, desire is motivated by the

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[11] The symbolic order is Lacan's term for the realm of language and law. It contrasts with

and exists in relation to the 'imaginary' (the dimension of images and identification) and the

'real' (the world of full and present things to which the subject of language has no access).

[12] Catherine Belsey, Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p.

55.

[13] Lacan, 'Signification of the Phallus', p. 316.

[14] Lacan, 'Signification of the Phallus', p. 318.

lack that constitutes the speaking subject and is organised around an object that marks this constitutive lack. This idea is illustrated in a food-related example from Sigmund Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams, later discussed by Lacan in an essay in Écrits: the dream of the smoked salmon. Confronted by a clever female patient sceptical of his thesis that dreams represent the fulfilment of wishes, Freud is challenged to interpret the following dream-narrative:

> I wanted to give a supper-party, but I had nothing in the house but a little smoked salmon. I thought I would go out and buy something, but remembered then that it was Sunday afternoon and all the shops would be shut. Next I tried to ring up some caterers, but the telephone was out of order. So I had to abandon my wish to give a supper-party.[15]

Prior to arriving at a judgement, Freud carefully extracts some background information from his patient. He discovers that she is happily married to a wholesale butcher and has a female friend whose favourite dish is smoked salmon. Her husband admires this woman, although she does not conform to his usual type, being rather thin. Nonetheless, the patient experiences some feelings of jealousy towards this woman, who has previously expressed a wish to grow 'a little stouter' and enquired of her, 'When are you going to ask us to another meal? You always feed one so well'.[16]

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[15] Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), Vol. IV, p. 147.

[16] Freud, Interpretation of Dreams, p. 148.

Armed with this supplementary information, Freud has no hesitation in pronouncing the meaning of the dream: by abandoning her desire for a dinner party, the patient fulfils an unconscious wish to prevent her friend growing plumper, and therefore more attractive to her husband. Allied to this, Freud suggests, it is notable that the patient does not dream specifically that her friend's wish (to grow stout) is unfulfilled, but rather that her own wish (to give a supper party) is unsatisfied: the patient puts herself in her friend's place and identifies with what she wants. The evidence for this 'hysterical identification', Freud claims, is that his patient has 'brought about a renounced wish in real life'.[17] For some time, she has craved

> a caviare sandwich every morning but ... grudged the expense.
> Of course her husband would have let her have it at once if she
> had asked him. But, on the contrary, she had asked him not to
> give her any caviare, so that she could go on teasing him about
> it.[18]

For Freud, the patient's dream proceeds metaphorically: the desire for smoked salmon (the friend's desire) is a substitute for the patient's own unfulfilled wish for caviar.

Desire, however, rarely operates so simply. Seizing upon Saussure's theory of the linguistic signifier, Lacan elaborates on Freud's initial analysis in order to discover in the dream of the 'witty hysteric' an unconscious

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[17] Freud, Interpretation of Dreams, p. 149.

[18] Freud, Interpretation of Dreams, p. 147.

manifestation of the very structure of desire.[19] First, he turns his attention to the caviar: what does it signify? Not a need for food, certainly: the patient specifically requests that her husband deny her the item in question. Caviar, 'qua signifier', would seem rather to symbolise 'desire as inaccessible', as incapable of being satisfied.[20] In this light, the desire for caviar identified by Freud in the hysteric's dream represents, for Lacan, 'the desire to have an unsatisfied desire'. To complicate matters further, this desire 'is inscribed in the ... register of one desire substituted for another': smoked salmon takes the place of caviar in the patient's dream.[21] A succession of significations emerges: an (unsatisfied) desire to serve smoked salmon at a dinner party signifies an (unfulfilled) desire for caviar, which in turn signifies a desire for an unsatisfied desire. This layering of meaning works, according to Lacan, not by metaphor, which substitutes one full term for another, but rather by metonymy, a rhetorical device which establishes a signifying chain in which each term refers and defers to the next in the series, rendering meaning never fully present, only ever partial.[22]

In its relation to lack, metonymy is inextricably linked to desire: indeed, it is by means of metonymy that desire expresses itself, defers and

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[19] Lacan, 'The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power', in Écrits, pp. 250-310 (p. 288).

[20] Lacan, 'Direction of the Treatment', p. 286.

[21] Lacan, 'Direction of the Treatment', p. 285.

[22] Lacan modifies the conventional definition of metonymy ('the part taken for the whole') to suggest that 'metonymy is ... the effect made possible by the fact that there is no signification that does not refer to another signification'. 'Direction of the Treatment', p. 286.

destabilises its meaning. Desire cannot be satiated by the provision of a fixed, concrete object. As Lacan summarises in <u>The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis</u>, '[the beautiful butcher's wife] loves caviar, but she doesn't want any. That's why she desires it'.[23] Were the anxious husband to provide his wife with the contentious item in question, he may go some way to satisfying her need for nutrition, but, in doing so, he would deprive her all the more of that which she <u>desires</u>. For the subject's desire always takes the form of an unsatisfied desire, one that perpetuates its suspension in the metonymic cycle of longing/wanting/lacking that motivates its actions. How might this revelation help to explain the behaviour of Porphyro in <u>The Eve of St. Agnes</u>?

The <u>Objet a</u>

Porphyro desires Madeline, yet, during his illicit sojourn in her bedchamber, much of his attention is taken up with the items of food stored there or, more specifically, their display. The feast arranged by Keats's ardent hero is remarkable for its visual intensity: 'a cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet' envelops the table, while 'golden dishes' and 'baskets bright / Of wreathèd silver' hold the 'sumptuous' spread arrayed there.[24] The food itself is similarly lustrous: 'candied' fruits and 'lucent syrups' combine to seduce the eye with their glistening glaze.[25] The poem betrays a notable preoccupation

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[23] Jacques Lacan, <u>The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis</u>, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; London: Vintage, 1998), p. 243.

[24] Keats, <u>Eve of St. Agnes</u>, ll. 256, 272-73.

[25] Keats, <u>Eve of St. Agnes</u>, ll. 265, 267.

with the look of what it describes. As in the case of Freud's 'witty hysteric', food does not function here as an object of need: despite its inviting appearance, neither Porphyro nor Madeline partake of the tiniest morsel. Instead, the fare on show seems to exist specifically to be looked at: it provokes a certain longing gaze.[26]

Indeed, the act of looking at the items on display in Madeline's bedchamber seems to supplant the act of looking at Madeline herself: she is curiously absent from this part of the poem. A tissue of signifiers, detailing the component parts of the feast, elides her supine body, the thing ostensibly desired. Are we to identify here a metaphorical transposition of food for body, a Freudian substitution of one desire for another? This reading would appear rational: the body of Madeline could not decently be described by Keats in the same sensual detail as the feast displayed in her chamber, and so the latter supplants the former in the poem's register of desire.[27] However, the food never actually replaces Madeline as the object

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[26] This 'gaze', in keeping with Lacan's theory (discussed later in this chapter), does not emanate from any specific source. Its existence is not dependent upon the presence of a definite spectator and, as such, can be related here to the reader's desire as much as that of Porphyro.

[27] The issue of propriety plagued The Eve of St. Agnes. In a letter to the publisher John Taylor, Richard Woodhouse, a lawyer and friend of Keats, fretted that although the poem contained 'no improper expressions', all being 'left to inference', it was nevertheless 'unfit for ladies, & indeed scarcely to be mentioned to them among the "things that are"'. Keats's response was that he did not write for ladies, only men. Richard Woodhouse to John Taylor, 20 September 1819, in Keats: The Critical Heritage, ed. G. M. Matthews (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 150.

of Porphyro's longing. Rather, it functions metonymically, its luxuriant web of signifiers deferring access to the moment of consummation and, with it, the incipient promise of appropriation, the possibility of taking possession of that which is lacking. By detaining Porphyro and apparently frustrating the fulfilment of his desire, the poem's elaborate feast of signifiers actually serves to motivate desire in both Keats's hero and the expectant reader, paradoxically heightening that which it would seem to impede.

As Lacan explains in his analysis of the dream of the smoked salmon, the subject's desire is always for an unsatisfied desire, something inaccessible, gratuitous, beyond that which can be appeased. What Porphyro really desires here is not the possession of a realisable object, but rather his continued engagement with the structure of desire in which he finds himself suspended. Satiation does not engender contentment; notably, the spectre of death haunts the poem following Porphyro's morally-ambivalent acquisition of Madeline. The Eve of St. Agnes does not have a conventional, happy denouement: it ends with the lovers fleeing 'away into the storm', their uncertain future intimated by references to nightmare and death.[28] As Lacan could have warned them, pleasure is not attained from the satisfaction of desire: the pervasive want which underlies it can be effaced only in the oblivion of death.

The food on display in The Eve of St. Agnes functions, then, not as the object of desire, but as an object which motivates desire by frustrating it, by simultaneously reminding and denying the desiring subject of that which it

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[28] Keats, Eve of St. Agnes, l. 371.

lacks. In this way, the food in the poem corresponds to what Lacan calls the

objet petit a, the object-cause of desire, as opposed to the object of desire

itself. Throughout his work, Lacan steadfastly denies readers a translation

or final definition of this concept: it remains elusive, ineffable. It does not

apply to a set category of objects; indeed, in many contexts, it does not refer

to an object at all, but rather to something insubstantial, the 'missing

contents', that which is not there.[29]

Perhaps the most well-known example of the objet a given by Lacan

does, however, take the form of a concrete object: the cotton-reel used by

Freud's grandson, Ernst, in his game of fort/da. Re-reading the story told by

Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Lacan notes that, when faced with

the traumatic prospect of his mother's absence, little Ernst does not express

a cry that would demand her return but instead takes up a cotton-reel

attached to a piece of string and proceeds to throw it away from himself

while uttering the sound 'fort' (gone), drawing it back with a triumphant 'da'

(here).[30] Ernst desires his mother's presence; her absence introduces within

him an 'ever-open gap', the structural lack by which he is constituted as

speaking subject.[31] Yet, when confronted with this loss, he engages not with

the object that would seem to bridge it (his mother), but with an object which

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[29] See, for example, Lacan's discussion of the gaze as objet a in Four Fundamental
Concepts, pp. 82-85.

[30] See Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), in The Standard Edition of the
Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth
Press, 1955), Vol. XVIII, pp. 14-16.

[31] Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 62.

repeats and re-enacts the opposition (gone/here) which made him aware of his loss in the first instance. This object does not replace the figure of the mother: as Lacan points out, the cotton-reel 'is not the mother reduced to a little ball' but rather an object which signifies, through its repeated presence and absence, the subject's lack.[32] The reel highlights and defers access to what little Ernst really wants. In doing so, it motivates his actions, making him 'play', without ever affording him mastery or becoming the aim of his desire.[33]

As Lacan's reading of the cotton-reel suggests, the objet a is not designated by its 'objectness', by any substantial, inherent quality, but rather by the way in which it signifies: it motivates desire by exposing the subject's incompleteness and perpetual sense of lack. It is by means of signification, then, that the food in Madeline's chamber takes on the role of the objet a: it functions, in its presentation, as an instigator of desire, a lure as well as an impediment, distracting Porphyro and displacing the figure of Madeline. Although not desired in and of itself, the food, qua objet a, is instrumental in sustaining the impassioned hero's suspension in and subjugation to the structure of desire – along with the frustrated reader of The Eve of St. Agnes, who finds him/herself engaged in a similar cycle of deprivation and longing while awaiting the poem's dramatic climax.

As the introduction to this thesis contends, representations of food are rarely semantically innocent, often being invested with cultural connotations which far exceed the straightforward evocation of culinary fare.

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[32] Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 62.

[33] See Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, pp. 239, 185-86.

In Keats's early-nineteenth-century poem and Freud's turn-of-the-century case notes, food signifies something other than a simple need to eat, standing for a hunger that cannot be satisfied by mere physical consumption. Significantly, the items described in each case seem to exist specifically to be looked at rather than ingested: they elicit an avid, longing gaze. This notion of food as a feast for the eyes is by no means uncommon in nineteenth-century representation. The triad of food, vision and desire occurs as an oft-repeated motif in diverse cultural texts of the period, including fine paintings, popular novels and contemporary domestic manuals. As this chapter will demonstrate, food, in its display, functions within Victorian bourgeois culture as a signifier of desire – a desire which, to use Lacan's words, 'is not to be conjured away, but appears ... at the centre of the stage, all too visibly, on the festive board'.[34]

Taste, Vision and Desire

Victorian culture is notable for its emphasis on the visual. In <u>The Philosophy of the Eye</u>, a book published in the year Queen Victoria came to the throne, John Walker, a Manchester surgeon, describes vision as the 'noblest of the senses', adding that the eye

> is the most beautiful of all the organs of the senses; it is, likewise, the most important, and therefore the most valued. All the other

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[34] Lacan, 'Direction of the Treatment', p. 290.

organs are necessary to the well-being of the individual, but there

is none so essential as that of vision.[35]

A number of historians and theorists have been quick to pick up on the

significance of 'seeing' to Victorian culture. Asa Briggs writes that 'much in

the nineteenth century ... had the sense of a "great spectacle"',[36] while Kate

Flint argues that the invention of various specular instruments – 'the magic

lantern, the kaleidoscope, the stereoscope, the pseudoscope, the zoetrope'

– transferred 'the excitement of looking differently into the domestic

environment itself'.[37] Part of the nineteenth-century obsession with vision

stems from the contemporary idea that seeing facilitated knowledge.

Walker, for instance, claims that 'we shall often obtain more information

concerning some objects at a single glance, occupying only an instant of

time, than by a whole hour's description addressed to the mind through the

ear', and goes on to label the eye a 'portal of knowledge'.[38]

Yet, if vision was thought to confer knowledge, visibility – the

condition of being seen – was equally important to the Victorians in terms of

imparting information about an individual's class, status and personal

circumstances. For the aspirational nineteenth-century bourgeoisie in

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[35] John Walker, The Philosophy of the Eye; Being a Familiar Exposition of its Mechanism

and of the Phenomena of Vision, with a View to the Evidence of Design (London: Knight,

1837), pp. ix, 1.

[36] Asa Briggs, Victorian Things (Stroud: Sutton, 2003), p. 83.

[37] Kate Flint, The Victorians and the Visual Imagination (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 2000), p. 5.

[38] Walker, Philosophy of the Eye, pp. 2, 4.

particular, appearances mattered. Judith Flanders, author of <u>The Victorian</u> <u>House</u>, identifies a politics of display at work in the middle-class domestic sphere:

> In theory, home was the private space of families. In practice –
> unacknowledged – houses were another aspect of public life.
> 'Home' was created by family life, but the house itself was
> inextricably linked with worldly success: the size of the house, how
> it was furnished, where it was located, all were indicative of the
> family that lived privately within.[39]

The nineteenth-century emphasis on visuality and appearances transplanted itself inside the middle-class home, holding particular dominion in rooms intended for the reception of guests. Within this climate of voracious visual consumption, the dining room (the principal of a household's public rooms) existed as a place in which to see and be seen as much as a space in which to eat. A well-dressed dinner table indicated wealth and social distinction. Consequently, in a wide range of nineteenth-century representation, food functions more as a feast for the eyes than the taste buds, and 'taste' itself emerges as a faculty associated as much with vision as the palate.

In <u>Kettner's Book of the Table</u> (1877), the Victorian journalist and author, E. S. Dallas, recognises this cultural conflation of visual and palatal taste, pointing out that the same word is used in English to designate the criterion for excellence in relation to both the stomach and the eye. 'Taste is at once so fine and so potent that it is selected from all the senses to

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[39] Judith Flanders, <u>The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed</u> (London: Harper Collins, 2003), pp. xxvi-xxviii.

designate the standard of art and the power of detecting all that is loveliest in heaven and earth,' he comments, adding drolly, 'we have one and the same name for the faculty which comprehends ... a Strasbourg pie and ... the Elgin marbles'.[40] The dual meanings attached to the term 'taste' were much in evidence around the nineteenth-century dinner table, where a preoccupation with the concept of 'good taste' had been in play since the early part of the century. In 1825, the French gourmand, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, had published his much-celebrated Physiology of Taste, a tome dedicated to the pleasures of the table, but also covering such divergent topics as the meaning of dreams and the end of the world. The work was an influential one: Brillat-Savarin's witty aphorisms and anecdotes on food and dining came to be cited in later nineteenth-century texts, such as Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management (1861) and Kettner's Book of the Table, while some of his most famous maxims (such as the previously quoted, 'Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are') remain familiar today.[41] Co-existent with the scintillating stories and pithy axioms which make up much of Brillat-Savarin's text is a discrepant, more dispassionate mode of address: the author insistently defines gastronomy as a science and therefore makes recourse to scientific discourse in order to describe and

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[40] E. S. Dallas, Kettner's Book of the Table (1877; London: Centaur Press, 1968), p. 456.

[41] Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, The Physiology of Taste, or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy (1825; London: Peter Davies, 1925), p. 3. For references to The Physiology of Taste in other nineteenth-century texts, see Isabella Beeton, Beeton's Book of Household Management (1861; London: Chancellor Press, 1994), pp. 173, 258, 905, 908 and Dallas, Kettner's Book of the Table, pp. 90-91, 457-58.

define the sensation of taste. He declares that 'taste is that one of our senses which communicates the sapidity of things to us, by means of the sensation which it arouses in the organ designed to enjoy their savour'.[42] Designating it a 'chemical process', and focussing specifically upon its somatic effects, he seems initially to dissociate 'good taste' from the realm of visual pleasure, reducing it to a purely biological operation.[43]

However, when describing the sensations to which taste gives rise, Brillat-Savarin suggests that this human faculty may involve something more than a simple, physical response. He asserts:

> I hold for a certainty that taste gives rise to sensations of three
>
> distinct orders, namely, <u>direct</u> sensation, <u>complete</u> sensation, and
>
> <u>reflex</u> sensation.
>
> The <u>direct</u> sensation is the first perception arising out of the
>
> immediate action of the organs of the mouth, while the substance
>
> to be tasted is still at rest on the fore part of the tongue.
>
> The <u>complete</u> sensation is composed of the first perception
>
> and the impression which follows when the food leaves its first
>
> position and passes to the back of the mouth, assailing the whole
>
> organ with its taste and perfume.
>
> Lastly, the <u>reflex</u> sensation is the judgement passed by the
>
> brain upon the impression transmitted to it by the organ.[44]

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[42] Brillat-Savarin, <u>Physiology of Taste</u>, p. 21.

[43] Brillat-Savarin, <u>Physiology of Taste</u>, p. 24.

[44] Brillat-Savarin, <u>Physiology of Taste</u>, pp. 26-27.

Taste, then, is a reflexive as well as a physical process for Brillat-Savarin. It involves the introspective formulation of a judgement on the part of the eating subject and, in this way, parallels the definition of taste put forward by the eighteenth-century philosopher, Immanuel Kant, in his Critique of Judgement (1790). Concerned specifically with the subject's relation to the realm of visual art, Kant's third critique begins by asserting that 'the judgement of taste is aesthetic', and affirming in a footnote that taste is 'the faculty of estimating the beautiful'.[45] Crucially, for Kant, this judgement is reflective: it is decided by the feeling of pleasure or displeasure aroused in the rational subject. In this way, the judgement of taste 'is one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective'; it reveals nothing about the object under consideration, only the spectator's experience of it.[46]

Similarly, Brillat-Savarin's conception of taste is inextricably linked to the sense of pleasure experienced by the subject. 'Taste', he argues, 'remains the one among our senses, when everything is taken into consideration, which procures us the maximum of delight'.[47] Significantly, part of the 'delight' experienced at the dinner table is attributable to the visual appeal of the surroundings: 'often at the most sumptuous banquet', Brillat-Savarin contends, 'I have been saved from boredom by the pleasure I derived from my observations'.[48] Thus, the language of aesthetics slips into

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[45] Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgement, trans. James Creed Meredith (1790; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 41.

[46] Kant, Critique of Judgement, pp. 41-42.

[47] Brillat-Savarin, Physiology of Taste, p. 29.

[48] Brillat-Savarin, Physiology of Taste, p. 9.

the seemingly scientific discourse of <u>The Physiology of Taste</u>, with the result

that savour and visuality become entangled in the nineteenth-century

definition of what constitutes 'good taste'.

Where 'taste' is considered in relation to food in nineteenth-century

representation, then, the term does not necessarily refer to the sapidity of a

meal. In fact, the flavour of food is rarely mentioned in fictional depictions of

the dinner table. Describing a grand banquet in <u>Vanity Fair</u> (1848), William

Makepeace Thackeray is unforthcoming in his presentation of the fare

enjoyed by the assembled company: 'as I have promised the reader he shall

enjoy it', he writes with deliberate reserve, 'he shall have the liberty of

ordering himself so as to suit his fancy'.[49] Where reference is made to the

taste of food in nineteenth-century literature, it is most often in disparaging

terms. The witty, mid-Victorian essay <u>Memoirs of a Stomach, Written by</u>

<u>Himself</u> (1853), for example, contains a comic invective against the general

standard of food to be found at British dinner tables. Its eponymous narrator

explains that his chief use is 'to receive with becoming courtesy and

politeness all nourishment that arrived in my parts, through an anti-chamber,

or passage, called Œsophagus'.[50] In the fulfilment of this role, the Stomach

finds himself assisted by

> a sort of supervising officer ... called Palate, whose duty it was to
>
> taste every particle of food intended for my consumption, and to

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[49] William Makepeace Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, ed. J. I. M. Stewart (1848; London: Penguin,

1968), p. 572.

[50] <u>Memoirs of a Stomach, Written by Himself, That All Who Eat May Read</u>, 3rd ed. (London:

W. E. Painter, 1853), p. 18.

reject it if disapproved. The vigilance of this personage, however, was of no avail against the strategems which were made to deceive both him and me; the consequence being, that he very often got into a morbid state of feeling, not knowing good from bad, and instead of guarding me from evil, led me into it.[51]

As a result of the inefficaciousness of Palate, the Stomach is obliged to digest such unappetising dishes as 'parboiled oxflesh, with sodden dumplings floating in a saline, greasy mixture surrounded by carrots looking red with disgust and turnips pale with dismay'.[52] The prevalence of such poorly-prepared fare seems to have been something of a nationwide affliction. French chef Alexis Soyer's <u>Modern Housewife</u> (1856) expresses similar dismay at the 'English way of partaking of plain boiled vegetables', neglectfully 'cooked and served up, often swimming in water'.[53] Little wonder Britain possessed a reputation for the blandness of its national palate in the nineteenth century.

Blandness was not necessarily a bad thing according to some members of the bourgeoisie, however. Strong-tasting food was associated with a working-class diet and was thought in certain circles to have a detrimental effect on the health of the consumer. Andrew Ure, writing in 1835 on the physical condition of Manchester's factory workers, attributes the gastralgia from which many of them suffered to their 'style of diet' and, in

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[51] <u>Memoirs of a Stomach</u>, pp. 13-14.

[52] <u>Memoirs of a Stomach</u>, p. 98.

[53] Alexis Soyer, <u>The Modern Housewife or Ménagère</u> (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1856), p. 321.

particular, their inclination for 'rusty' bacon which, in its 'piquant state, ...

suits vitiated palates accustomed to the fiery impressions of tobacco and

gin'.[54] Similarly, Henry Mayhew, writing in 1851, ascribes the working-class

preference for strong, stimulating food to the unrefined palate which results

from a limited diet. Workers 'require a ... "staying" kind of food', he

suggests, adding:

> The delights of the palate, we should remember, are studied only
>
> when the cravings of the stomach are satisfied, so that those who
>
> have strong stomachs have necessarily dull palates, and,
>
> therefore, prefer something that 'bites in the mouth', – to use the
>
> words of one of my informants – like gin, onions, sprats, or pickled
>
> whelks.[55]

By contrast, the 'delicacies of the season' were available to the privileged

palates of the upper and middle classes, yet still such diners found grounds

for complaint regarding the taste of the dishes they were served.[56] In

Anthony Trollope's <u>The Last Chronicle of Barset</u> (1867), Mr Toogood, a no-

nonsense lawyer, criticises a meal hosted by one of his neighbours where

'not a morsel of food on the table' was fit to eat. 'I never was so poisoned in

my life', he grumbles, adding that the soup 'was just the washings of the

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[54] Andrew Ure, <u>The Philosophy of Manufactures; or an Exposition of the Scientific, Moral,</u>

<u>and Commercial Economy of the Factory System of Great Britain</u> (London: Knight, 1835), p.

385.

[55] Henry Mayhew, <u>London Labour and the London Poor</u> (1851; London: Frank Cass, 1967),

Vol. I, p. 120.

[56] Mayhew, <u>London Labour</u>, p. 120.

pastrycook's kettle next door'.[57] In similar vein, <u>The Modern Housewife</u>

regretfully notes, 'we are often obliged to swallow that we do not like'.[58] The

quality of mid-week meals represents a particular source of concern for this

domestic adviser. 'Having ... given my full and due respect for the comfort

of their Sunday's dinner, I have, in many instances, to complain of the way

most of the industrious classes dine the remainder of the week,' the

<u>Housewife</u> states, adding:

> We ... must be very positive upon this important question, and
>
> make them perceive that dining well once or twice a week is really
>
> unworthy of such a civilized and wealthy country as ours, whose
>
> provisions cannot be excelled by any other, both in regard to
>
> quantity and quality.[59]

Were the middle classes 'only but slightly acquainted with the domestic

cookery of France', she continues, 'they would certainly live better and less

expensively than at present'.[60]

For the citizens of Britain's nearest neighbour, it seems, tasty food, as

opposed to tasteful surroundings, formed the paramount concern with regard

to pleasurable dining. In her 1878 advice manual, <u>The Dining-Room</u>, British

author Mrs Loftie sets out the terms of this national difference:

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[57] Anthony Trollope, <u>The Last Chronicle of Barset</u>, ed. Sophie Gilmartin (1867; London:

Penguin, 2002), p. 397.

[58] Soyer, <u>Modern Housewife</u>, p. 89.

[59] Soyer, <u>Modern Housewife</u>, p. 63.

[60] Soyer, <u>Modern Housewife</u>, p. 64.

In Continental countries, where cookery is allowed to rank as a

fine art, very little decoration is usually bestowed on the room in

which the food is served .... The most important considerations

connected with the salle-à-manger are not of the pattern of the

carpet, the height of the dado, or the colouring of the ceiling, but of

the flavour of the sauce piquante, the lightness of the vol-au-vent,

or the quality of the dessert.[61]

In Britain, however (a place 'where cooking does not as yet amount to a

trade, far less to an art'), a pleasantly-decorated dining room, well-laid table

and impressive array of silver plate were thought to compensate for any

deficiency of taste in the dishes served.[62] As one of Mrs Loftie's

correspondents remarks mournfully of a dinner she received from a couple

of newlyweds:

The soup was burnt, but it was served in Oriental bowls, so I

suppose I should have found the flavour perfect. The fish was

sodden: but it was helped with the silver trowel used by Charles II

in laying the foundation of St. Paul's.[63]

Though the dinner party was the occasion of 'much pleasant talk', the

unfortunate woman returns home 'starving' and disconsolate.[64] Mrs Loftie is

unremitting in her judgement of such cases: 'the most perfect antique china

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[61] Mrs Loftie, The Dining-Room (London: Macmillan, 1878), pp. 1-2.

[62] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 2.

[63] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 22.

[64] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 22.

will not atone for bad coffee, nor the most lovely Oriental salad-bowl make stale lettuce taste fresh,' she chides.[65]

In spite of this proclamation, the professed purpose of The Dining-Room is to instruct in the art of tasteful decoration those 'inexperienced housekeepers of small income, who do not wish to make limited means an excuse for disorder and ugliness'.[66] The book, like many other nineteenth-century manuals on home enhancement, stresses the importance of aesthetics in the dining room, revealing an anxious concern with the appearance of things, with visual as well as palatal taste. For seeing 'well', according to the Victorians, was by no means a simple operation. In The Philosophy of the Eye, Walker argues:

> It is ... rendered apparent, that in order to see, we must possess
> something more than an organ of vision, or, in other words, that an
> uninstructed eye would be of no manner of use to us; that that
> organ requires ... training or educating.[67]

John Ruskin concurs in his analysis of Modern Painters (1856) with the much quoted aphorism, 'hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see'.[68] A deficiency in artistic vision was diagnosed as a national disorder, affecting not only those for whom penury proved a bar to the development of good taste, but also those

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[65] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 21.

[66] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. vii.

[67] Walker, Philosophy of the Eye, p. 14.

[68] John Ruskin, Modern Painters: Volume III (1856), in The Works of John Ruskin, eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), Vol. V, p. 333.

members of the middle classes interested in design and display: people who should have known better. Charles Eastlake, author of the influential <u>Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details</u> (1878), asserts that, although most 'well-bred women' pride themselves on the excellence of their aesthetic judgement, it is 'a lamentable fact that this very quality [good taste] was until recently deficient, not only among the generally ignorant, but also among the most educated classes in this country'.[69] How could it be otherwise? As Eastlake points out (with requisite modesty) in the introduction to the revised, fourth edition of his text, prior to the publication of books such as his own, the public were denied instruction in 'even the simplest and most elementary principles of decorative art', with the result that the majority were 'content to be guided by a few people who [were] themselves not only uninformed but misinformed on the subject'.[70]

Evidently, the capacity to see was not enough to attain the measure of good taste; according to the arbiters of nineteenth-century aesthetic values, it was incumbent upon the Victorian populace also to learn to <u>read</u> the objects with which they filled their dining rooms. Interestingly, in <u>The Philosophy of the Eye</u>, Walker draws a direct comparison between the

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[69] Charles L. Eastlake, <u>Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details</u>, 4th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1878), pp. 8-9. Commenting on the importance of 'good taste' to the female bourgeoisie, Eastlake asserts, 'We may condemn a lady's opinion on politics – criticise her handwriting – correct her pronunciation of Latin, and disparage her favourite author with a chance of escaping displeasure. But if we venture to question her taste ... we are sure to offend' (pp. 8-9).

[70] Eastlake, <u>Hints on Household Taste</u>, p. 9.

activities of looking and reading. 'There is a very striking analogy', he suggests, 'between learning to see objects around us, and the kindred art of discriminating between the various mystic signs, commonly called letters, which are used to represent those objects'.[71] This analogy is also implied in the title of Owen Jones's 1856 treatise on decoration, The Grammar of Ornament. Like Walker and Eastlake, Jones argues that 'proper' vision and aesthetic judgement are not inherent qualities in the human subject, but things to be learnt and applied. In the last of thirty-seven propositions put forward on the subject of the decorative arts, he writes:

> No improvement can take place in the Art of the present generation until all classes, Artists, Manufacturers, and the Public, are better educated in Art, and the existence of general principles is more fully recognized.[72]

In The Dining-Room, Mrs Loftie appears to agree: 'there is no doubt that the eye can be educated like ... the palate, and depraved in precisely the same way', she claims, suggesting the need for the British public to be schooled in the art of tasteful dining-room decoration.[73]

What were, then, the principles of good taste? Little consensus exists on the subject. Throughout the nineteenth century, a variety of styles – Queen Anne, Renaissance revival, Gothic, Rococo, Arts and Crafts – entered into and receded from the realms of popular fashion. Mrs Haweis, in her analysis of Beautiful Houses (1882), states her reluctance to hold up

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[71] Walker, Philosophy of the Eye, p. 14.

[72] Owen Jones, The Grammar of Ornament (London: Day, 1856), p. 6.

[73] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 12.

'any particular style as proper for imitation'.[74] Indeed, she suggests, 'no house ... which is the servile copy of something else' can truly be said to be tasteful.[75] Nevertheless, by selecting 'for study and admiration' a number of residences of 'very various and distinctive characters', Mrs Haweis hopes to encourage her readers to arrange their homes with comparable 'feeling, devotion, and knowledge, or at least with all the skill that money and thought command in the nineteenth century'.[76]

Eastlake is similarly evasive in his doctrine on Household Taste. Advocating 'simplicity of style' in home furnishing, allied with 'the refinements and comfort to which we are accustomed in the nineteenth century', he instructs readers 'who have had no opportunity of forming a judgement on such matters' to 'take their cue from others of more cultivated taste'.[77] Three chapters later, however, he rails against the 'absurd conventionality' governing the decoration of dining rooms, whereby householders copy the style of their neighbours for fear of 'violating good taste'.[78] Even greater wrath is reserved for modern upholsterers who stipulate 'with great gravity ... a series of rules by which certain types of form and certain shades of colour are to be, for some mysterious reason ... for ever associated with certain

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[74] Mrs Haweis, Beautiful Houses: Being a Description of Certain Well-Known Artistic Houses (London: Sampson Low, 1882), p. i.

[75] Haweis, Beautiful Houses, p. iii.

[76] Haweis, Beautiful Houses, pp. iv-v.

[77] Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste, pp. vii, vi.

[78] Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste, p. 73.

apartments in the house'.[79] Ironically, it seems that in their attempts to establish 'good taste' as something unchanging and universal nineteenth-century writers frequently dismissed the judgements of fellow advice-givers in order to promote their own, individual, and invariably elusive, doctrines.

Yet, if the specificities of tasteful dining-room decoration differed from author to author, manual to manual, the notion that something called 'good taste' existed and was available to everyone with a willingness to learn was not a matter for debate. Mrs Haweis is immovable in her conviction that 'no house is too ugly, or too inconvenient, or too small, to repay money spent in making it beautiful'.[80] The demonstration of aesthetic discernment in reception rooms, such as the dining room, was important to the middle classes in particular, owing to the immersion of 'taste' in a bourgeois economy of morality. Judith Flanders explains:

> The attractive, tastefully appointed house was a sign of respectability .... Taste, as agreed by society, had moral values, and therefore adherence to what was considered at any one time to be good taste was a virtue, while ignoring the taste of the period was a sign of something very wrong indeed.[81]

Tasteful decoration was a social imperative: implicated in Victorian ideas of decency and propriety, it helped to establish a householder's fitness to be ranked a member of the middle classes.

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[79] Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste, p. 71.

[80] Haweis, Beautiful Houses, p. 107.

[81] Flanders, Victorian House, p. xxxiv.

Allied to its links with morality, taste also signified cultivation and enlightenment. In his analysis of the 'Ornament of Savage Tribes', Owen Jones claims that 'there is scarcely a people ... with whom the desire for ornament is not a strong instinct', adding that the appreciation of beauty 'grows and increases with all in the ratio of their progress in civilisation'.[82] Eastlake, meanwhile, closes his Hints on Household Taste with a heartfelt plea for reform in the twin spheres of design and manufacture in order to re-introduce the principles of good taste into British society:

> If [the public] encourage that sound and healthy taste which alone is found allied with conscientious labour, whether in the workshop or the factory, then we may hope to see revived the ancient glory of those industrial arts which, while they derive a certain interest from tradition, should owe their highest perfection to civilised skill.[83]

Taste functioned in the nineteenth century as an important marker of civilisation: requiring knowledge and judgement, it was a symbol of cultural superiority, indicating the competence of the possessor to control and govern lesser nations. Given these imperialistic associations, it is hardly surprising that questions of taste abounded during the Victorian period, existing as the subject of an anxious repetition. Nor is it surprising to find that an industry of professional advice-givers grew up around such questions, in order to instruct and marshal the aesthetic impulses of the middle classes. The output of such writers, commensurate with the public's

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[82] Jones, Grammar of Ornament, p. 1.

[83] Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste, p. 296 (my emphasis).

interest, was prolific. Nicholas Cooper notes that Mrs Panton, correspondent for The Lady's Pictorial, would deal with the requests of up to thirty eager readers in her weekly column; she would also 'answer letters privately for 7s 6d and would travel anywhere to give advice for a guinea plus her expenses'.[84]

Even though the definition of 'good taste' was far from immutable in the nineteenth century, altering to fit the vagaries of changing fashions and the differing opinions of such self-appointed arbiters of visual etiquette as Panton, Haweis, Eastlake and Loftie, the need to display the proficiency of one's aesthetic judgement was fixed in the cultural consciousness of the ambitious middle classes. As a result of hard work and enterprise, the power and population of this social group had expanded rapidly during the early nineteenth century, and, as John Burnett suggests, by the 1840s and 1850s, its moneyed members were keen to demonstrate that 'humble origins did not imply a lack of culture and refinement'.[85] Keeping up appearances was paramount: the display of success at dinner parties and social occasions populated by one's peers was almost as important as its achievement. For this reason, the middle classes seem to have been motivated by a restless insecurity, an incessant sense of want (for more money, more success, greater status) which, they felt, could be compensated for by the possession and display of stylish objects. Through

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[84] Nicholas Cooper, The Opulent Eye: Late Victorian and Edwardian Taste in Interior Design (London: Architectural Press, 1976), p. 8.

[85] John Burnett, Plenty and Want: A Social History of Food in England from 1815 to the Present Day, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 66.

its links with social accomplishment, the demonstration of good taste in the nineteenth-century dining room came to be implicated in an economy of desire.

Given this association, it is apt that the language of lack appears in a number of writings on taste from the time. One of the key propositions put forward by Owen Jones in <u>The Grammar of Ornament</u> insists that, 'True beauty results from that repose which the mind feels when the eye, the intellect, and the affections, <u>are satisfied from the absence of any want</u>'.[86] Similarly, the importance of taste for Brillat-Savarin lies in its ability, 'by way of the pleasure derived, <u>to make good the losses which we suffer from in the activities of life</u>'.[87] These losses, as the author later points out, are not simply somatic, the result of the subject's natural expenditure of energy. In a remarkable anticipation of the language of desire used by Lacan over a century later, Brillat-Savarin suggests the importance of distinguishing between bodily hunger, 'a need' capable of being fulfilled by consumption, and the desire associated with 'the pleasures of the table' – 'the various circumstances of fact, place, things, and persons attendant upon a meal'.[88] He elaborates that these 'pleasures' do not correspond with the sense of complete gratification normally associated with the term:

> There is neither rapture, nor ecstasy, nor any extreme transport of
>
> bliss in the pleasures of the table; but they ... above all possess

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[86] Jones, <u>Grammar of Ornament</u>, p. 4 (my emphasis).

[87] Brillat-Savarin, <u>Physiology of Taste</u>, p. 22 (my emphasis).

[88] Brillat-Savarin, <u>Physiology of Taste</u>, pp. 132-33.

the peculiar merit of inclining us towards all other pleasures, or, in

the last resort, consoling us for the loss thereof.[89]

The visual appreciation of objects associated with dining compensates for

the losses endured by the subject. As with the food displayed by Porphyro

in The Eve of St. Agnes, objects of taste afford a degree of pleasure as they

distract attention from the lack which plagues the subject. Yet, even as they

'trick' subjects into a feeling of consolation, such objects necessarily remind

them of the losses for which they are consoled, re-engendering want and

motivating desire.[90] In this way, taste, in its visual incarnation in particular, is

intimately linked to desire in nineteenth-century representation, manifesting

itself most conspicuously in the dining room, where display was as important

as consumption to the aspirant middle classes.

Ornamental Dining

According to Mrs Loftie, 'the best decoration for a dining-room is a well

cooked dinner'.[91] For her middle-class readers, however, something more

than good food was needed to adorn the nineteenth-century dinner table.

Involved, implicitly or explicitly, in the maintenance of Britain's 'Greatness',

the middle classes desired not only power and privilege but also the means

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[89] Brillat-Savarin, Physiology of Taste, p. 133.

[90] Lacan plays on the double meaning of the French word 'tour', meaning 'trick', and also, as

in the phrase 'faire le tour de quelque chose', 'to walk, to drive, etc., round something', in

order to suggest that the objet a at once turns the drive for pleasure in the subject, and is

tricked by the drive. Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 168.

[91] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 21.

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to exhibit these assets. A consciousness of one's financial and cultural superiority to working-class and colonial subjects was not enough; it was imperative also to make manifest one's ascendancy, to display it to one's contemporaries and social equivalents. Owing to its emphasis on appearances and the opportunity it afforded for display, the dinner party provided the perfect setting for exhibitions of worldly success and therefore came to assume a role distinct from that of providing food in nineteenth-century culture. As Mrs Loftie notes in her preface to The Dining-Room, 'the last possible reason now for asking a man to dine would be that he wanted a dinner'.[92] To hold a dinner party was to proclaim publicly that one possessed money and status. Similarly, the receipt of an invitation to dine confirmed one's acceptance into the bourgeois social order. As an 1894 handbook, Etiquette for Ladies, suggests:

> An invitation to dinner must always be considered in the light of a compliment, and it is also an acknowledgement that you belong to the same class as your entertainers. Every country has some particular test of this kind, and in England the invitation to dinner is the hall-mark of social equality.[93]

Of course, not all dinner invitations were issued in such complimentary vein. In cynical recognition of the competitive spirit governing the Victorian age,

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[92] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. viii.

[93] Quoted in Valerie Mars, 'A La Russe: The New Way of Dining', in Luncheon, Nuncheon and Other Meals: Eating with the Victorians, ed. C. Anne Wilson (Stroud: Sutton, 1994), pp. 117-43 (p. 131).

Thackeray observes that 'dinners are given mostly in the middle classes by way of revenge'.[94]

Whatever its purpose, the importance of the dinner party as a social institution was widely acknowledged throughout the nineteenth century. 'Some knowledge of gastronomy is necessary to all men', argues Brillat-Savarin in <u>The Physiology of Taste</u>, adding that

> its usefulness increases ... in proportion to the social rank of the
>
> individual, and it is indispensable to persons enjoying large
>
> incomes, who entertain in the grand style, whether ... for political
>
> reasons, or following their own inclination, or in obedience to the
>
> laws of fashion.[95]

A well-appointed dinner table was considered crucial to the success of the class-conscious, socially-ambitious host; consequently, dinner-givers found themselves compelled to go to ever greater lengths to impress their guests with displays of cultivated dining. For the privileged, the nineteenth century was an age of elaborate and ostentatious feasting. Food, particularly in its appearance, functioned as a potent signifier of power. The richest and most influential houses in Europe, therefore, competed to produce ever more extravagant and outrageous culinary spectacles and, to achieve this end, invariably employed the services of a celebrated, freelance chef.

One of the most famous of these was a Frenchman, Antonin Carême, whose magnificent creations graced the tables of the Emperor Napoleon, the

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[94] Quoted in Arnold Palmer, <u>Movable Feasts</u> (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 83.

[95] Brillat-Savarin, <u>Physiology of Taste</u>, pp. 36-37.

Prince Regent and Tsar Alexander I, as well as a number of renowned

politicians and wealthy families of the Regency period. Carême's reputation

rested largely upon the pièces montées, or extraordinaires, that he produced

for his patrons; fabricated from sugar, wax, confectioners' pastry and paste,

these dramatic centrepieces were designed to sit at the heart of the dinner

or banqueting table, providing a focal point for guests as they took their

seats. Such elaborately decorated dishes have a long history, from

medieval 'subtleties' to seventeenth-century banqueting conceits, as noted

by Dena Attar.[96] The pièces montées created by Carême drew upon and

elaborated these culinary traditions to dazzling effect. A keen student of

classical architecture, Carême assembled pastry, marzipan and sugar

copies of the structures he found in the books of the Bibliothèque Nationale

in Paris. Appreciative of the importance of appearances, he proclaimed

'architecture to be the first amongst the arts' and the 'principal branch of

architecture [to be] confectionary'.[97]

The results of this conviction were spectacular: for a dinner at

Château Rothschild in 1829, Carême created his Sultane à la Colonne, a

Grecian temple in spun sugar, while for the feast served to the Prince

Regent and Grand Duke Nicholas of Russia at the Brighton Pavilion in 1817

no less than eight pièces montées were produced, including an Italian

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[96] Dena Attar, 'Keeping Up Appearances: The Genteel Art of Dining in Middle-Class

Victorian Britain', in The Appetite and the Eye, ed. C. Anne Wilson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh

University Press, 1991), pp. 123-40 (p. 133).

[97] Quoted in Ian Kelly, Cooking for Kings: The Life of Antonin Carême, the First Celebrity

Chef (London: Short, 2003), p. 38.

pavilion, a Swiss hermitage, a Welsh hermitage and a copy of the Brighton

Pavilion itself. As Ian Kelly notes, the

> extraordinarily lavish meal laid on by the Prince Regent – and
>
> Carême – for the delectation of the Russians was not there just to
>
> be eaten. Indeed no one – not even the gluttonous Prince Regent
>
> – could have sampled more than a fraction of the whole ....
>
> Rather, the banquet was to be seen and experienced as part of
>
> the theatre of international relations.[98]

Display was the governing dictum of nineteenth-century state banquets.

These events represented an opportunity to present Britain's wealth,

imperial status and power to the world and, as such, were even on occasion

opened up to spectators: selected members of the public were admitted to

see the setting-up of an 1811 dinner at Carlton House and the Waterloo

banquets, held annually at Apsley House in celebration of the Duke of

Wellington's victory over Napoleon.[99]

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, too, displays of Britain's

wealth and eminence prevailed in royal and aristocratic dining rooms.

Although Queen Victoria's personal preference was for plain and simple

fare, her position as head of a vast empire demanded a degree of

magnificence at her dinner table. Indeed, John Burnett notes,

> it was ... typical of her concept of Britain's imperial role that on
>
> every day of the year curry was prepared by Indian servants in the

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[98] Kelly, Cooking for Kings, p. 141.

[99] See Philippa Glanville and Hilary Young, eds., Elegant Eating: Four Hundred Years of Dining in Style (London: V&A, 2002), pp. 118, 127.

royal kitchens in case it should be asked for by visiting Orientals: usually it was sent back untouched.[100]

Like the largely inedible extraordinaires created by Carême, the function of the curries on Queen Victoria's table was not to nourish but to display the power and pre-eminence of the host. Britain's imperial successes were replayed and represented in the dining room, as foods from the furthest reaches of the globe were imported and presented at the tables of the rich. Charles Cooper, writing of prodigious dinners and diners of the nineteenth century, relates the tale of Twistleton Fiennes, 'one of the finest epicures of his day', who would ransack 'every country, every sea ... in the search for some new delicacy': at one of his breakfasts, it was reported, 'an omelet was served which was composed entirely of golden pheasants' eggs'.[101] The regular consumption of such outré concoctions soon took its toll, however, and Fiennes's health eventually gave way under his excesses. An ostentatious table may have been a desirable thing in nineteenth-century culture, but a gluttonous appetite was not.

Although served less frequently and elaborately than their royal or aristocratic counterparts, middle-class dinner parties evinced an equivalent concern with appearances and display. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the price of luxury foodstuffs fell more than that of necessities and, as a result, a wealth of exotic, previously unaffordable items became available to the prosperous bourgeoisie. Eating emerged as an activity

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[100] Burnett, Plenty and Want, p. 194.

[101] Charles Cooper, The English Table in History and Literature (London: Sampson & Low, 1929), p. 201.

caught up in displays of affluence. As the aspirant middle classes mimicked

the dining practices of their social superiors, 'status did not so much define

what one could consume; what one consumed helped to define one's

status', as Sidney Mintz points out.[102] According to the dictates of good

taste, dishes of French origin should prevail at the fashionable middle-class

dinner party. Burnett notes that, among the nouveaux riches,

> traditional English dishes were now out of favour: to be smart, the
>
> menu had to be French and recherché. The acquisition of a
>
> French chef, or at the very least of a cook 'professed' in French
>
> practice, was now essential for the family with serious social
>
> aspirations.[103]

'Recherché' was the term used by the Victorians to describe French-based

cuisine, although some of the dishes to which the expression came to be

applied were not entirely authentic. For the harassed lady of the house,

charged with the task of composing a sophisticated dinner-party menu, the

addition of the words 'à la mode' to the title of a dish could imply the

distinction and allure of French cooking without claiming any specific

provenance. In general, then, recherché came to signify any meal that was

dainty or refined in character and appearance, but was also used to describe

some of the more extravagant or outrageous dishes to grace the middle-

class dinner table. In Mutton and Oysters, Sarah Freeman evokes the

bizarre, and unquestionably recherché, spectacle of Poulardes à la Nelson:

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[102] Sidney W. Mintz, Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 78.

[103] Burnett, Plenty and Want, p. 193.

fatted chickens stuffed with cockscombs and truffles and garnished to resemble a ship.[104] Not everyone appreciated such eye-catching offerings, however. According to Thomas Walker, the 'barbarian principle of ornament' adopted by followers of French culinary fashion was 'in no way distinguishable from the untutored Indians' fondness for feathers and shells'.[105]

Elaborate dinner parties were held usually no more than once a month by the majority of the middle classes, for whom a family dinner at home represented the usual mode of dining. Such meals were invariably dominated by the traditional roast, yet appearances still mattered, it seems, even within this homely context. Notably, many of the cookery books published in the nineteenth century are illustrated: Eliza Acton's Modern Cookery for Private Families (1855) and Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management both contain depictions of the dishes they describe, revealing a concern with how things should be displayed as well as how they should taste. In her preface, Mrs Beeton explains that 'skilful artists' have designed the numerous drawings in her work, and suggests that these pictorial supplements 'illustrate, better than any description, many important and interesting items'.[106] Recipes for desserts are regularly accompanied by illustrations: like Carême, it seems, Mrs Beeton concedes the importance of visuality to the art of pastry. This branch of culinary science, she suggests,

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[104] Sarah Freeman, Mutton and Oysters: The Victorians and their Food (London: Victor Gollancz, 1989), p. 186.

[105] Quoted in Cooper, The English Table, p. 178.

[106] Beeton, Book of Household Management, p. iv.

unceasingly occupies itself with ministering pleasure to the sight

as well as to the taste; with erecting graceful monuments,

miniature fortresses, and all kinds of architectural imitations,

composed of the sweetest and most agreeable products of all

climates and countries.[107]

In certain cases, the function of taste seems subsidiary to visual appeal:

while Mrs Beeton rarely describes the taste of a finished dish, its effect upon

the eye is frequently noted. For a melted butter sauce, she advises 'using

milk instead of water', as this makes the dish 'so much whiter and more

delicate'.[108] The appearance of jellies is also a source of concern: 'as

lemon-juice, unless carefully strained, is liable to make the jelly muddy, see

that it is clear before it is added to the other ingredients', she directs, adding

later, 'unless the jelly be very clear, the beauty of the dish will be spoiled'.[109]

The emphasis on visuality at the early- to mid-nineteenth-century

dinner table can be attributed, in part, to the method of service employed at

the time. The fashionable mode of dining, known as à la française, typically

comprised two grand courses, preceded by soup. As guests or family

members entered the dining room, they were greeted by the spectacle of the

first course, already laid before them in symmetrical pattern. As the meal

progressed, certain dishes were removed from and added to table but, in

general, a large number of dishes, to which diners helped themselves as

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[107] Beeton, Book of Household Management, p. 607.

[108] Beeton, Book of Household Management, p. 186.

[109] Beeton, Book of Household Management, pp. 712, 724.

they wished, were simultaneously on view.[110] Display, consequently, was

paramount to the success of the dinner served à la française. Its visual

potential accounted largely for its popularity, as Sarah Freeman notes:

> Even [a] comparatively plain dinner would have looked like a feast
>
> with the simultaneous display of turkey, goose, pork and beef, of
>
> pudding, mince pies, tart, cream and jelly ... it also had the
>
> practical advantage of enabling diners to see the dishes on offer
>
> before deciding which to choose.[111]

The main disadvantage of this mode of dining was that dishes, left standing

for the elicitation of collective admiration, often went cold before they came

to be eaten. 'While engaging the eye', meals served à la française often 'left

the tongue and stomach disappointed', as Ian Kelly observes.[112]

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, service à la française came

to be replaced by the trend for dining à la russe. According to the directives

of this method of service, food was not presented whole, at the table, but

ready plated, having been served up and apportioned by waiting servants.

This new approach rendered redundant the decorated roasts and elaborate

pièces montées of old; display, however, was still crucial to the late-Victorian

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[110] The soup was replaced by une grosse pièce (usually a roasted joint of meat) and a

number of entrées (delicate, 'made dishes'). These, in turn, were replaced by the dishes of

the second course: un plat de rôt (more roasted meat) and lighter entremets (typically

vegetable dishes, delicate pastry, eggs, cakes, creams, tarts, and sweets). For a discussion

of the constituent parts of dinner served à la française, see Dallas, Kettner's Book of the

Table, pp. 173-77.

[111] Freeman, Mutton and Oysters, p. 188.

[112] Kelly, Cooking for Kings, p. 52.

dining experience. As à la russe slowly supplanted à la française, objects

began to replace food as the focal point of the fashionably-arrayed dinner

table. Dishes of fruit, ostentatious epergnes and arrangements of flowers

became the latest cultural signifiers of good taste and refinement. Such was

the importance of an ornate centrepiece to social advancement, hostesses

vied with each other to produce the most exquisite and spectacular

examples, frequently spending more money on exotic plants and flowers

than on food for their guests. In doing so, they followed the advice of Mrs

Loftie, who counsels that 'flowers and fruit are at all times desirable on the

table', and dedicates an entire chapter of The Dining-Room to the subject.[113]

Not everyone was quite so keen on the trend for floral ornamentation,

however. Queen Victoria once commented, 'We imagine that before very

long no dishes of either fruit, cakes or sweetmeats will be placed upon the

table ... and their place occupied by flowers and ferns'.[114]

As the popularity of à la russe increased, the middle-class gaze

began to focus upon the implements of and supplements to dining. In

Beautiful Houses, Mrs Haweis describes, with some excitement, the dining

room of William Burges's Melbury Road home, where luxuriousness takes

precedence over functionality. 'Walled with Devonshire marbles', the

apartment is furnished with 'sideboards' which house the owner's 'precious

drinking vessels'. Here, polished stones and brilliant jewels abound:

> Cups of jade, knife-handles, goblets of silver and rock-crystal set
>
> with gems and quaint work, cameos, pearls, turquoise ... antique

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[113] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 34.

[114] Quoted in Glanville and Young, Elegant Eating, p. 58.

mother-o'-pearl flagons with a long pedigree and full of beauty, crowd the little shelves.[115]

The sideboard, so abundantly filled in the example cited above, represented an essential piece of dining-room furniture for the middle classes owing to its fulfilment of a 'double duty': as Mrs Loftie points out, it was at once an instrument of use and display.[116] Having the practical function of a place from which to serve food during dinner parties, the sideboard's shelves also provided space for exhibiting 'the old china vases and rare porcelain, of which every house contains a few examples' or, in certain cases, entire collections, arrayed for the appreciation of admiring guests.[117]

The table, though, remained the primary focus of the fashionably-decorated dining room. Asserting that 'a well-appointed dinner-table is one of the triumphs of an English housewife's domestic care', Eastlake goes on to stipulate:

> That the cloth shall be of fine and snow-white damask; that the decanters and wine-glasses shall be delicate in form and of purest quality; that the silver shall look as bright and spotless as when it first came wrapped in tissue-paper from the silversmith's; that the épergne shall be filled with the choicest flowers – these are points which she will consider of as much importance as the dainty skill of the cook's art itself.[118]

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[115] Haweis, Beautiful Houses, p. 17.

[116] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 46.

[117] Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste, p. 84.

[118] Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste, p. 282.

As Eastlake's directive suggests, possessions – glass, linen, silver – functioned as emissaries for the Victorians, transmitting messages about a household's wealth, class, mores and social standing to an ever-curious public.[119]

Karl Marx was particularly interested in this relation between people and objects, arguing in Capital (1867) that the wealth of bourgeois society 'presents itself as an "immense accumulation of commodities"'.[120] These commodities represent for Marx 'queer thing[s], abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'.[121] Their complexity is not immediately apparent, however. 'In the first place', he suggests, the commodity is 'an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another', whether arising from 'the stomach or from fancy'.[122] Insofar as they fulfil this practical purpose, there is nothing mysterious about commodities; in bourgeois culture, however, objects – the products of work – are not valued only because they are useful. A supplementary, illusory value attaches itself to commodity items, one which has 'absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom'. The relationship between bourgeois subjects and commodities is a 'social relation', Marx explains, one that assumes 'the

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[119] For a discussion of 'Things as Emissaries', see Briggs, Victorian Things, pp. 1-35.

[120] Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I (1867), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), Vol. 35, p. 45. Capital was first published in German in 1867; an English translation appeared in 1887.

[121] Marx, Capital, p. 81.

[122] Marx, Capital, p. 45.

fantastic form of a relation between things'.[123] Objects are desired by the bourgeoisie not because of their inherent usefulness, but because of their potential for exchange: the possession of commodities suggests the possibility of acquiring further items and effects. This operation Marx names the fetishism of commodities.

Commodity fetishism arises in nineteenth-century culture precisely because objects signify; although chimerical, the meanings associated with objects have a material effect on the everyday lives of middle-class subjects. Trollope demonstrates the point well in The Last Chronicle of Barset. At a dinner party at Mr Dobbs Broughton's house, Mrs Van Siever, a rich widow, demands of Mr Musselboro, another guest, 'Why doesn't What's-his-name have real silver forks?' Musselboro experiences some difficulty in answering this question, as Mrs 'What's-his-name' is seated in uncomfortable proximity to him. Eventually, however, he comes up with the following diplomatic response: 'What's the use? ... Everybody has these plated things now. What's the use of a lot of capital lying dead?' Mrs Van Siever is emphatic: 'Everybody doesn't. I don't. You know as well as I do, Musselboro, that the appearance of the thing goes for a great deal. Capital isn't lying dead as long as people know that you've got it.'[124]

Evidently, for the fictional arbiters of bourgeois values, silver plate signifies something quite different from pure silver, a sensibility correspondingly conveyed in Charles Dickens's Our Mutual Friend (1864-65). Here, the avaricious Podsnaps betray an overwhelming concern with

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[123] Marx, Capital, p. 83.

[124] Trollope, Last Chronicle of Barset, p. 242.

the financial meanings attached to their dining-room objects. 'Hideous solidity was the characteristic of the Podsnap plate', the narrator proclaims, adding that, at Georgiana Podsnap's birthday party,

> everything was made to look as heavy as it could, and to take up
> as much room as possible. Everything said boastfully, 'Here you
> have as much of me in my ugliness as if I were only lead; but I am
> so many ounces of precious metal worth so much an ounce; –
> wouldn't you like to melt me down?' A corpulent straddling
> epergne, blotched all over as if it had broken out in an eruption
> rather than been ornamented, delivered this address from an
> unsightly silver platform in the centre of the table. Four silver
> wine-coolers, each furnished with four staring heads, each head
> obtrusively carrying a big silver ring in each of its ears, conveyed
> the sentiment up and down the table, and handed it on to the pot-
> bellied silver salt-cellars. All the big silver spoons and forks
> widened the mouths of the company expressly for the purpose of
> thrusting the sentiment down their throats with every morsel they
> ate.[125]

The Podsnaps, with their typical bourgeois 'mania for possessions', serve to embody Marx's assertion that 'money is ... the god among commodities'.[126]

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[125] Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, ed. Stephen Gill (1864-65; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 177.

[126] Karl Marx, Grundrisse, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 222, 221. Marx's Grundrisse comprises a series of seven notebooks drafted between 1857-58; the manuscript, missing for many years, was first published in German in 1953.

Failing to recognise the social consequences of their wealth (Podsnap

shouts down a dinner guest who has the audacity to mention the starving

poor at his sumptuous table[127]), the Podsnaps enact the illusive relationship

between subject and object described by Marx, in which 'the individual in

one of his aspects objectifies [vergegenständlicht] himself in the thing, so

that his possession of the thing appears at the same time as a certain

development of his individuality'.[128] For Podsnap, the possession and

accumulation of objects confirms and augments his success as a bourgeois

subject. In order to reaffirm his position publicly, however, mere ownership

is not enough; it is also necessary to participate, along with other members

of his class, in rituals of social display which will allow his objects to <u>speak</u>

<u>for him</u>, declaring unequivocally his status and wealth.

This pattern is repeated regularly in nineteenth-century fiction. In

Elizabeth Gaskell's <u>North and South</u> (1855), Mrs Thornton, a formidable

matriarch whose position has risen in correlation with the success of her

son's cotton mill, recognises her class-based obligation to entertain.

Although she does not enjoy 'society', the narrator explains, she takes a

certain pleasure in 'dinner-giving' and in 'criticizing other people's dinners'.[129]

Her own parties are exercises in magnificence: 'careless to abstemiousness

in her daily habits, it was part of her pride to set a feast before such of her

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[127] Dickens, <u>Our Mutual Friend</u>, pp. 186-88.

[128] Marx, <u>Grundrisse</u>, pp. 221-22.

[129] Elizabeth Gaskell, <u>North and South</u>, ed. Patricia Ingham (1855; London: Penguin, 1995),

p. 96.

guests as cared for it'.[130] When the novel's heroine, Margaret Hale, is

invited to dine with the Thorntons, her materialistic mother instructs her to

'notice the dinner well', in order to establish how the dinner parties of Milton,

the northern industrial town where the Hales now live, differ from the London

gatherings to which they have been accustomed.[131] Her snobbery proves

unfounded: the narrator notes that 'Mrs Hale would have been more than

interested, – she would have been astonished, if she had seen the

sumptuousness of the dinner-table and its appointments' at Marlborough

Mill.[132] Margaret, however, finds the visual splendour of the meal

'oppressive'; for her, every corner of the Thorntons' home 'seemed filled up

with ornament, until it became a weariness of the eye'.[133]

She is similarly disenchanted with the after-dinner talk of Milton's

wealthy ladies, which is dominated by their fixation upon possessions and

signifiers of wealth. 'The ladies were so dull', she complains later to her

father,

> – oh, so dull! Yet I think it was clever too. It reminded me of our
>
> old game of having each so many nouns to introduce into a
>
> sentence.'
>
> 'What do you mean, child?' asked Mr Hale.
>
> 'Why, they took nouns that were signs of things which gave
>
> evidence of wealth, – housekeepers, under-gardeners, extent of

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[130] Gaskell, <u>North and South</u>, p. 159.

[131] Gaskell, <u>North and South</u>, p. 158.

[132] Gaskell, <u>North and South</u>, pp. 158-59.

[133] Gaskell, <u>North and South</u>, p. 159.

glass, valuable lace, diamonds, and all such things; and each one

formed her speech so as to bring them all in, in the prettiest

accidental manner possible.'[134]

Possessions do not exist simply as practical assets for the wealthy members

of Milton society, but also as potent signifiers of success. If, as Marx

suggests, commodities were utilised by the bourgeoisie to demonstrate a

'general power over society, over the whole world of gratifications', then

ornamental dining of the kind vaunted at Marlborough Mill can be read as a

calculated attestation of cultural supremacy.[135]

Not all members of the middle classes were seduced by the lure of

objects, however. Characteristically, Margaret Hale recognises that the

visual signifiers of wealth which bombard her at London and Milton dinner

parties conceal a certain emptiness. Her sense of social display as facade

is intensified after she witnesses the sparse tables of Milton's impoverished

mill-workers. 'Oh mamma, mamma!' she implores, 'how am I to dress up in

my finery, and go off and away to smart parties, after the sorrow I have seen

today?'[136] The magnificent dinners and ornamental objects delineated in

North and South, and in nineteenth-century fiction generally, do not work to

fulfil a human need; instead, as Margaret begins to perceive, these things

mask the lack which informs bourgeois desire. Deluded by the illusory value

invested in their prized possessions, the middle classes see ownership and

display as means by which to assert dominance over their world and satiate

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[134] Gaskell, North and South, p. 166.

[135] Marx, Grundrisse, p. 222.

[136] Gaskell, North and South, p. 156.

simultaneously a desire for power and control. However, the ability of attainable objects to satisfy desire is, precisely, an illusion. As Henry Kripps points out, the fetishised commodity, in this respect, 'bears a structural similarity' to the objet a, which 'is not only a concrete object but also a ghostly value, a false essence carried by the concrete object and constituted through the process of exchange'.[137] Like the objet a, dining-room accoutrements motivate desire by reminding owners that they can never have enough wealth or accumulate too many possessions.

In relation to the ornaments adorning their dinner tables, then, the Victorian bourgeoisie constituted themselves as victims of a profound misunderstanding, or méconnaissance to use Lacan's term. According to Lacan, possessions cannot bring about fulfilment because they are knowable, obtainable objects, and the subject remains, always, in a 'state of nescience ... in relation to his desire'.[138] Subjects cannot own their desire, a point recognised in an 1854 article cited by Asa Briggs, which asserts, 'It is a folly to suppose when a man amasses a quantity of furniture that it belongs to him. On the contrary, it is he who belongs to his furniture'.[139] The dining-room possessions accrued by Victorian householders did not serve to satiate desire (for power, social standing and so on) but rather to motivate it by making oblique reference to the fact that the cultural meanings attached to one's belongings lie defiantly outside of one's control. This state of affairs

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[137] Henry Krips, Fetish: An Erotics of Culture (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 21.

[138] Lacan, 'Subversion of the Subject', p. 345.

[139] Quoted in Briggs, Victorian Things, p. 4.

was not generally recognised by the aspirant middle classes, however, who continued to acquire dining-room ornaments not only to display their taste, wealth and status but also in hopes of procuring lucrative matches for unmarried family members.

The Politics of Self-display

On arrival at the ancestral home of Henry and Eleanor Tilney, Catherine Morland, the naïve heroine of Northanger Abbey (1818), is surprised by the assiduous attentions lavished upon her by her friends' father. Unbeknown to Catherine, the imposing and eccentric General Tilney has received exaggerated reports of her parents' wealth and is consequently keen to foster the budding romance between her and Henry. To this end, the magnificent dining room at Northanger is used as a snare. Seated for the first time at the General's table, Catherine is impressed by the size and splendour of the apartment. It is

> a noble room ... fitted up in a style of luxury and expense which was almost lost on the unpractised eye of Catherine, who saw little more than its spaciousness and the number of their attendants. Of the former, she spoke aloud her admiration; and the General, with a very gracious countenance, acknowledged that it was by no means an ill-sized room.[140]

Gratified by Catherine's artless appreciation, 'the General could not forego the pleasure' of showing her the room again, the next day, during a tour of

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[140] Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, ed. Marylin Butler (1818; London: Penguin, 1995), p. 145.

the Abbey, even going so far as to '[pace] out the length' in order to prove its massive proportions.[141] Like other fictional nineteenth-century parents, anxious to secure suitable matches for unmarried offspring, General Tilney utilises the visual impact of the dining room in order to persuade a potential daughter-in-law of his family's good name and financial worth.

Ironically, however, the grandeur of the Tilney's dining room fails to actuate the intended effect: being of much more moderate means than the General assumes, Catherine is overwhelmed by its stateliness and resplendent display. Usually represented in nineteenth-century fiction as a unified, harmonious, familial eating space, the dining room here is transformed into a scene of discomfiture and embarrassment.[142] For while Catherine stares, awestruck, at the abundance before her, it becomes apparent that she, too, is fixed by an exacting, socially-constructed gaze. She suffers great agitation at the Tilney's breakfast table in Bath as a result of her fear 'of not doing exactly what was right, and of not being able to preserve [the family's] good opinion'.[143] As Catherine comes to realise, the nineteenth-century dining room represents a space not only in which to display one's objects and possessions, but also, crucially, oneself.

The politics of self-display at work in the dining room is inextricably linked to the inception and development of romantic relations. Luce Giard argues that the table functions as 'a social machinery', compelling eaters to

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[141] Austen, Northanger Abbey, p. 160.

[142] For a discussion of the homely connotations of the dining room, see Chapter 2 of this thesis, pp. 145–48.

[143] Austen, Northanger Abbey, p. 135.

face one another, talk, listen and interact. Specifically, it encourages amorous attachments: 'there is nothing quite like a fine dinner,' she insists, 'to help promote ... matters ... of the heart'.[144] This romantic function was of particular importance to the Victorians, for whom the dining room represented one of those rare, socially-acceptable spaces in which the sexes could mix, intermingle and converse without fear of scandal or reprobation. Unsurprisingly, many fictional relationships first begin, or come to be consolidated, around the dinner table. At a party in The Last Chronicle of Barset, John Eames, who 'understood dinners quite well enough to know that in a party of twelve, among whom six are ladies, everything depends on your next neighbour', is relieved to find that Miss Demolines, the lady he has been allocated to accompany to the table, is both attractive and talkative. Perceiving that he 'would have no difficulty as to conversation', Johnny embarks upon a pleasant flirtation with his companion, who selects for him choice items from the great bill of fare provided.[145]

In Vanity Fair, meanwhile, the avaricious and ambitious Becky Sharp first sets her sights on hapless Jos Sedley at his family's dinner table. Conscious of his love of food, Becky dispatches 'many sweet little appeals, half tender, half jocular ... about the dishes at dinner' in his direction and, at first, it seems her plan to snare a husband will end in success.[146] By tea-

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[144] Luce Giard, 'Plat du Jour', in The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking, eds. Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 171-98 (p. 197).

[145] Trollope, Last Chronicle of Barset, p. 239.

[146] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 65.

time some days later, Jos's bachelorhood appears in grave danger as he

listens, in a state of ravishment, to Miss Sharp's performance at the Sedleys'

piano. However, his prodigious appetite, initially manipulated by Becky in

order to procure herself a place in his affections, is now the cause of her

downfall: at the moment Jos summons up the courage to speak of his

feelings, Mr Sambo, the family servant, '[makes] his appearance with a tray

containing sandwiches, jellies, and some glittering glasses and decanters',

on which Jos immediately fixes his attention. As the narrator wryly notes,

'the passion of love never interfered with the appetite' of Joseph Sedley, and

Becky's chance is duly missed.[147]

For many nineteenth-century suitors, though, the 'passion of love'

only increased with the production of food. In <u>Bleak House</u> (1853), the

luncheon table is the scene of an ardent declaration by Mr Guppy, a

presumptuous young clerk from the firm of Kenge and Carboy's. Having had

business to attend to at the home of John Jarndyce, Mr Guppy is invited by

Jarndyce's ward, Esther Summerson, to take some refreshment before

leaving. Satisfied that Esther will be present while he eats, Guppy is

pleased to accept. 'The lunch was soon brought,' Esther notes in her

narration of the incident, 'but it remained for some time on the table'. Seated

at his meal, the usually prolix Mr Guppy appears at a loss for words. He

> began nervously sharpening the carving-knife on the carving-fork;
>
> still looking at me (as I felt quite sure without looking at him), in
>
> [an] unusual manner. The sharpening lasted so long, that at last I

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[147] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, pp. 73-74.

felt a kind of obligation on me to raise my eyes, in order that I might break the spell under which he seemed to labour, of not being able to leave off.

He immediately looked at the dish, and began to carve.[148]

Unsettled by Guppy's insistent gaze, Esther thinks it expedient to leave. As she rises to quit the room, however, she is implored by the now determined legal clerk to allow him 'the favor of a minute's private conversation'.[149] Though disconcerted by the tenor of his request and the successive glasses of wine he has rather hastily consumed, Esther assents – much to her regret. Finding herself first regaled with meticulous details of Mr Guppy's current financial position and future prospects, Esther is then made the unwilling subject of a proposal: 'Miss Summerson! In the mildest language, I adore you. Would you be so kind as to allow me (as I may say) to file a declaration – to make an offer!'[150] Conscious that his suit is not being met with the enthusiasm for which he might have wished, Guppy makes a second assay. Miss Summerson remains unpersuadable, however, and, after affirming that Mr Guppy addresses her interest as unsuccessfully as he addresses her inclination, requests that he leave.

This amusing incident plays on the long-established literary association of romance and the dinner table to bathetic effect. As Guppy himself melancholically notes following Esther's initial refusal, 'what a

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[148] Charles Dickens, <u>Bleak House</u>, ed. Stephen Gill (1853; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 136.

[149] Dickens, <u>Bleak House</u>, p. 137.

[150] Dickens, <u>Bleak House</u>, p. 138.

mockery it is ... to be stationed behind food at such a moment'.[151] Yet, in its

gentle satirisation of conventional representations of romance in the dining

room, the text works subtly to reaffirm the traditional relationship between

love, food and vision in nineteenth-century fiction.[152] The importance of

vision is particularly emphasised here: as in The Eve of St. Agnes, a play of

gazes is at work in Dickens's comical misappropriation of the conventional

proposal scene. Although Esther averts her eyes for much of the

uncomfortable interview, she makes repeated reference to the uncanny

sensation of being examined in a 'scrutinizing and curious way', and fixed by

an 'intent look'.[153] Even after Guppy's departure, this look remains: 'raising

my eyes as he went out, I once more saw him looking at me after he had

passed the door'.[154] It should be noted that Guppy's insistent stares are not

completely motivated by the sort of heartfelt passion evinced by Porphyro;

secretly struck by Esther's resemblance to Lady Dedlock, he is curious to

know whether this latter figure could hold the key to Esther's unknown

parentage. Nevertheless, while seated at lunch, Guppy's gaze replicates the

consuming looks issued by countless lovers in Victorian fiction. Significantly,

his stare is coupled with the incessant sharpening of his carving knife,

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[151] Dickens, Bleak House, p. 138.

[152] It is notable that Esther later meets her true love and future husband, Allan Woodcourt,

at a dinner party; the association of romance and the dinner table, though ripe for parody, is

not redundant in Bleak House, it seems (p. 197).

[153] Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 136, 138.

[154] Dickens, Bleak House, p. 141.

suggesting that, for him, Esther represents an object to be devoured, much like the food before him.

Giard contends that this 'devouring fantasy' is common around the dinner table, where 'the love exchange ... transforms the partner into a delectable morsel, decks him or her out with pet names taken from culinary vocabulary ("my honey bun", "my little lamb", "my little chickadee")'.[155] The language of lovers reveals their devouring impulse, yet it is not only in words but also through looks that the fantasy of 'a cannibalistic assimilation of the other by oneself, [the] nostalgia for an impossible, identifying fusion' is typically enacted.[156] In Armadale (1866), for example, the enraptured Allan, recently returned from a visit to his neighbour's house, tells his friend Midwinter:

> Don't be afraid of my not keeping you company at breakfast. I
> didn't eat much at the cottage – I feasted my eyes on Miss Milroy,
> as the poets say. Oh, the darling! the darling! she turns you topsy-
> turvey the moment you look at her.[157]

Interestingly, Allan here describes the act of 'feasting' in which he has indulged not in terms of its impact on Miss Milroy, but rather in terms of its effect upon himself, the sense of personal disorder he experiences when wielding his devouring gaze. Following on from Freud, Lacan suggests that love is governed by a 'fundamentally narcissistic structure': 'to love is,

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[155] Giard, 'Plat du jour', p. 196.

[156] Giard, 'Plat du jour', p. 196.

[157] Wilkie Collins, Armadale, ed. Catherine Peters (1866; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 221-22.

essentially, to wish to be loved'.[158] The loaded look across the dinner table,

therefore, is self-interested: it does not simply reveal the desire of one

subject for another, but rather communicates the desire of each to be seen,

'to be recognized by the other'.[159] Fictional characters such as Porphyro,

Guppy and Allan Armadale are obliged not to realise this, of course, for the

success of the nineteenth-century love story turns on our unwavering belief

in the ability of the love-object to satisfy desire. As Lacan asserts, 'in

persuading the other that he has that which may complement us, we assure

ourselves of being able to continue to misunderstand precisely what we

lack'.[160] Caught up in the false conviction that love can satisfy desire and

assuage lack, the romantic heroes and heroines of nineteenth-century

representation continually enact the devouring gaze alluded to by Giard and

Lacan in hopes of achieving future fulfilment. Thus, the fictional Victorian

dinner table is simultaneously the scene of scrutiny and self-deception.

Like Esther Summerson, many fictional nineteenth-century diners

impart a consciousness of being surveyed while they eat. The penetrating

look of which they are aware need not emanate from a specific source: in

panoptical style, the knowledge that one might be seen was enough to

influence many Victorians at the dinner table. Dining amounted to a public

performance for the middle and upper classes: an awareness of how they

might appear to others, initiated by the existence of what Disraeli terms a

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[158] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, pp. 186, 253.

[159] Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', in <u>Écrits</u>, pp. 33-125 (p. 64).

[160] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, p. 133.

'universal gaze', permeated their eating behaviour.[161] This gaze was directed towards certain participants at dinner in particular: the person whose task it was to carve the various joints of meat that accompanied meals served à la française, for example, was guaranteed a rapt audience. The role of carver was an important one at the nineteenth-century table, not only because it involved the responsibility of ensuring all guests received adequate portions of the grosses pièces but also because, as Valerie Mars suggests, 'carving demonstrated a potent and symbolic act, with inferences of power and incorporation'.[162]

Unsurprisingly, given its cultural consequence, many domestic manuals devote much attention to the subject. An early-nineteenth-century advice-giver, who called herself Margaret Dods after the indomitable landlady of Sir Walter Scott's St. Ronan's Well (1823), argues that

> carving has long been esteemed one of the minor arts of polite
> life, – a test at first sight of the breeding of men, as its dextrous
> and graceful performance is presumed to mark a person trained in
> good fashion. 'To dance in hall and carve at board' are classed
> together ... in the list of a young gentleman's accomplishments.[163]

In Modern Cookery for Private Families, Eliza Acton agrees on the importance of carving to the social aspirations of well-bred young men. She asserts that, while it is advisable for a gentlewoman to 'be able to carve well

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[161] Benjamin Disraeli, Vivian Grey (1826; New York: AMS Press, 1976), Vol. I, p. 194.

[162] Valerie Mars, 'A La Russe: The New Way of Dining', p. 138.

[163] Margaret Dods, The Cook and Housewife's Manual, 4th ed. (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1829), p. 41.

and easily ... that she may be <u>competent</u> to do the honours of a table at any

time with propriety and self-possession', for gentlemen,

> and especially to those who mix much in society, some knowledge
>
> of this art, and a certain degree of skill in the exercise of it, are
>
> indispensable, if they would avoid the chance of appearing often
>
> to great disadvantage themselves, and of causing dissatisfaction
>
> and annoyance to others; for the uncouth operations of bad
>
> carvers occasion almost as much discomfort to those who witness,
>
> as they do generally of awkwardness and embarrassment to those
>
> who exhibit them.[164]

So concerned is Acton that carvers appear to advantage on public

occasions, she adds a footnote to her text advising young persons

inexperienced in the art to practice first at home, for here 'the failure of their

first attempts will cause them much less embarrassment that they would in

another sphere, and at a later period of life'.[165]

For the aid of untutored individuals, Mrs Beeton's <u>Book of Household</u>

<u>Management</u> offers illustrated guidance on the carving of beef, mutton,

lamb, pork, veal, poultry and game. In the case of these latter two

categories, Beeton suggests particular 'knowledge and skill' are required, as

'an inapt practitioner appears to more disadvantage when mauling these

pretty and favourite dishes'.[166] To facilitate the carving of birds, Soyer's

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[164] Eliza Acton, <u>Modern Cookery for Private Families</u> (1855; Lewes: Southover Press, 1993),

p. 7.

[165] Acton, <u>Modern Cookery</u>, p. 7.

[166] Beeton, <u>Book of Household Management</u>, pp. 501, 538.

Modern Housewife recommends the use of a 'Tendon Separator', available

from Bramah's in Piccadilly and created (coincidentally) by one Alexis Soyer.

This implement, the Housewife eulogises, 'is the greatest boon ever

conferred on a bad carver':

> If it was more generally used, there would be no more birds flying
>
> across the table in the faces of guests; no more turkeys deposited
>
> in a lady's or gentleman's lap; no more splashing of gravy to spoil
>
> satin dresses; but all would be divided with the greatest facility,
>
> and in the most elegant manner, and the poultry would look much
>
> better at table.[167]

The sort of culinary accidents described here provided stock material for the

narrators of dinner-table anecdotes and satirical publications, such as

Punch, for much of the nineteenth century. Their incidence was threatened,

however, in the later Victorian era by the fashion for dining à la russe,

whereby, as previously noted, joints were carved by practised servants at a

sideboard before being brought, ready plated, to the table. Many diners

were reluctant to embrace this new mode of service and continued to

advocate the importance of skilful carving. Writing in 1861, Mrs Beeton

pronounces that, although

> Diners à la Russe may possibly, erewhile, save modern gentlemen
>
> the necessity of learning the art which was in auld lang syne one
>
> of the necessary accomplishments of the youthful squire ... until

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[167] Soyer, Modern Housewife, p. 424.

side-tables become universal ... it will be well for all to learn how to assist at ... carving.[168]

As <u>Warne's Model Cookery and Housekeeping Book</u> (1869) pragmatically points out, though 'the present fashion of Russian dinners is fast banishing the necessity for promiscuous carving from the richly-served boards of the wealthy', in the rather more moderate circles of middle life, 'where it is not adopted, the necessity of skill in the use of a carving-knife is sufficiently obvious'.[169]

The continued importance attached to carving resulted not only from practical necessity, but also cultural reasons: carving offered men the opportunity to display their proficiency, skill and grace – accomplishments eminently desirable in a potential husband. Dexterous carvers invariably attract female attention in nineteenth-century representation. In <u>Mansfield Park</u> (1814), Lady Bertram is 'astonished' to find how well her second son, Edmund, can 'supply his [father's] place in carving' during Sir Thomas's prolonged absence from home.[170] Miss Crawford, a single woman of twenty thousand pounds a year, is similarly impressed. When the Bertrams' elder son, Tom, also absents himself from Mansfield, she initially prepares 'to find a great chasm in their society' and, when dining at the Park, retakes 'her

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[168] Beeton, <u>Book of Household Management</u>, p. 539.

[169] Mary Jewry, ed., <u>Warne's Model Cookery and Housekeeping Book</u>, People's Edition (London: Frederick Warne, 1869), p. 23.

[170] Jane Austen, <u>Mansfield Park</u>, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (1814; London: Penguin, 1996), p. 30.

chosen place near the bottom of the table, fully expecting to feel a most

melancholy difference in the change of masters':

> It would be a very flat business, she was sure. In comparison with
>
> his brother, Edmund would have nothing to say. The soup would
>
> be sent round in a most spiritless manner, wine drank without any
>
> smiles, or agreeable trifling, and the venison cut up without
>
> supplying one pleasant anecdote of any former haunch, or a
>
> single entertaining story about 'my friend such a one'.[171]

So consummately does Edmund perform his masculine duties, however, by

the time of Tom's return, Miss Crawford comes to realise that she actually

prefers the younger brother and transfers her attentions in his direction.

Yet, if competent carving could be used by men to elicit female

admiration, in women, it seems, incompetence in this area was more often

the key to engaging the notice of the opposite sex. In Lady Audley's Secret

(1862), Lucy, the 'lady' of the title, is described as being 'very charming at

the dinner-table': in her role as hostess, she professes 'the most bewitching

incapacity for carving the pheasant set before her' and, consequently, is

obliged to call upon her captivated nephew for assistance.[172] In different

circumstances, though, the text posits female domestic capability as a more

effective means of attracting the attentions of watching men. 'Surely a pretty

woman never looks prettier than when making tea,' the narrator exclaims,

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[171] Austen, Mansfield Park, p. 45.

[172] Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Lady Audley's Secret, ed. David Skilton (1862; Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1987), p. 85.

adding that this 'most feminine and most domestic of all occupations imparts

a magic harmony to her every movement, a witchery to her every glance'.[173]

In North and South, too, displays of domestic proficiency captivate the

interest of male onlookers. When Mrs Thornton learns that her son, John, is

to take tea with Margaret Hale and her family, she warns him not to 'get

caught by a penniless girl'.[174] Mr Thornton demurs but is nevertheless

fascinated by Margaret at the meal and repeatedly fixes his gaze in her

direction:

> She stood by the tea-table in a light-coloured muslin gown, which
>
> had a good deal of pink about it. She looked as if she was not
>
> attending to the conversation, but solely busy with the tea-cups,
>
> among which her round ivory hands moved with pretty, noiseless
>
> daintiness. She had a bracelet on one taper arm, which would fall
>
> down over her round wrist. Mr Thornton watched the re-placing of
>
> this troublesome ornament with far more attention than he listened
>
> to her father. It seemed as if it fascinated him to see her push it
>
> up impatiently, until it tightened her soft flesh; and then to mark the
>
> loosening – the fall. He could almost have exclaimed – 'There it
>
> goes, again!'[175]

So entranced is Mr Thornton with Margaret's performance at the tea table,

he almost regrets her efficiency, which hastens the distracting 'obligation of

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[173] Braddon, Lady Audley's Secret, p. 222.

[174] Gaskell, North and South, p. 78.

[175] Gaskell, North and South, p. 80.

eating and drinking'.[176] This duty does not prevent him from watching her, however. He notes how his hostess hands

> him his cup of tea with the proud air of an unwilling slave; but her
>
> eye caught the moment when he was ready for another cup; and
>
> he almost longed to ask her to do for him what he saw her
>
> compelled to do for her father, who took her little finger and thumb
>
> in his masculine hand, and made them serve as sugar-tongs.[177]

The minutiae of observation in this part of North and South reveal the importance of the gaze in scenes where romantic feeling coincides with eating and drinking. Thornton desires that the afternoon last longer so that he can continue to devour Margaret – for his is a devouring gaze, in spite of its tenderness and delicacy. His focus falls upon the parts of Margaret's body exposed to him: her 'ivory hands' and wrist, and the 'soft flesh' of her arm. His desire is to take her hand in his and use her fingers as tongs, making them an extension of himself: the sort of gesture of cannibalistic assimilation referred to earlier by Giard. The text does not make explicit Margaret's awareness of Thornton's stare; it does, however, suggest her perception of another, more general gaze, which triggers her inherent sense of duty and obliges her to an unconscious performance of domestic self-display. Although this 'unwilling slave' is disinclined to serve Thornton because of her personal dislike of his character, she nonetheless notices when his cup is empty and performs her duty as necessary. A

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[176] Gaskell, North and South, p. 80.

[177] Gaskell, North and South, p. 80.

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consciousness of society's expectations permeates Margaret's performance

at the tea table, compelling her to display her domestic competence.

At the Thornton's dinner party, too, Margaret is the object of Mr

Thornton's loving/devouring gaze. On this occasion, her thick black hair is

'twisted round and round', and 'compressed into massive coils, that encircled

her head like a crown, and then were gathered into a large spiral knot

behind'.[178] The effect, when combined with that of her white, silk dress

against her milk-white skin, is statuesque, goddess-like; the reader is

implicitly invited here to consume Margaret's image in the same way that

John Thornton does at dinner. 'Struck anew with her great beauty', he

imbibes her appearance with 'one of his sudden comprehensive glances':

> The large soft eyes that looked forth steadily at one object ... the
>
> curving lines of the red lips, just parted in the interest of listening to
>
> what her companion said – the head a little bent forwards, so as to
>
> make a long sweeping line from the summit, where the light
>
> caught on the glossy raven hair, to the smooth ivory tip of the
>
> shoulder; the round white arms, and taper hands, laid lightly
>
> across each other, but perfectly motionless in their pretty
>
> attitude.[179]

So entranced is Thornton, it proves a wrench for him to look away and

attend to the conversation of his guests.

The dispatch of devouring looks is by no means restricted to male

characters in <u>North and South</u>, however. In a reciprocal gesture, Mr

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[178] Gaskell, <u>North and South</u>, p. 158.

[179] Gaskell, <u>North and South</u>, pp. 160-61.

Thornton's appearance at dinner is a feast for Margaret's eyes, while his conduct gives her food for thought:

> His whole manner, as master of the house, and entertainer of his friends, was so straightforward, yet simple and modest, as to be thoroughly dignified. Margaret thought she had never seen him to so much advantage.[180]

Her devouring gaze returns at the end of the novel, by which time she has recognised the essential nobleness of Mr Thornton's character, and the true nature of her feelings towards him. Both characters have met with a reversal of fortune: Thornton is plagued by the threat of financial failure following a period of bad trade, while Margaret has acceded to a fortune after the death of her parents and benefactor. At the Lennoxes' dinner party, therefore, it is she who occupies the position of power in their relationship, as revealed in the play of gazes operating at the table. Beautiful in her gold gown and pomegranate flowers, Margaret watches Mr Thornton's face:

> He never looked at her; so she might study him unobserved .... For an instant, his glance instinctively sought hers .... But when their eyes met, his whole countenance changed; he was grave and anxious once more; and he resolutely avoided even looking near her again during dinner.[181]

The power enjoyed here by Margaret is again experienced, though in more ambivalent terms, the next day. At an interview with Thornton, she offers to rescue his precarious position by investing money in Marlborough Mill,

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[180] Gaskell, North and South, p. 161.

[181] Gaskell, North and South, p. 419.

before agreeing to marry him, and thus rendering herself his property anyway according to the law of the time. The novel ends before the happy nuptials occur, but the reader may presume that they take place in accordance with Margaret's earlier-stated wishes: weary of the arrangements associated with her cousin Edith's wedding, she declares, 'I should like to walk to church through the shade of trees; and not to have so many bridesmaids, and to have no wedding-breakfast'.[182] In defiance of Victorian cultural norms, Margaret appears to prefer the role of spectator to that of object of an expectant, socially-constructed gaze.

In contrast with Margaret's professed wish for a ceremony unblighted by pomp and display, many nineteenth-century weddings were extravagant affairs, particularly among those members of the ever-expanding middle classes keen to show off their new spouses and assert their newly-combined wealth. As ever, food was central to the visual spectacularism of proceedings: the nineteenth century was the period in which the classic, three-tiered wedding cake, so closely associated with weddings today, first evolved. As Simon Charsley points out, in this magnificent offering 'form triumphantly replaces any consideration of eatability, let alone of nutrition'.[183] The wedding cake, decked out in crisp, white icing and adorned with decorative piping and sugar work, functions primarily as an object of display.

Charsley notes that cakes gathered under the umbrella appellation 'bridecake' had long constituted a part of wedding celebrations. In the

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[182] Gaskell, North and South, p. 13.

[183] Simon Charsley, 'Marriages, Weddings and their Cakes', in Food, Health and Identity, ed. Pat Caplan (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 50-70 (p. 50).

Victorian era, however, the trend for a single, elaborate wedding cake

developed following a series of royal weddings, from the 1850s onwards, for

which leading commercial confectioners supplied individual wedding cakes

'of monumental size and form'.[184] These structures excited the interest of a

voracious public and, as the desire for ornate wedding cakes augmented,

expert bakers and confectioners began to advertise their services and wares

to those who could afford them. For those who could not, Mrs Beeton gives

a recipe for a 'rich bride cake' made with, among other ingredients, 5lbs. of

finest flour, 3lbs. of fresh butter, 5lbs. of currants, 2lbs. of sifted sugar and 16

eggs. The cake, she directs, should be 'spread with a thick layer of almond

icing, and over that another layer of sugar icing, and afterwards

ornamented'.[185] Others preferred to leave the task of decoration to

professionals: in a recipe for a similarly extravagant offering, Soyer

recommends sending the finished article to a reputable baker for

ornamentation in line with the illustration he provides.[186]

The appetite for elaborate, professionally-produced wedding cakes

among the socially-ambitious bourgeoisie suggests that such objects did not

simply work to symbolise the loving union of two members of that class;

these ostentatious offerings also signified the wealth and status of those

joined in matrimony and publicly proclaimed their combined consequence

and prestige. Money was the ultimate matchmaker in the nineteenth

century, as the representation of the period makes clear. At the dinner

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[184] Charsley, 'Marriages, Weddings and their Cakes', p. 57.

[185] Beeton, Book of Household Management, p. 854-55.

[186] Soyer, Modern Housewife, p. 396.

parties described earlier, the desire to find a wealthy mate was often the

motivating factor behind the documented instances of conspicuous self-

display. The narrator of <u>Vanity Fair</u> is decided upon the subject. 'What

causes respectable parents to take up their carpets, set their houses topsy-

turvy, and spend a fifth of their year's income in ball suppers and iced

champagne?' he demands tersely, adding, 'Is it sheer love of their species,

and an unadulterated wish to see young people happy and dancing? Psha!

they want to marry their daughters'.[187] The dinner table doubled as a

marriage market in the Victorian period, and, in this arena, unmarried women

of a certain age were portrayed as particularly predatory. The character of

Miss Demolines in <u>The Last Chronicle of Barset</u>, for example, '[knows] her

game very well' and, consequently, does not waste time conversing with

men in the drawing room prior to dinner but instead waits to see how the

table will arrange itself before making herself agreeable to prospective

partners. 'Powder may be wasted, and often is wasted' upon initial attempts

which later come to nothing, as the narrator cynically notes.[188]

Some enterprising diners fare better than Miss Demolines, however,

and the resultant marriages, based upon financial as opposed to romantic

interest, are often the most opulent and extravagant in nineteenth-century

fiction. After the death of his first wife, Mr Dombey, the flinty, impassive

businessman of Charles Dickens's <u>Dombey and Son</u> (1848), thinks it

expedient to take another, and selects for the purpose the beautiful, proud

but impoverished widow, Edith Granger. Little affection attaches itself to

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[187] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 58.

[188] Trollope, <u>Last Chronicle of Barset</u>, p. 239.

either side of the pairing, which proceeds more like a business arrangement than a love match; nevertheless, a wedding date is agreed upon and the marriage goes ahead. The wedding breakfast, which takes place in the dining room of the house 'borrowed' by Edith's mother, is an extravagant affair: 'the pastry-cook has done his duty like a man' and, consequently, the table is richly laid with 'roast fowls, raised pies, and lobster-salad'.[189] In spite of the luxuriousness of the breakfast, however, the dining room takes on a funereal air: its dark-brown walls, gloomy air and 'dead sea of mahogany' defy all attempts to brighten it with confectionary, 'flowers and love-knots'.[190] Significantly, the wedding feast is first described to the reader not in its pomp but after the departure of the guests, when all that remains is the debris of the meal:

> crumbs, dirty plates, spillings of wine, half-thawed ice, stale discoloured heel-taps, scraps of lobster, drum-sticks of fowls, and pensive jellies, gradually resolving themselves into a lukewarm gummy soup.[191]

This chaotic, disorderly table reveals the opulence of the wedding festivities, and the nuptials themselves, to be but a sham. As the narrator darkly notes, by the end of the day, 'the [Dombey] marriage is ... almost as denuded of its show and garnish as the breakfast'.[192]

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[189] Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son, ed. Peter Fairclough (1848; London: Penguin, 1970), pp. 528, 530.

[190] Dickens, Dombey and Son, pp. 510, 528.

[191] Dickens, Dombey and Son, p. 532.

[192] Dickens, Dombey and Son, p. 532.

Display continues to compensate for genuine feeling following the Dombeys' return from honeymoon. Although, at dinner, their table is arrayed with 'gold and silver', 'glittering spoons, and knives and forks and plates', as well as 'rich meats and wines', the conviviality typically associated with the Victorian family dining room is conspicuously absent.[193] Edith Dombey, 'immovable ... proud and cold', is but an ornament for her husband's table; he seems to have no more affection for her than he would a candelabra or epergne. Likewise,

> nothing that his wealth could do, though it were increased ten
> thousand fold, could win him for its own sake, one look of softened
> recognition from the defiant woman, linked to him, but arrayed with
> her whole soul against him'.[194]

Spectacle is no substitute for mutual regard and inclination according to the textual morality of Dombey and Son.

In other nineteenth-century fictions, too, the dangers of a marriage based on display, as opposed to true affection, are made manifest. The Lammles, a superficial young couple in Our Mutual Friend, are each seduced into believing that the other is a person of property following their respective grandiose performances on public occasions. Their marriage, like that of the Dombeys, is christened with a spectacular wedding feast in which the dining room is magnificently outfitted, the table 'crowned with flowers', and a 'splendid cake, covered with Cupids, silver, and true-lovers' knots'

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[193] Dickens, Dombey and Son, pp. 596, 598.

[194] Dickens, Dombey and Son, p. 584.

takes centre stage.[195] On honeymoon, however, the couple come to realise

that they have each been deceived as to the extent of their partner's wealth.

An unhappy marriage ensues, characterised by pretence and polish, as the

Lammles try (unsuccessfully) to convince the world of their secure financial

position and genuine love for each other. In this way, Our Mutual Friend,

like Dombey and Son, suggests that ostentation is invariably at odds with

domestic bliss and marital felicity.

Perhaps the most haunting symbol of the fallibility of attachments

founded on appearances rather than genuine affection is to be found in

Great Expectations (1861), however. Here the cobweb-covered 'bride-cake'

which stands, perpetually, at the centre of Miss Havisham's abandoned

wedding table testifies to her seduction and subsequent desertion by the

'showy-man' who defrauded her and broke her heart.[196] To depend upon

displays of prosperity or unregulated passion when selecting a marriage

partner, to ignore the importance of mutual esteem and regard, was to court

disaster according to the fiction of the mid-nineteenth century. Like Miss

Havisham's uneaten wedding cake, such relationships were fated soon to

lose their initial lustre and succumb to a slow decay.

Reflection and Veneer

Appearances, as this chapter has shown, were important to nineteenth-

century culture in general, and the bourgeois dining room in particular, but

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[195] Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, pp. 159, 166.

[196] Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, ed. Margaret Cardwell (1861; Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1994), pp. 83, 179.

could not be trusted unequivocally. Invested with significatory potential but

no guarantee of truth, looks could deceive as well as disclose things about

the wealth, standing and respectability of one's contemporaries. The

gnawing sense of anxiety generated by appearances in the Victorian period

manifested itself most pointedly in a series of articles published in Fraser's

Magazine between 1850 and 1851, entitled 'The Age of Veneer'. In the first

of the series, the importance of semblance to the British social system is

made clear. 'Society in this country is imitative,' the article argues:

> That is its present aspect. Each grade or class strives to hook
>
> itself on to its superior; is proud, not of its own self-created virtues,
>
> position, or other speciality, but of its resemblance to the nearest
>
> aristocratic model within the range of its ken. In politics, religion,
>
> amusements, literature, dress, art, and general social habits,
>
> imitation is the almost universal rule.[197]

Such aspirational mimicry is, to a certain extent, inevitable, the article

acknowledges, and even to be encouraged by small degrees. The desire for

self-improvement is a 'noble' one; however, it takes on a dangerous aspect

when it involves not innocent social imitation but active deception.

Unfortunately, the article continues, wilful imposture is rife in mid-nineteenth-

century Britain: a 'crust' of veneer covers society, rendering it 'superficial and

unreal in everything'.[198]

The practice of veneering, in its literal sense, was a popular one in the

Victorian period, owing to its ability to lend a household of moderate means

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[197] 'The Age of Veneer', Fraser's Magazine, 42 (1850), 237-45 (p. 240).

[198] 'The Age of Veneer', p. 244.

the appearance of opulence. As <u>Fraser's Magazine</u> somewhat scathingly remarks:

> Those who could not buy carved mahogany in the solid were content to put a pious fraud on themselves, and accept in lieu a bulk of deal or pine, with a thin layer of the richer wood spread over it. 'It looks as good,' they said, 'and it does not cost so much.'[199]

Veneering was a form of social disguise, masking the humble origins and modest value of a piece of furniture. Over time, the article claims, this 'same disposition to accept the superficial and the unreal in lieu of the solid and substantial' with regard to household effects began to infiltrate 'almost all the operations of social life in this country'.[200] The Victorian obsession with appearances encouraged the aspirant middle classes, in particular, to cultivate an impression of wealth or grandeur inconsistent with their actual circumstances. A dubious film of veneer began to coat not only their furnishings, but also themselves, their morals and mores. It even laminated the prosaic daily ritual of eating and drinking, along with the 'sacred rites of hospitality'.[201] According to <u>Fraser's Magazine</u>, the modern John Bull

> sits on veneered chairs, in veneered garments; and he eats off veneered mahogany, with electrotyped plate. He imbibes with his breakfast his day's opinions from leading articles, the <u>ne plus ultra</u> of veneering ... and he passes his social hours in the midst of a

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[199] 'The Age of Veneer', p. 238.

[200] 'The Age of Veneer', p. 243.

[201] 'The Age of Veneer', p. 243.

veneered gaiety and refinement, and a still more flagrantly

veneered hospitality.[202]

The prevalence of such mendacious posturing is hardly to be wondered at,

the article sombrely concludes: 'immense "returns" ... in the shape of power,

notoriety, or profit' await those who adopt the facade of social

accomplishment and polish their persons, their homes, their habits and

practices to a state of high finish.[203] The application of a little veneer could

go a long way to securing one's social and financial position in the mid-

nineteenth century.

The culture of veneering alluded to in <u>Fraser's Magazine</u> caught the

imagination of many Victorian writers, most notably that of Charles Dickens

in <u>Our Mutual Friend</u>. Here, the aptly-named Veneerings exhibit all of the

sham gentility and superficiality condemned in 'The Age of Veneer',

shamelessly flaunting their parvenu status with a series of extravagant

dinner parties. These occasions are frequented by a variety of shallow

acquaintances, who attend not out of love or friendship for their hosts but in

order to enjoy the glittering decadence of their elaborately-arrayed table.

For, in the Veneering establishment, 'all things were in a state of high

varnish and polish', from the fittings and furnishings to the family itself.[204]

Such ubiquitous glossing implies an absence of substance, as well as taste,

according to nineteenth-century values. Charles Eastlake was one of a

number of domestic advisers to disapprove of the fashion for 'French-

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[202] 'The Age of Veneer', pp. 244-45.

[203] 'The Age of Veneer', p. 242.

[204] Dickens, <u>Our Mutual Friend</u>, p. 48.

polishing, or literally varnishing, furniture' so that it glistened and gleamed.

In his Hints on Household Taste, he argues that the trend destroys 'all

artistic effect in its appearance' and renders dining-room objects, in

particular, 'eminently uninteresting'.[205] Unfortunately, he despairs, the

majority of Victorian consumers, like the fictional Veneerings, choose not to

heed his advice, failing to realise when their sideboard 'comes like a new toy

from the shop, fresh with recent varnish and untarnished gilding' that its

'transient prettiness' – 'the single merit which it possesses' – will soon

fade.[206]

For writers such as Eastlake, veneering and varnishing were

inescapably associated with artificiality: the express purpose of both

practices was to disguise and distort the 'true' nature of what lay beneath, an

'essentially un-English' operation, according to the authors of Fraser's

Magazine.[207] Accordingly, the sheen surrounding the Veneering household

in Our Mutual Friend masks an underlying insincerity: as the narrator

cynically observes, of both the furniture and the Veneerings themselves, 'the

surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle stickey'.[208]

The patina of newness clings to Mr and Mrs Veneering, their possessions

and surroundings. They are, the novel notes, with insistent repetition:

> Bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of
>
> London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span

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[205] Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste, pp. 83, 84.

[206] Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste, p. 83.

[207] 'The Age of Veneer', p. 238.

[208] Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, p. 48.

new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their

servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new,

their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were

new, they themselves were new, [and] they were as newly married

as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby.[209]

Even the gold and silver crest which adorns the Veneerings' dinner table

betrays an inevitable newness: a 'Crusading ancestor' bearing a camel on

his shield has been found for the family of arrivistes by the Herald's College,

with the result that camels now crowd the dining room in the form of

epergnes, candlesticks and salt cellars.[210]

The kind of 'vulgar thirst for novelty' evinced by the Veneerings is as

offensive as the fashion for varnish and veneer itself, according to Mrs

Loftie, who highlights the need for 'a clear distinction' to be drawn 'between

new inventions of use or beauty and mere novelties, only made to be sold,

looked at, and thrown aside'.[211] Of the prevalence of the latter category, she

adds, 'every season we have such things produced by the thousand, and

chiefly in the form of ... dining-room ornaments'.[212] The absurdly-themed

accoutrements to the Veneerings' table certainly proclaim a concern with

novelty rather than the enduring precepts of 'good taste'. However, even if

such items proved to be perfect examples of elegance and finesse, Loftie

warns that

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[209] Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, p. 48.

[210] Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, p. 52.

[211] Loftie, The Dining-Room, pp. 11, 14-15.

[212] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 15.

it is well not to allow a love of possessing pretty things to grow into

a selfish passion for accumulating household ornament. People of

small income have no more right to spend an undue portion of it

on Venetian glass and oriental rugs than on diamonds or

gambling.[213]

Loftie is far from alone in her conviction. The fiction and advice manuals of

the nineteenth century reveal an over-riding concern with the need for

middle-class subjects to live up to, but not beyond, their income. In From

Kitchen to Garret (1888), J. E. Panton rails against the contemporary curse

of English households, 'this seeming to be what you are not, this wretched

pretending of 400l. to be 800l.'.[214] Robert Kerr expresses similar disquiet in

The Gentleman's House (1865). 'To attempt to create a fictitious

appearance, of either extent or cost, is a thing particularly distasteful,' he

warns his readers, adding,

the happy medium is to display all to the best advantage, but

honestly, and devoid of trick or affectation .... Whether the house

be large or small, the outlay restricted or profuse, the effect to be

aimed at must be that of solid value for the money spent, –

nothing more, but certainly nothing less.[215]

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[213] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 19.

[214] J. E. Panton, From Kitchen to Garret: Hints for Young Householders, 5th ed. (London:
Ward and Downey, 1888), p. 22.

[215] Robert Kerr, The Gentleman's House; or, How to Plan English Residences, From the
Parsonage to the Palace, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1865), p. 88.

As Judith Flanders suggests, 'if a house reflected the owners' standing, then pretending to be of a different financial standing cast doubt over the whole system of judging acquaintances'.[216] False appearances undermined the credibility of vision in nineteenth-century culture, and in this way threatened the stability and security of the bourgeois worldview.

Not all Victorians were deceived by the veneer of apparent prosperity. After dining with the Dobbs Broughtons in The Last Chronicle of Barset, John Eames tells his friend Conway Dalyrample that although the couple 'stink of money', he doubts whether they actually have any. 'A good deal of it looked to me like make-believe,' he asserts, adding, 'there's no doubt about the claret, but the champagne was execrable'.[217] The Dobbs Broughtons are, as Johnny suspects, living beyond their means, holding glittering evening gatherings that belie their real financial position. In this way, Johnny surmises, they are typical of

> a sort of persons going now ... who are downright Brummagem to the ear and to the touch and to the sight, and we recognise them as such at the very first moment .... Clap [them] down upon the counter, and [they ring] dull and untrue at once.[218]

Other characters in nineteenth-century fiction display less perspicacity than John Eames, however. In Vanity Fair, Becky and Rawden Crawley manage to fool society at large and enjoy an extravagant existence in spite of their

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[216] Flanders, Victorian House, p. 136.

[217] Trollope, Last Chronicle of Barset, p. 248.

[218] Trollope, Last Chronicle of Barset, p. 248.

straitened circumstances. The profligate couple cultivate a reputation for the

excellence of their dinner parties. Guests to their home are greeted with

a hearty welcome, a kind smile, a good dinner, and a jolly shake of

the hand from the host and hostess there, just for all the world as if

they had been undisputed masters of three or four thousand a

year.[219]

And so they were, in a way, the narrator notes in a chapter entitled 'How to

Live Well on Nothing a Year' – not in money, but in produce and labour:

If they did not pay for the mutton, they had it; if they did not give

bullion in exchange for their wine, how should we know? Never

was better claret at any man's table than at honest Rawdon's;

dinners more gay and neatly served.[220]

As the narrator observes later in the text, 'by economy and good

management – by a sparing use of ready-money and by paying scarcely

anybody – people can manage, for a time at least, to make a great show

with very little means'.[221] In this way, Becky and Rawden Crawley are able

to live elegantly on an income of nothing a year and dupe the friends and

relatives who share their prodigious table.

Yet it seems that the veneer of prosperity cannot exist forever intact in

nineteenth-century representation. As though to reassure middle-class

readers, to revitalise their faith in the trustworthiness of appearances,

Victorian fiction invariably brings characters such as the Veneerings, the

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[219] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 439.

[220] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 439.

[221] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 592.

Dobbs Broughtons and the Crawleys to an unfortunate end. Bankruptcy, inglorious flits abroad and even death are the standard mechanisms by which novels mete out textual justice to those who indulge in pretence and dissemblance. This seems not to have completely relieved wider cultural fears regarding the prevalence of performance and veneer, however. The fact that characters who cultivate false appearances recur so regularly in nineteenth-century representation suggests that anxieties regarding the true credentials of friends and neighbours remained lodged in the middle-class consciousness.

The continuing fear of things not being as they seemed did not only apply to members of one's social circle: in relation to food, too, qualms regarding false appearances flourished in Victorian Britain. Although small-scale trickery and dishonesty had long been features of the production and sale of food, in the early nineteenth century, food adulteration was a major problem and existed to an unprecedented extent. As Burnett notes, the phenomenon of adulteration was linked to industrialisation and the growth of urban spaces: 'as soon as there emerged a consuming public, distinct and separated from the producers of food, opportunities for organized commercial fraud arose'.[222] Some of the most popular scams involved the substitution of cheap, and occasionally dangerous, substances for the proper ingredients of foodstuffs; often, the explicit intention was to improve the appearance of the item in question. Frederick Accum's <u>Treatise on Adulterations of Food and Culinary Poisons</u>, published in 1820, disclosed

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[222] Burnett, <u>Plenty and Want</u>, p. 86.

many of the methods used by producers and wholesalers to embellish

visually a variety of goods: alum was added to inferior-grade flour in order to

whiten cheap loaves of bread; copper was added to pickles to enhance their

green colour; Gloucester cheese was coloured with vermilion and red lead;

and coffee was laced with red ochre. Burnett points out that the prevalence

of such practices held serious implications for both the physical and moral

health of a nation which

> prided itself on its high standards of morality, public as well as
>
> private .... An important section of the English middle class – the
>
> class which had taken upon itself the moral leadership of society,
>
> and the task of reforming the vices alike of the aristocracy and the
>
> lower orders – not only practised adulteration but accepted it as a
>
> normal agency of commerce.[223]

A turning point in attitudes to the adulteration of food was reached in the

middle of the century, when medical professionals began campaigning for

reform. Particularly influential was an investigation commissioned by

Thomas Wakely, editor of the Lancet. Its reports, published in simplified

form in a number of daily newspapers, pricked the consciences of middle-

class readers, who began to demand unadulterated produce from sellers

and suppliers. In response to this demand, advertisements for consumable

goods began, from the 1850s onwards, to carry promises such as 'pure and

unadulterated' and 'guaranteed pure', while some even went so far as to

carry certificates of approval from doctors and scientific experts.

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[223] Burnett, Plenty and Want, p. 101.

It was some time before legislation caught up with the public sense of moral outrage regarding food purity: the first Adulteration of Foods Act came into being only in 1860. Yet, although falsity, in all its forms, was professedly deplored by the virtuous Victorian middle classes, there was one acceptable way in which the appearance of food could be altered both before and after this date: glazing. C. Anne Wilson suggests that as the nineteenth century progressed, 'so it became fashionable not merely to garnish food but also to give it a shiny, glossy appearance'.[224] Advice on the matter proliferates in Victorian domestic manuals. Along with a recipe for pastry glaze, Mrs Beeton provides readers with instructions on the preparation of aspic, 'an ornamental savoury jelly' which can be used 'as an exterior moulding for cold game, poultry, fish &c.'[225] Being of a transparent nature, the jelly 'allows the bird which it covers to be seen through it,' Mrs Beeton explains, for the benefit of those readers unacquainted with French cookery, adding that, because of its translucent quality, aspic is the perfect substance for 'decorating and garnishing'.[226] In Modern Cookery for Private Families, Eliza Acton gives directions for the glazing of joints of meat, instructing readers that 'the surface of the meat should be covered evenly, with two or three separate layers of the glaze'. Hams and cutlets lend themselves particularly

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[224] C. Anne Wilson, 'Supper: The Ultimate Meal', in Luncheon, Nuncheon and Other Meals, pp. 145-56 (p. 150).

[225] Beeton, Book of Household Management, pp. 180, 44. The recipe for pastry glaze is given on pp. 670-71.

[226] Beeton, Book of Household Management, p. 44.

well to this practice, she adds, and create a 'very good effect' at the table.[227]

Soyers's <u>Modern Housewife</u> is even more insistent upon the aesthetic

benefits of glazing. 'Glaze is an almost indispensable article in a <u>cuisine</u>

<u>bourgeoisie</u>,' she writes,

> and should be kept by all persons in the middle classes of life, the
>
> advantage being that it will keep for months together, is very
>
> simple to make, and is always useful in cookery, however so
>
> humble; in fact, with it you can dress a very good dinner with very
>
> little trouble.[228]

Glazing seems to have escaped the disapprobation reserved for the general

practice of moral and social veneering in Victorian culture because it was

seen more as a way of enhancing the natural appearance of food than as a

practice of deception or fraud.

Yet the bourgeois inclination to 'glaze surfaces, to round them off, to

bury ... food under the even sediment of sauces, creams, icing and jellies' is

steeped in mendacity, according to Roland Barthes.[229] He argues that the

'persistence of glazing' in middle-class cookery represents 'a need for

gentility'; it bespeaks a desire to render benign the ambivalent activity of

eating, to smooth over the surface of food, making it easier to swallow, at

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[227] Acton, <u>Modern Cookery</u>, p. 168.

[228] Soyer, <u>Modern Housewife</u>, p. 107.

[229] Roland Barthes, <u>Mythologies</u>, trans. Annette Lavers (1972; London: Vintage, 2000), p.

78.

both a literal and metaphorical level.[230] Hence, Barthes continues, genteel

cookery is 'a cookery ... based on coatings and alibis', one which tries

always 'to extenuate and even to disguise the primary nature of foodstuffs,

the brutality of meat or the abruptness of sea-food'.[231] For the nineteenth-

century bourgeoisie, glazing offered a way in which to gentrify food and,

concomitantly, to assuage the threat posed to the polished middle-class

identity by the primitive act of eating. Ultimately, the application of glaze was

a means of controlling nature, and this desire was also evident in the

ornamental accompaniments that supplemented genteel cookery.

Barthes points out that glazing often 'serves as background for

unbridled beautification': along with coatings and sauces, fancy items such

as 'chiselled mushrooms, punctuation of cherries, motifs of carved lemon,

shavings of truffle, silver pastilles, [and] arabesques of glacé fruit' litter the

dinner tables of the inventive middle classes.[232] These hyper-real,

decorative foodstuffs enact a contradictory, dual operation, according to

Barthes, 'on the one hand, fleeing from nature thanks to a kind of frenzied

baroque ... and on the other, trying to reconstitute it through an incongruous

artifice'.[233] This paradoxical impulse is evident in Mrs Beeton's recipe for

'Hot Lobster', which instructs readers, first, to remove the meat of the lobster

from its shell and then to mix it with butter, eggs, breadcrumbs and

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[230] Barthes, Mythologies, p. 78. For a discussion of the ambivalence of eating, see Chapter

2 of this thesis, pp. 138-39, 148-50.

[231] Barthes, Mythologies, p. 78.

[232] Barthes, Mythologies, p. 78.

[233] Barthes, Mythologies, p. 79.

seasoning. The resultant paste should be moulded into the form of a

lobster, sprinkled with spawn and baked. Finally, the cooked dish should be

laid over the reserved 'tail and body shell, with the small claws underneath,

to resemble a lobster'.[234] For the anxious bourgeoisie it seems that only

when dressed up and nullified could nature safely be returned to an

approximation of its original form.

One of the most extreme examples of this desire to cultivate and re-

instate nature at the dinner table is documented by J. E. Panton in From

Kitchen to Garret. Describing the very latest trends in table decoration, she

informs readers that the current vogue among dinner-givers is to place a

large wicker basket at the centre of the table, cover it entirely with moss, ivy

and berberis leaves, and punctuate it with flowers placed in such a way 'that

they appear growing'. Further arrangements of flowers and potted ferns

complete the display, making the final table 'look as much like a bank of

flowers as possible'.[235] Ornaments, too, reveal the Victorian trend for

sophistication followed by re-naturalisation: the same pattern elucidated in

the examples described thus far can also be identified in what Barthes calls

the 'elaboration of petit-bourgeois trinkets'.[236] At various times during the

nineteenth century, the fashion for displaying 'trompe l'oeil' dishes and

serving bowls, naturalistically modelled in the shape of fruits and vegetables,

enjoyed renewed popularity. The form of such wares invariably

corresponded to their contents: a chestnut dish manufactured by Minton in

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[234] Beeton, Book of Household Management, p. 137.

[235] Panton, From Kitchen to Garret, p. 210.

[236] Barthes, Mythologies, p. 79.

1855, for example, is decorated with moulded nuts and chestnut leaves, and coloured in rich brown and green glazes (Figure 1); an 1866 tureen, intended to hold game stew, features a duck, a hare and a crow on a background of realistic-looking foliage (Figure 2); and a salt cellar, designed in 1848, takes the form of a sea-creature, bearing a shell upon its back (Figure 3). Bright and bold, these pieces re-present nature in enhanced form and colour.

Not all consumers approved of such dazzling and dramatic tableware, however. In <u>The Dining-Room</u>, Mrs Loftie rages

> It would only be waste of time to attempt to catalogue all the
> frightful nightmares of the china manufactures. When the public
> know what is good and ask for it we suppose it will be produced in
> large quantities at moderate prices, but we must wait a while for
> this millennium. So long as people enjoy having sprawling red
> lobsters as large as life, butterflies, snails, caterpillars, or
> cockatoos, on their plates they will be satisfied.[237]

And they were satisfied, it seems, for not only did '<u>trompe l'oeil</u>' dishes make entertaining conversation pieces at Victorian dinner parties, implicitly intimating the wit and originality of the host, they also suggested the special ability of the middle classes to order and control their world. For the power-hungry bourgeoisie, nature represented something to be possessed, cultivated and reproduced in gentrified form. Appropriately, then, the '<u>trompe l'oeil</u>' dishes so popular in Victorian Britain were usually coated in

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[237] Loftie, <u>The Dining-Room</u>, p. 110.

Figure 1: Minton Chestnut Dish (1855), Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 2: Minton Tureen (1866), Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 3: Wedgwood Salt Cellar (designed 1848, this piece dated 1865),

Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

thick, lustrous glazes; like the coatings applied to genteel food, these helped to domesticate and de-naturalise the objects they covered, assisting their assimilation into the world of bourgeois possessions.

Yet perhaps the most important aspect of the glazes applied to food and tableware in the Victorian era was their ability to reflect back to the bourgeoisie the world they already knew. Significantly, reflective surfaces filled the ideal middle-class dining room. Even those authors and domestic advisers disparaging of the trend for varnish and veneer, novelty and over-elaboration, were keen to stress the essentiality of glittering glass and silverware to the tastefully-appointed table. Mrs Loftie posits that

> there is something most attractive ... about a table where all the
> sweet things, the salad, the milk, the cream, the salt, the flowers,
> and some of the fruit are in bright, transparent flashing glass,
> everything looking pure and clean, cool and inviting.[238]

'It may seem superfluous to touch on the necessity of having the silver brilliant,' she adds, before going on, nevertheless, to emphasise 'the agreeable effect of gleaming plate on the dinner-table'.[239] Eastlake is similarly effusive regarding the importance of shimmering silver and glass. 'Next to a good display of China on the table or sideboard,' he suggests,

> there is nothing which lends greater grace to the appointments of
> a dining-room than delicate and well-designed glass. North of the
> Tweed, it is not unusual to regard 'crystal' as the all-important
> feature of domestic feasts; and certainly most London housewives

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[238] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 35.

[239] Loftie, The Dining-Room, p. 93.

who can afford the luxury are as careful of the appearance of their

decanters and wine-glasses as the glittering plate which lies

beside them.[240]

In the writing of both Loftie and Eastlake, the appeal of silver and glass

objects resides in their reflective capacity: repeated reference is made to the

importance of 'brilliant', 'bright', 'glittering' and 'gleaming' surfaces in the

model dining-room. Such surfaces were deemed desirable not only because

they were attractive to look at, but also because they could reflect back to

diners the opulence and elegance of their surroundings, reassuring them of

their status and standing. The virtual world offered up by glass and silver

accoutrements was necessarily partial, however, restricted by the form and

surface area of the objects themselves. In order to reproduce properly the

splendour of the dining room, something larger was needed: a mirror.

Mirrors of varying shapes, sizes and degrees of ostentation were

habitually to be found in middle-class dining rooms. Mrs Loftie refers to 'the

inevitable looking-glass' located in that chamber, and proceeds to advise

readers of her work on the benefits of 'plain bevelled mirrors, with glass

candlesticks attached', which 'look bright and ornamental in the day-time as

well as at night'.[241] At the very least, Loftie suggests, the requisite sideboard

should have a looking-glass inlaid, 'to set off and magnify the silver'

displayed there.[242] Such items enjoyed immense popularity in the

nineteenth century, as signalled in the furniture catalogues of the period:

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[240] Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste, p. 241.

[241] Loftie, The Dining-Room, pp. 1, 41.

[242] Loftie, The Dining-Room, pp. 47-48.

Hampton and Sons of London, for example, offer for sale a range of sideboards, each ornamented with a mirror (Figure 4). Their catalogue also supplies customers with a number of artistic impressions, detailing ways in which dining rooms can be fitted out according to different budgets. Notably, in both the 'plain modern dining-room' (Figure 5) and 'inexpensive dining-room' (Figure 6), as well as the more elaborate Elizabethan and Italian Renaissance examples (Figures 7-8), mirrors are prominent features.

In Beautiful Houses, Mrs Haweis helps to explain the popularity of mirrors in middle-class homes. In a tasteful, but bijou residence, she informs readers, a carefully placed mirror can be used to 'dissemble distance', and thus to create the impression of greater space.[243] In an ordinary household, a 'convex mirror' may be suited to this purpose; readers of a more ambitious disposition, however, may have wished to copy the example of Lord Frederick Leighton, whose dining-room chairs were affixed with 'panels of looking-glass ... upon the backs and arms'.[244] In whatever form, mirrored surfaces were deemed indispensable to the nineteenth-century dining room, as they served not only to reflect the wealth and splendour of that space, but also to augment it. In this way, mirrors were inextricably conjoined to Victorian notions of status and self-worth.

This revelation would have come as no surprise to Lacan, who recognised, in an article published in 1949, the importance of mirrors and reflection to the subject's idea of itself as an autonomous, empowered individual. Invoking the 'startling spectacle' of the six-month-old infant, unco-

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[243] Haweis, Beautiful Houses, p. 101.

[244] Haweis, Beautiful Houses, pp. 105, 9.

No. 163.
Superior Sideboard of best manufacture, in Fumed Oak, Walnut, or Mahogany, Richly Carved, and of fine finish throughout.
6ft.6in. wide.   35 Guineas.

No. 166.
Superior Sideboard, of best manufacture, with finely Carved Frieze, Cornice and Pediment supported by Carved Columns.
6ft.6in. wide.   35 Guineas.

HAMPTON & SONS,
PALL MALL EAST AND COCKSPUR STREET, CHARING CROSS, LONDON, S.W.

Figure 4: Illustration from <u>Designs for Furniture and Decorations for Complete House Furnishing by Hampton & Sons</u> (London: c. 1880).

Figure 5: A Plain Modern Dining Room, from Designs for Furniture and
Decorations for Complete House Furnishing by Hampton & Sons (London: c.
1880).

Figure 6: An Inexpensive Dining Room, from Designs for Furniture and
Decorations for Complete House Furnishing by Hampton & Sons (London: c.
1880).

Figure 7: A Dining Hall in the Elizabethan Style, from Designs for Furniture

and Decorations for Complete House Furnishing by Hampton & Sons

(London: c. 1880).

Figure 8: Dining Room in the Style of the Italian Renaissance, from Designs

for Furniture and Decorations for Complete House Furnishing by Hampton &

Sons (London: c. 1880).

ordinated and as yet unable to speak, seeing itself for the first time in a

mirror, Lacan argues that the child finds in its reflection not simply the

replicated form of its immature body but also an entire identity, waiting to be

assumed.[245] This hypothetical 'mirror stage' of development is where the

relationship between the subject and its surroundings begins to take shape,

as the child 'experiences in play the relation between the movements

assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this

virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates'.[246] Lacan continues:

> The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated
>
> from insufficiency into anticipation – and which manufactures for
>
> the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the
>
> succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-
>
> image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and,
>
> lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity,
>
> which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental
>
> development.[247]

Imbued with the promise of self-sufficiency and self-control, the mirror stage

is a profoundly comforting psychical experience, bolstering and emboldening

the developing human ego. It seemingly permits the child, who has not yet

taken up the alienating position of 'I' in language, to 'resolve ... [its]

discordance with [its] own reality' by appropriating and identifying with the

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[245] Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in

Psychoanalytic Experience', in Écrits, pp. 1-8 (p. 2).

[246] Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', p. 2.

[247] Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', p. 5.

image of wholeness seen in the mirror.[248] Although, in fact, unable to control its body or its environment, the incipient subject is seduced by a fiction of totality, 'the illusion of autonomy' it finds reflected in its mirror image.[249] The effects of this <u>méconnaissance</u> are long lasting: throughout its development, the subject continues to shroud itself in the phantasmic armour of completeness and self-control first adopted at the mirror stage.

The mirrors populating the walls of nineteenth-century dining rooms did not simply function as decorative ornaments, then, devoid of any other purpose. By reflecting back to the middle classes their world, their possessions, their family and social circle, mirrors helped to perpetuate the myth of mastery so fundamental to the bourgeois cultural identity. Capable of encapsulating and replicating the middle-class world, and then re-presenting this reduplicated image as reality, mirrors enacted the task Jean-François Lyotard attributes to nineteenth-century realist representation: 'protecting consciousness from doubt'.[250] Mirrors exerted a profoundly comforting influence: the image of the Victorian dining room reflected therein existed as a domesticated microcosm of the wider world, an appropriable space that could be captured and possessed with a single glance. The

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[248] Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', p. 3.

[249] Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', p. 7.

[250] Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?', in <u>The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985</u> (London: Turnaround, 1992), pp. 9-25 (p. 15). According to Lyotard, realist representation, of the kind popular in the nineteenth century, has a 'therapeutic' effect: it organises the world in a way instantly recognisable to its addressees and, in this way, comforts and reassures. Mirrors, then, represent the ultimate mimetic apparatus.

dining-room mirror enabled a certain sovereign gaze, and this, in turn, served to magnify the power of the nineteenth-century middle classes by re-entrenching the illusion of autonomy first taken up at the mirror stage and concealing the disturbing sense of lack which continued to inform bourgeois subjectivity and motivate bourgeois desire.

The Devouring Gaze Returned

What constituted middle-class desire in the nineteenth century? At an individual level, it is difficult to know for sure: the 'middle classes' were a wide-ranging and heterogeneous social group with disparate personal hopes and aspirations. At a cultural level, however, it is possible to discover something of the nature of nineteenth-century bourgeois desire from the representation of the period. Crucially, art and literature do not simply reflect 'real life' in its exactitude; they also reveal, manifestly or covertly, the ways in which a culture sees itself, suggesting the values and ideals attached to and evinced by certain subjects at specific historical moments. If, as Lacan suggests, a fundamental loss governs all human subjects, then this sense of lack would seem especially problematic for the Victorian middle classes, a group defined by cultural narratives of autonomy and self-control. Thus, the desire located in much nineteenth-century bourgeois representation is a desire for power and command over both the external world and the public and private self.

In particular, the middle classes desired mastery over the field of vision. As mentioned earlier, technologies designed to aid or augment the power of the eye burgeoned in the nineteenth century, and one of the most

popular of these was the 'panorama', an unbroken, 360° pictorial

representation of the view from a single standpoint. Asa Briggs notes that

the vogue for these images coincided almost exactly with the boundaries of

the nineteenth century; the promise of all-encompassing vision afforded by

the panorama's sweeping survey seems to have answered a peculiarly

Victorian longing.[251] Significantly, the panorama privileges the individual,

capturing and organising the world according to the exclusive position of a

single observer. The desire for such an extensive, but centrally-focussed,

worldview can be identified in the Illustrated London News, a periodical

which pledged in its first issue to provide readers with a 'panorama of all [the

world's] activities and influences'.[252] The public have been 'greedy' for such

an all-seeing publication, its preface proclaims, 'and have devoured it

eagerly'.[253]

The desire for mastery did not only apply to the outer world, however;

in the domestic sphere, too, the middle classes yearned to control the visual

field, and achieved this through the display of certain objects. As previously

noted, the semi-public, semi-private space of the Victorian dining room

functioned as a kind of spectacle for its inhabitants. The acquisitions

arrayed there, from furnishings to food, porcelain to plate, conveyed not only

the gratifying sense of social success and prosperity associated with

property but also, more importantly, the ability of the bourgeoisie to own and

control their world. For the act of looking, Lacan explains, is intimately

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[251] Briggs, Victorian Things, p. 114.

[252] Illustrated London News, 14 May 1842, p. 1.

[253] Illustrated London News, preface to the first volume (1842), p. iv.

connected with the notion of possession. In <u>The Four Fundamental</u>

<u>Concepts of Psycho-analysis</u>, the eye, as organ, correlates to the 'I' of the

Cartesian cogito: both affirm the power of the subject as consciousness.[254]

The seeing, rational subject believes itself to be imbued with the privilege of

mastery over the world of images and, so absolute is this conviction, the

subject comes to believe that 'as soon as I perceive, my representations

belong to me'.[255]

When carried to the limit, Lacan suggests, 'this <u>belong to me</u> aspect

of representations, so reminiscent of property' appears to invest the

spectating subject with an almost God-like 'power of annihilation': subjects

are seduced into believing that, simply by looking at an object, they are able

not only to take possession of it but also to bring it into being or, conversely,

obliterate it by averting their eyes.[256] As a result of the illusive sovereignty of

sight, possessions in nineteenth-century culture begin to signify only when

they are <u>seen</u>. The bourgeoisie, therefore, arrayed their dining rooms with

an abundance of objects designed to engage the eye, hoping in this way to

assert their mastery over both the field of vision and the world of

possessions.

Yet, as noted earlier, the nineteenth-century dining room existed not

only as a space in which to display objects but also the self: it attested to the

human subject's profound wish at once to see and to be seen. This duplex

desire, Lacan explains, is the result of a radical split in the scopic drive.

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[254] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, p. 80.

[255] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, p. 81.

[256] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, p. 81.

When the human subject first begins to recognise the existence of others, it comes to realise that the process of looking is reciprocal: 'We are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world. That which makes us consciousness institutes us by the same token as <u>speculum mundi</u>'.[257] In order to become subjects, to be capable of seeing, we must also submit to the process of being seen, of finding ourselves situated as the object of another's look. For, Lacan argues, there is something prior to the seer's eye: 'I emerge as eye' from 'a function of <u>seeingness</u> (<u>voyure</u>)' which marks 'the pre-existence to the seen of a given-to-be-seen'.[258] In other words, the subject finds itself inserted into a specular order which governs both its ability to look and the way in which it is viewed. This 'function of seeingness' Lacan names the 'gaze'.

Whereas the look and the eye belong to the subject, and are implicated in ideologies of autonomy, mastery and possession, the gaze exists outside of the subject and falls beyond its control. The subject can neither govern nor know how it is perceived in the specular sphere. As Lacan points out, 'I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides'.[259] The gaze functions as a kind of blot, or 'stain' on the field of vision, undermining the subject's claim to authority by demonstrating that, although we may look at the world, we can never see ourselves seeing, adopt the position of other spectators, and attain full vision.[260] The gaze,

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[257] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, p. 75.

[258] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, pp. 82, 74.

[259] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, p. 72.

[260] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, p. 74.

then, makes manifest the lack which constitutes the human subject, and yet, surprisingly, its disconcerting effects remain largely unperceived. Lacan suggests that there is, in everyday life, 'an elision of the gaze'; we avoid the feeling of 'strangeness' it provokes by taking refuge in the illusion of unity and sovereignty described earlier.[261] Occasionally, however, the evanescent gaze punctures the protective armour adopted by the self-deceiving subject, making its disruptive presence felt. According to Lacan, this sudden awareness of the gaze takes the subject by surprise, altering perspective and changing the order of its domain. It need not be triggered by the obvious presence of another person, just a consciousness that the subject is <u>always</u> situated in the eyes of the world, constantly located as the potential object of another's gaze.

Owing to its association with loss, the gaze is apprehended not by the 'annihilating subject' of consciousness, but by the 'subject sustaining himself in a function of desire' – the subject who lacks unity, who is incomplete.[262] How could the Victorian middle classes manage this loss of control, mitigate the dangerous effects of the manifest gaze? By 'sleight of hand', Lacan suggests: the spectating subject may avoid the displeasure afforded by the gaze and the lack it exposes by taking up 'that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness', or, in more simple terms, by engaging in the illusion of '<u>seeing oneself seeing oneself</u>'.[263] This fantasy evokes the kind of total, panoramic vision so desired by the Victorian middle

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[261] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, p. 75.

[262] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, p. 85.

[263] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, p. 74.

classes and suggests the tantalising possibility of sealing up the split in the

scopic drive by allowing the subject at once to see and to be seen. How,

though, could this impossible desire be supported in the bourgeois home?

Quite simply – in the arena of the dining room, it was bolstered by the

display of a familiar visual ornament: the family portrait.

In Hampton and Sons' depiction of the archetypal middle-class dining

room for a family of moderate means, it is notable that, along with the

inevitable mirror, a variety of paintings adorn the walls (Figure 5). According

to Dianne Sachko Macleod, the collection and display of artworks was

popular among the newly-affluent bourgeoisie not only because it suggested

wealth and status, but also because it was a key element in the affirmation

of a specific, middle-class identity, 'distinct from the leisured existence of the

aristocracy'.[264] She elaborates:

> The expanding commercial élite in the early Victorian years made
>
> its presence felt throughout England .... Not content to imitate the
>
> aristocracy, these energetic businessmen recast the cultural
>
> system in their own image in an attempt to create a stable social
>
> category for their class.[265]

The middle-class art market demanded not the classical works of Old

Masters but rather paintings which reflected and replicated the world of its

clients. As Marx and Engels suggest in The Communist Manifesto (1848),

the fundamental desire of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie was to '[create]

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[264] Dianne Sachko Macleod, Art and the Victorian Middle Class: Money and the Making of

Cultural Identity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 1.

[265] Macleod, Art and the Victorian Middle Class, p. 2.

a world after its own image' and, in this way, to augment its power.[266] As the

popularity of painted scenes from middle-class life grew, so the middle-class

self-image became the recognisable, representative face of Victorian Britain,

conflating realist depiction with real life. Thus, middle-class art not only

reflected but also confirmed and extended the cultural influence of the

bourgeoisie.

One of the most satisfying means of self-representation for this sector

of society was the family portrait, an artwork capable of conveying at once a

family's financial, social and procreative successes. Aptly, such pictures

were displayed most frequently in the dining room, a space implicated in the

dual desire of Victorian bourgeois subjects to see and to be seen. Charles

Eastlake tells his readers:

> It is an old English custom to hang family portraits in the dining-
>
> room, and it seems a reasonable custom. Generally large in size,
>
> and enclosed in massive frames, they appear well suited to an
>
> apartment which experience had led us to furnish in a more solid
>
> and substantial manner than any other in the house.[267]

Furthermore, Eastlake adds, in a telling addendum, 'the Dining-room is

especially devoted to hospitality and family gatherings, and it is pleasant on

such occasions to be surrounded by mementos of ... members of [one's]

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[266] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), in Karl Marx

and Frederick Engels: Collected Works (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), Vol. 6, pp.

477-519 (p. 8).

[267] Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste, pp. 185-86.

social circle'.[268] By presenting the middle classes with a virtual version of

their 'real' existence, populated by recognisable members of their own social

class, family portraits enacted for nineteenth-century diners the illusion of

'seeing oneself seeing oneself'. They reflected, like the dining-room mirrors

they accompanied, a world made over in the bourgeois image, allowing the

middle classes to view themselves, ostensibly, as they were seen. For the

Victorian middle classes, then, family portraits were not simply decorative

ornaments: they functioned, rather, as tools with which to exercise mastery

over the intractable field of vision.

A second type of painting commonly found in the nineteenth-century

dining room was the still life. This genre enjoyed revived popularity in the

Victorian period, largely in response to the demands of critics such as

Ruskin, who called for art to study nature and reproduce its bounty with total

fidelity.[269] Still-life painting, with its emphasis on the natural, offered the

Victorians the opportunity to indulge their appetite for mimesis. As Macleod

suggests,

> The shrinking of the distance between pictorial delineation and
>
> optical reality was celebrated as another achievement of the
>
> progressive ideal that inspired all phases of society, from the
>
> industrial to the aesthetic. It was essential to the Victorian

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[268] Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste, p. 186.

[269] Commenting on landscape painting, Ruskin asserts that 'faithful representation is ... of

primal importance'. Modern Painters: Volume III, p. 317.

conception of progress that no visible brushwork be allowed to

mar the contours of the illusion or to fracture its planar surface.[270]

Nineteenth-century still-life painting was an exercise in verisimilitude:

preserving the illusion of reality was paramount to the success of the genre,

which usually featured intricate arrangements of flowers, fruit and a range of

other foodstuffs, such as shellfish and game. The Victorians' desire to

decorate dining rooms with such pictures was apposite because, according

to Lacan, the work of art has a nourishing effect on the human subject. If the

contents of the bourgeois dinner table gratified the stomach, then the realist

paintings adorning the dining-room walls fed the eyes of hungry diners.

Exploring the relationship between artist and consumer, Lacan

proposes that

> the painter gives something to the person who must stand in front
>
> of his painting which, in part ... might be summed up thus – You
>
> want to see? Well, take a look at this! He gives something for the
>
> eye to feed on.[271]

This nourishing aspect of painting comes not from its subject matter, its

depiction of consumable or 'possessable' objects, as one might expect, but

rather from the way in which it orders and organises the visual domain. Like

so many post-Renaissance Western artworks, nineteenth-century still-life

painting was structured according to the rules of perspective, a

representational mode which privileges the viewing subject. It is no

accident, Lacan suggests, that the emergence of geometral optics coincided

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[270] Macleod, Art and the Victorian Middle Class, pp. 15-16.

[271] Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 101.

with that of Cartesian philosophy, for both privilege the 'I'/eye as the omnipotent origin of sight, the place from which all lines of vision emanate.[272] Perspective painting offers itself to a single, privileged spectator: as Catherine Belsey points out, 'it gives the miracle of a simulated reality so palpable that we might be there, and in the process installs us as viewing subjects, sovereign over all we survey'.[273] The work of art 'calms people, comforts them'; there is at work in painting a certain 'dompte-regard', Lacan suggests, a 'taming of the gaze', which soothes viewers by reassuring them that they are in control of the specular sphere.[274]

This pacifying effect is particularly to be found in Victorian still-life painting, which satiates the incessant 'appetite of the eye' by presenting the spectating subject with the illusion of three-dimensional reality on a flat representational plane.[275] Of the many nineteenth-century artists adept at such practice, one was particularly proficient: Edward Ladell, an Englishman who produced numerous paintings based on the Dutch still-life tradition. Verisimilitude seeps from Ladell's images. According to Frank Lewis,

> a dead duck lying upon a board, as represented by Mr Ladell, is a
> duck indeed. There is no necessity for retiring a distance from the
> easel in order to realise the effect of the picture. Near to the
> vision, or a space removed, the effect is the same. You have the

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[272]Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, pp. 85-86.

[273] Catherine Belsey, <u>Culture and the Real</u> (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 100.

[274] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, pp. 111, 109.

[275] Lacan, <u>Four Fundamental Concepts</u>, p. 115.

very bird before you, and close scrutiny seems to show real

feathers and not the painted semblance.[276]

The mimetic quality of Ladell's painting feeds the spectator's eye and,

consequently, amplifies its scopic power. Furthermore, like the family

portraits and mirrors described earlier, Ladell's work reflects back to its

middle-class audience the world it knows and inhabits – quite literally, for

among the various, meticulously-observed objects to be found in Ladell's

images (fruit, nuts, shellfish, vine) there is, invariably, a wine glass depicted

and caught in its rounded surface there appears a second, mini-picture: the

reflection of a bourgeois interior, 'imitated with a truthfulness that deceives

the eye' (Figures 9-10).[277] This reflected image replicates the surroundings

in which the 'real' picture was intended to be viewed: even in those paintings

where the background takes the form of a medieval-esque window ledge,

composed of crumbling brick, the image in the wine glass remains that of a

discernibly modern, nineteenth-century interior (Figure 11). Ladell's still-life

paintings, therefore, flatter the spectator to spectacular effect, suggesting, in

their representations of reflections, their ability to portray the space outside

of their legitimate domain, supplant the gaze and thus furnish the subject of

consciousness with full, panoramic vision.

Something is missing, however, from the reduplicated reality of

Ladell's paintings. If the bulbous wine glasses depicted were really to reflect

the outer space of the spectating subject's world, then surely the spectator,

too, should be visible in their mirror-like surfaces? Yet no human figure

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[276] Frank Lewis, Edward Ladell, 1821-1886 (Leigh-on-Sea: F. Lewis, 1976), p. 8.

[277] Lewis, Edward Ladell, p. 8.

Figure 9: <u>Still Life</u>, Edward Ladell, private collection.

Figure 11: Still Life, Edward Ladell, private collection.

features in Ladell's work: the viewer is conspicuously absent from the scene.[278] Logically, this comes as no surprise: painting is, of course, only representation, a lure for the eye, imbued with the promise of visual mastery but withholding, in the end, more than it gives. The subject is 'caught, manipulated, captured, in the field of vision': the 'I'/eye can be tricked, deceived by images, and so can never attain mastery over the gaze, the refractory conditions of vision and visuality which govern the specular realm.[279] A scotoma, or blind spot, impinges upon the subject's sovereign look; therefore, Lacan argues, at the heart of every picture, there is an absence where the subject is elided from the geometral plane. This absence, or hole, signifies 'the pupil behind which is situated the gaze', and it is from this unlocatable point that the painting always 'looks back', transforming the spectator into the object of its own, unseen gaze.[280] Lacan points out:

> I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture.[281]

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[278] For a discussion of mirrors and/or reflective surfaces in other works of art (notably Diego Velázquez's Las Meninas) and their effect on the spectator, see Michel Foucault, 'Las Meninas', in The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, trans. Alan Sheridan (1970; London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 3-18 and Belsey, Culture and the Real, pp. 100-18.

[279] Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 92.

[280] Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 108.

[281] Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 96.

As Slavoj Žižek elucidates, 'the gaze as object is a stain preventing me from looking at the picture from a safe, "objective" distance, from enframing it as something that is at my grasping view's disposal'.[282] No matter how far seemingly passive images, such as Ladell's still-life paintings, appear to submit to the spectator's eye, they cannot be mastered, for the power of the gaze resides with the object, not the subject, who is omitted from the scene.

The gaze, then, exists as the objet a in the field of vision: it is the thing that determines the subject's lack in relation to the specular domain and also the thing with which the subject engages in order to compensate itself for its loss. As Lacan points out, 'from the moment that this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt himself to it', to become the gaze, 'to symbolize his own vanishing ... in the illusion of the consciousness of seeing oneself seeing oneself, in which the gaze is elided'.[283] Even images which seem to support this illusion and subdue the disturbing influence of the gaze, such as Ladell's still lifes, fail to supply full mastery to the spectating subject. The hungry eye can never be fully satiated, for it can never access the painting's reciprocal look. In another food-based metaphor, Lacan suggests that the gaze, as objet a, is 'the object that cannot be swallowed, ... which remains stuck in the gullet'.[284] It continually baffles the nineteenth-century bourgeois subject's attempts to control the visual realm, even emanating from those paintings designed to flatter the sovereign 'I'/eye. Thus, as

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[282] Slavoj Žižek, Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture (London: MIT Press, 1992), p. 125.

[283] Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 83.

[284] Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 270.

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Catherine Belsey concludes, 'all art ... is a place of desire', a space of presence and absence which at once promises and withholds from the spectating subject that which it wants.[285]

It is notable that the language of food and consumption pervades Lacan's discourse of desire, especially in relation to vision. Scattered through his work, one finds a number of alimentary metaphors: the appetite of the eye is fed by the work of art, while the objet a, in the guise of the gaze, cannot be swallowed away, but appears resplendent, like the centrepiece of a festal board. In nineteenth-century representation, too, vision, food and desire are inextricably linked: in the middle-class dining room, the eye, caught up in the lure of possessing the world it beholds, demands satisfaction as much as the mouth. Yet, no matter how much middle-class figures gorge themselves upon visions of their prosperity, accomplishment and social success in art and literature, something is always missing from the scene. The dining room, the space in which the manifold desires of the bourgeoisie – romantic, pecuniary, dietary – play themselves out, is invariably implicated in the manifestation of a disconcerting sense of lack. Caught up in a culture of tasteful display, conspicuous consumption and self-satisfied reflection, the dining room nevertheless fails to fulfil Victorian bourgeois desire, working instead to sustain its inhabitants in an incessant structure of wanting. A place in which to see and be seen, the dining room offers nourishment on both a literal and metaphorical level, but the objects with which it is ornamented also threaten to devour diners with their returned

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[285] Belsey, Culture and the Real, p. 86.

look, in the same way that the absent spectator is eradicated from the still-life paintings of Edward Ladell. Desire, as this chapter has shown, cannot properly be known, let alone controlled by supposedly autonomous subjects. Fictional figures such as Veneering, Dobbs Broughton and Dombey, who use the dining room to reflect and augment their status, rendering the space devoid of communal warmth and affection, tend to find themselves reduced to little or nothing by the end of their respective narratives. A preoccupation with display and the visual consumption of possessions does not engender contentment in the Victorian bourgeoisie but instead eats away at the illusion of power adopted by that social class. The devouring gaze of the bourgeois subject turns back upon itself: thus, in nineteenth-century representation, the dining room exists as a space in which the middle classes find themselves consumed, as much as satiated, by their desires.

Chapter 2 – Eating In, Dining Out: Spaces of Consumption

'The outside bears with the inside a relationship that is ... anything but

simple exteriority. The meaning of the outside [is] always present within the

inside, imprisoned outside the outside, and vice versa.'[1]

The act of eating is intimately connected with the idea of space and the

transgression of borders between spaces. It involves, at its most basic level,

a transition: a movement from outside to inside, a process of <u>incorporation</u>,

as what was once external to the body becomes internalised within it.

Significantly, food is one of the few substances permitted to permeate the

boundaries of the human body with any degree of cultural approbation. As

Mary Douglas suggests, 'all margins are dangerous' owing to their liminality

and, as such, 'the orifices of the body ... symbolise its specially vulnerable

points'.[2] The mouth figures as a particular source of concern: as Julia

Kristeva points out, 'orality signifies a boundary of the self's clean and proper

body', a permeable border between the somatic interior and external world.[3]

Thus, though the process of consumption is essential to the continuation of

life, it is also invested with numerous cultural anxieties; the fear generated

by the prospect of transmissions across margins represents a possible

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[1] Jacques Derrida, <u>Of Grammatology</u>, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and

London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 35.

[2] Mary Douglas, <u>Purity and Danger</u> (1966; London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 150.

[3] Julia Kristeva, <u>Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection</u>, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New

York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 75.

explanation for the number of protocols and taboos attached to the ingestion of food.[4]

A brief consideration of human biology reveals the complexity of the inside/outside dynamic in relation to the apparently simple act of eating. Once an item of food has entered the body from without, it undergoes a number of further transitions in order to assimilate itself with the structure it helps to sustain. As Harold McGee explains in his essay on digestion, 'the digestive tract is <u>an inner extension of the body's exterior</u>; it segregates food from our true insides until that food is fit for our use'.[5] The process of integration may begin with the passage of food into the mouth, a gesture which effects the crossing of a boundary between the outside world and the body's interior, but it does not end there. Over time, the human gastrointestinal tract, 'an initially straight, undifferentiated passage', has developed into 'a series of antechambers' with 'an increasingly complex lining', demanding a sequence of further movements across boundaries before the absorption of nutrients into the bloodstream can take place.[6] 'Inner' spaces become 'outer' spaces as what has been eaten passes through successive regions of the body's digestive system. Only once it has

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[4] The Victorians, in particular, were concerned with propriety at the dinner table: during the nineteenth century, numerous guides and manuals were published on the subject of dining etiquette. For a discussion of the systematisation of Victorian dining conventions, see Natalie Kapetanios Meir, '"A Fashionable Dinner is Arranged as Follows": Victorian Dining Taxonomies', <u>Victorian Literature and Culture</u>, 33 (2005), 133-48.

[5] Harold McGee, <u>On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen</u> (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), p. 553 (my emphasis).

[6] McGee, <u>On Food and Cooking</u>, p. 554.

traversed these layers of internality does food become fully incorporated into the human form, an integral part of its being.

Aligned to the process of incorporation are the twin functions of segregation and expulsion. Only nutrients necessary to the body's continued health and development are internalised through digestion; those waste products superfluous to somatic requirements are stored in the colon, before being excreted from the human form in an act of re-externalisation. In terms of consumption, the body is a privileged entity, the internal borders of which determine what is good and bad, wholesome and unwholesome, pure and abject. The body, as structure, as sanctified space, defines what may be embraced within its confines and what must be expelled without.

The relationship between food, space and borders is not simply a physical one, however. The biological process of incorporation is complicated by the coexistent cultural meanings which adhere to acts of consumption. As Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil point out,

> we do not simply think in terms of the incorporation of chemical
>
> nutrients into the physical fabric of the body, but also in terms of
>
> our beliefs and our collective representations .... Not only are the
>
> properties of food seen as being incorporated into the eater, but,
>
> by a symmetrical process, the very absorption of given foods is
>
> seen as incorporating the eater into a culinary system and into the
>
> group which practises it.[7]

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[7] Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil, Sociology on the Menu: An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 53-54.

Eating engenders a sense of belonging: it forges bonds and indicates

affiliations among distinct communities of eaters. This socially-significative

aspect of consumption holds particular relevance to a consideration of

nineteenth-century eating practices. At that time, <u>where</u> one ate was as

important to the definition of one's place in the cultural hierarchy as what one

ate. As this chapter will demonstrate, a domestic setting conferred

distinction upon eaters, suggesting their incorporation into a specific moral

and social order; the practice of eating outdoors, meanwhile, involved the

potential for disorder and disruption, and therefore came to be associated

with persons of low moral or social repute. Even within the home, where

one ate revealed something of one's standing: the presence of a dining room

– a special, segregated space for the consumption of food – bestowed

eminence upon the occupiers of a household because it suggested wealth

enough to possess a separate room for eating purposes. It also enabled

owners to share that space with others of similar standing through that most

important of Victorian institutions, the dinner party. As Stephen Mennell,

Anne Murcott and Anneke H. van Otterloo suggest, 'sharing food is held to

signify "togetherness", an equivalence among a group that defines and

reaffirms insiders as socially similar'.[8] In nineteenth-century culture, the

location of consumption functioned as an efficacious signifier of status and

class, helping to define and differentiate social groups by integrating eaters

into an order of implicitly or explicitly shared values, meanings and practices.

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[8] Stephen Mennell, Anne Murcott and Anneke H. van Otterloo, <u>The Sociology of Food:</u>
<u>Eating, Diet and Culture</u> (London: Sage, 1992), p. 115.

However, as with the physical incorporation of food, social incorporation was not an isolated act, but one related to the concomitant processes of segregation and expulsion. The nineteenth century was a time when previously blurred social distinctions came sharply into focus, and nowhere was the regimentation of status more clearly visible than at the dinner table. John Burnett points out that in rural eighteenth-century Britain it was common practice for large numbers of farm servants to board and lodge in the farmhouse with their employers. One hundred years later, however, the desire for social segregation meant that, although in certain parts of the country the tradition of communal dinner in the farmhouse kitchen survived, the farmer and his family would invariably eat at a cloth-covered table while the labourers sat around a separate, scrubbed board at a distance.[9] Where you ate in the nineteenth century did not only distinguish who you were: it also defined, most emphatically, who you were not. Location mattered and, through an analysis of various paintings, literary and non-literary texts, this chapter will interrogate the dichotomy between 'eating in' and 'eating out' in nineteenth-century culture, exposing the power relations at play in the construction and transgression of spaces of consumption.

Eating In: The Dining Room

Famed for his crowd scenes and vast panoramas of mid-nineteenth-century life, the painter William Powell Frith, in 1856, turned his sweeping gaze

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[9] John Burnett, Plenty and Want: A Social History of Food in England from 1815 to the Present Day, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 22-23.

inwards to focus upon a more domestic setting: the Victorian home. His

painting Many Happy Returns of the Day depicts the occasion of a child's

birthday party in an affluent middle-class household: gathered around a table

strewn with delicious edibles, a family celebrates the anniversary of one of

its youngest members, who sits, somewhat overawed, in a chair bedecked

with a garland of flowers (Figure 12). Frith's vision is one of blissful

domesticity, a celebration of those twin tenets of Victorian cultural life, family

and home. In this way, it can be read as a product very much of its time: as

Arnold Palmer points out, by the mid-nineteenth century, 'Home' had

become 'a banner, something to be held aloft and pressed forward'.[10] Even

if the reality of domestic life was, for a sizeable percentage of the Victorian

population, far removed from the idyllic existence suggested in Many Happy

Returns, in representation, at least, home tended to be portrayed as a

privileged space, a haven from the disorder of the outside world.

One of the most powerful advocates of this sentiment was John

Ruskin. In 'Of Queens Gardens' (1865), he contemplates the 'true nature of

home', concluding:

> It is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but
>
> from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is
>
> not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it,
>
> and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile
>
> society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to

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[10] Arnold Palmer, Movable Feasts (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 106.

Figure 12: <u>Many Happy Returns of the Day</u>, William Powell Frith (1856),
Mercer Gallery, Harrogate.

cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of

that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in.[11]

Significantly, Ruskin's definition makes express use of the language of

interiority and exteriority, and attributes contrasting values to each term in

this spatial dichotomy. 'Outside' is a space characterised by uncertainty,

doubt and disorder; 'inside', meanwhile, is an asylum, a place of safety, calm

and repose.

In light of this, it is notable that the space depicted by Frith in Many

Happy Returns is almost entirely closed off from the outside world: the solid,

wooden door to the left of the painting is firmly shut, rendering the narrow

window to the extreme right the picture's only source of external light. The

window itself is curtailed by the edge of the canvas; that part of it still visible

to the spectator is swathed predominantly in heavy, velvet fabric, and edged

with floral net. The plush, patterned carpet which covers the floor adds to

the cocoon of comfort, muting the noise associated with external spaces. By

arresting the encroachment of the outer world in this way, Frith creates a

secure, familial space for the subjects of his painting: the interior setting

appears to confer and confirm a certain bourgeois domestic felicity.

However, as Ruskin anxiously points out, to segregate a space from the

outside world is not necessarily to create an ordered sanctuary, a home.

The peaceable domesticity of Frith's image is attributable to something more

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[11] John Ruskin, 'Of Queen's Gardens', Sesame and Lilies (1865), in The Works of John

Ruskin, eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1905), Vol.

XVIII, pp. 109-44 (p. 122).

than its interiority: it depends also upon its specific location within the middle-class homestead – the dining room.

In his seminal treatise on the organisation of Victorian homes, The Gentleman's House; or, How to Plan English Residences, From the Parsonage to the Palace (1865), Robert Kerr accords pre-eminence to the dining room by making it the first point of discussion in his catalogue of architectural arrangements.[12] How are we to account for this distinction? Why was the dining room so important to nineteenth-century culture? Firstly, because, as Frith's painting suggests, it could be conceived of as a family space. In her directions to the mistress of a typical middle-class household, Mrs Beeton stresses the importance of making home 'the happiest place in the world' for family members and, as 'a family dinner at home, compared with either giving or going to a dinner-party, [was] ... of much more frequent occurrence, and ... of much greater importance', the dining room necessarily came to play a vital role in the formation of genial domestic relations.[13]

This assumption informs much nineteenth-century representation: the description of the Leyburn's dining room in Mrs Humphrey Ward's novel Robert Elsmere (1888), for example, makes explicit its connection with family values:

> The dining-room ... had a good deal of homely dignity, and was to
>
> the Leyburns full of associations. The oak settle near the fire, the

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[12] Robert Kerr, The Gentleman's House; or, How to Plan English Residences, From the Parsonage to the Palace, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1865), p. 91.

[13] Isabella Beeton, Beeton's Book of Household Management (1861; London: Chancellor Press, 1994), pp. 16-17.

oak sideboard running along one side of the room, the black oak

table with carved legs at which they sat, were genuine pieces of

old Westmoreland work, which had belonged to their grandfather

.... Over the mantelpiece hung the portrait of the girls' father ...

bearing a strong resemblance to Catherine; ... while a bookcase,

filled apparently with the father's college books and college prizes

... gave a final touch of habitableness to the room .... The eggs,

the home-made bread and preserves, the tempting butter and old-

fashioned silver ... suggested the same family qualities as the

room. Frugality, a dainty personal self-respect, a family

consciousness, tenacious of its memories and tenderly careful of

all the little material objects which were to it the symbols of those

memories – clearly all these elements entered into the Leyburn

tradition.[14]

The genealogy of the Leyburn family is rooted in its dining room; a 'family

consciousness', or feeling of continuity between past and present, resides

there. In this way, it parallels Frith's Many Happy Returns, where three

generations of the same family, representing past, present and future, gather

around the dinner table for a birthday celebration. Although, in actuality, the

young children of well-to-do homes were more likely to eat in the nursery

than in the dining room, in Victorian representational practice, the familial

harmony of this space was paramount: in paintings such as Many Happy

Returns, therefore, admission is extended to all members of the household,

regardless of age.

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[14] Mrs Humphrey Ward, Robert Elsmere (1888; Bath: Chivers, 1974), p. 10.

The sense of homeliness attached to the dining rooms described by Frith and Mrs Humphrey Ward does not derive simply from the family objects which furnish them, however, nor from the multi-generational subjects who occupy the space. Much of the appeal of the dining room in nineteenth-century representation emanates from its purpose, its status as a location for the sharing of food. Sociologists have long recognised the equation of commensality with happiness, and this association is invariably borne out in art and literature.[15] In Dickens's <u>Our Mutual Friend</u> (1864-65), for instance, the usually fractious Wilfer family are seduced into a rare moment of equanimity following the production of a lamb-cutlet dinner.[16] Similarly, part of the pleasure evoked in <u>Many Happy Returns</u> seems to issue from the fact that its fictional family is shown in the act of sharing a meal: to the right of the picture, a little girl passes a glass of wine to her grandfather while, at the table, the mother pours a drink for her daughter. The dining room held a cohesive function for the Victorians: it was a communal space which served for both the incorporation of food and the incorporation of individuals into a shared familial order. Notably, in Wilkie Collins's <u>No Name</u> (1862), the sham marriage between Noel Vanstone and his cousin, Magdalen, is first described to the reader in terms of the 'comfortless appearance' of the breakfast table at the couple's honeymoon residence. When Noel arrives to

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[15] On the subject of commensality and happiness, see Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo, <u>The Sociology of Food</u>, pp. 115-18; Pasi Falk, <u>The Consuming Body</u> (London: Sage, 1994), pp. 20-25; and David Bell and Gill Valentine, <u>Consuming Geographies: We are Where we Eat</u> (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 106-12.

[16] Charles Dickens, <u>Our Mutual Friend</u>, ed. Stephen Gill (1864-65; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 84-85.

breakfast, he is greeted not by the smiles of an adoring wife, but by 'the

battered egg-shell, the fish half-stripped to a skeleton, the crumbs in the

plate, and the dregs in the cup' of the already-departed Magdalen.[17] The

quasi-tragic despondency of this scene contrasts sharply with the blissful

domesticity of Magdalen's parents' breakfast table, described in the opening

chapter of the novel, thus accentuating the fact that, within nineteenth-

century representation, the dining table was essentially a family-orientated

space for the shared consumption of food.

If sharing food could prove a source of pleasure for the Victorian

family, however, it could also figure as a potent source of anxiety. Luce

Giard argues that 'the table first and foremost celebrates the mouth as the

center of the ceremony',[18] and this focus upon the mouth – a body part

which, for Jacques Derrida, occupies a curious 'borderline' position,

'between the outside and the inside'[19] – carries with it the threat of an implicit

danger. As Mary Douglas suggests, 'any structure ... is vulnerable at its

margins';[20] the act of taking in food is an ambivalent one not only because it

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[17] Wilkie Collins, No Name, ed. Virginia Blain (1862; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986),

p. 535.

[18] Luce Giard, 'Plat du Jour', in The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and

Cooking, eds. Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 171-98 (p. 197).

[19] Jacques Derrida, 'Foreword: Fors: The Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria

Torok', trans. Barbara Johnson, in The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy, Nicolas

Abraham and Maria Torok, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

Press, 1986), pp. xi-xlviii (p. xxxviii).

[20] Douglas, Purity and Danger, p. 150.

equates, in itself, to a movement across the perimeters of the body, but also because it is associated with the process of defecation, a second traversal of somatic boundaries.[21] Eating constituted a problematic activity in Victorian culture, figuring as a persistent source of concern for the middle classes in particular.[22] The digestive system required constant monitoring, as well as 'the periodical use of blue pills, "anti-bilious elixirs," or "patent universal panaceas"' as a contemporary article 'On Digestion and Food' somewhat scathingly pointed out.[23] Advice from authoritative, as well as more dubious, medical sources abounded on the subject: in his Ladies' Guide in Health and Disease (1882), Dr John Kellogg asserts the importance of maintaining the 'regularity of the bowels', especially in pregnant women, warning that 'the effete products which should be promptly removed from the body, being long retained, are certain to find their way back into the system again'.[24] Implicit in this caution is the need to distinguish sustenance from waste, to separate those products properly belonging to the body from those which belong without. If, owing to its capacity to traverse boundaries between inside and

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[21] According to Julia Kristeva, the passage of faeces outside the human body represents a greater source of cultural anxiety than the intake of food. She cites Mark 15: 'There is nothing from without a man, that entering him can defile him: but things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man'. Powers of Abjection, p. 114.

[22] For a discussion of bourgeois anxieties regarding food, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa (New York: Vintage, 2000), pp. 174-84.

[23] Alfred L. Carroll, 'On Digestion and Food', Harper's Magazine, 39 (1869), 892-98 (p. 892).

[24] John Harvey Kellogg, 'The Ladies' Guide in Health and Disease' (1882), in The Yellow Wallpaper, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, ed. Dale M. Bauer (Boston and New York: Bedford, 1998), pp. 157-73 (p. 171).

outside, food figured as a source of concern, as well as contentment, for the Victorian middle classes, then the dining room, through its association with bodies and the process of consumption, represented a space replete with tacit dangers and anxieties. How could the bodily-conscious bourgeoisie assuage the sense of unease engendered by the act of eating, mitigate the fear attached to the traversal of boundaries which occurred in the family dining room?

The answer is to be found in the imposition of a strict order. 'Subdivision, classification, and elaboration, are certainly distinguishing characteristics of the present era of civilisation,' wrote George Augustus Sala in 1859, and nowhere was this drive for orderliness more evident than in the middle-class dining room.[25] In keeping with the dictates of good taste, the dinner table and its contents were arranged in a strictly symmetrical pattern, with no two dishes of the same kind being placed next to each other. Moreover, in its very location within the family home, the dining room bespoke a desire for management and segregation. According to Robert Kerr, 'the proper Dining-room' (as opposed to its implicit inferior, the hybrid 'Parlour Dining-room', which served as both eating space and living area),

> is a spacious and always comparatively stately apartment, of
> which the chief characteristics ought to be freedom from the heat
> and glare of sunshine at those hours when it is in use, and a

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[25] George Augustus Sala, Gaslight and Daylight, with Some London Scenes they Shine Upon (London: Chapman and Hall, 1859), pp. 218-19.

certain sort of seclusion as respects its situation, both internally

and externally.[26]

Kerr's insistence upon internal and external seclusion suggests that the ideal

dining room should represent a sanctum not only from the anxieties of the

'outer world', as Ruskin suggests, but also from the hustle-bustle of daily

household life. In order to quell the apprehensions native to this space and

instil an atmosphere of order and control, Kerr advocates a policy of strict

partition and makes clear the dangers of opening up the dining room to the

iniquities of the outside world. Though it may seem desirable when planning

this apartment 'to have one of the windows in the form of a Sash-door, ...

opening on a Terrace or Garden', he warns, 'cases have not been wanting

... when such a door has provided unhappy facilities for stealing the plate'.[27]

The infiltration of outer life into the dining room's inner space was, therefore,

something to be avoided at all costs.

The nineteenth-century desire to exclude outer disorder, in all its

forms, has already been identified in Frith's Many Happy Returns. As

previously noted, the closed window and door in this painting secure the

family dining space from insidious outside influences, helping to foster a

climate of comfort and domestic tranquillity. Its quiet orderliness is

attributable to something more than the simple instigation of a border

between inside and outside, however; in its very construction, the image is

regulated by a number of mechanisms of discipline and control. At first

glance, the painting appears to be of informal composition: the bodies

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[26] Kerr, Gentleman's House, p. 91.

[27] Kerr, Gentleman's House, p. 96.

around the dining table are organised 'realistically', with some figures displaying their backs to the implied spectator, partially eclipsing others in doing so. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the painting is governed by a subtle internal hierarchy: the male family members – grandfather, father, sons – are gathered around the head of the table, in recognition of their status as patresfamilias, while the women – grandmother, mother, daughters – congregate towards the opposite end. In its gendered spatial organisation, the picture corresponds to the nineteenth-century conception of the dining room as an overtly masculine sphere, an idea reinforced by its decoration. According to Kerr,

> The Style of finish, both for the apartment itself and for the
> furniture, [should be] always somewhat massive and simple .... It
> need not be sombre and dull, or indeed devoid of cheerfulness in
> any way; but so far as forms, colours, and arrangements can
> produce such a result, the whole appearance of the room ought to
> be that of masculine importance.[28]

With its dark green walls, crimson curtains, patterned 'Turkey' carpet and solid, mahogany furniture, Frith's dining room closely follows the dictates of mid-nineteenth-century domestic fashion.[29] Implicit in its decoration is a silent sanction of the patriarchal order which was posited as the norm in

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[28] Kerr, Gentleman's House, p. 94.

[29] For a discussion of trends in nineteenth-century dining-room decoration, see Charles L. Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details, 4th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1878), pp. 72-73 and Judith Flanders, The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed (London: Harper Collins, 2003), pp. 215-17.

Victorian culture, as well as a celebration of those 'inherently masculine' virtues, orderliness, discipline and control.

Yet, it was not simply in terms of gender relations that the nineteenth-century dining room was organised: a hierarchy of status, or class, was also in place. One of the principle dicta governing Kerr's advice in <u>The Gentleman's House</u> is that of segregation. 'Primarily', he asserts, 'the house of an English gentleman is divisible into two departments; namely, that of THE FAMILY, and that of THE SERVANTS'. While conceding that, 'in dwellings of inferior class ... this separation is not so distinct', Kerr goes on to emphasise that 'in the smallest establishment of the kind with which we have here to deal this element of character must be considered essential'.[30] He later elaborates:

> The idea which underlies all is simply this. The family constitute
> one community: the servants another. Whatever may be their
> mutual regard and confidence as dwellers under the same roof,
> each class is entitled to shut its door upon the other and be
> alone.[31]

Already invested with transgressive potential, owing to its association with the traversal of somatic boundaries, the nineteenth-century dining room needed to be rid of the possibility of promiscuous mixing between the middle classes and their staff. In Frith's painting, therefore, the family members (with the exception of the grandfather, to whom this chapter will later return) gravitate towards the centre of the room, forming an inner circle around the

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[30] Kerr, <u>Gentleman's House</u>, pp. 63-64.

[31] Kerr, <u>Gentleman's House</u>, p. 68.

dinner table, while their female servant, her arms laden with gifts, moves in a separate, outer orbit, following the periphery of the room. Such segregation was of primary importance to Kerr, who argued that 'the operations of the servants' should never be 'brought into prominence' and advocated a number of measures – service-hatches, lift-tables or, preferably, an adjacent service-room – 'to protect the company' from the inconvenient proximity of those waiting upon them.[32]

Such measures could not always be relied upon to placate diners, however. In Jane Austen's <u>Mansfield Park</u> (1814), readers are told that the punctilious Mrs Norris 'always contrive[d] to experience some evil from the passing of … servants behind her chair' whenever she dined with her neighbours, the Grants. Her second complaint – 'of its being impossible among so many dishes but that some must be cold' – highlights a further organisational concern raised by Kerr: the proper location of the kitchen in relation to the dining room.[33] While recognising the desirability of 'serving dinner hot', Kerr goes on to argue that it is 'more essential still that the <u>transmission of kitchen smells</u> to the Family Apartments shall be guarded against'.[34] Although acceptable in the servants' quarters, cooking aromas represented an inappropriate invasion into the more refined areas of the aristocratic or bourgeois home. Thus, in a large number of Victorian residences, the kitchen came to be situated at some distance from the room

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[32] Kerr, <u>Gentleman's House</u>, pp. 94, 97.

[33] Jane Austen, <u>Mansfield Park</u>, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (1814; London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 198-99.

[34] Kerr, <u>Gentleman's House</u>, p. 210.

in which its food was to be served. To demonstrate the desirability of such

an arrangement, The Gentleman's House reproduces the floorplan of a

grand property in Walton, Surrey, where a substantial passageway and ante-

chamber separate the kitchen and dining room (Figure 13). According to the

values of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, the dining room required

protection from those elements external to it, be they servants or cooking

odours for, in this way, the integrity of the inside/outside dichotomy, so

important to this patriarchal, family-orientated space, could be maintained.

Eating Out, In: The Dining Room

By ordering the interior of the dining room according to hierarchies of gender

and class, the Victorians were able to make palatable the ambivalent

process of consumption that took place there. Such measures could not

completely eliminate the infiltration of the outside world into this inner

sanctum, however, for, as Judith Flanders points out, the ostensibly private

family dining room was 'in practice ... another aspect of public life', the place

where visitors were received for dinner and supper parties.[35] Opening up

one's home to guests was an obligatory operation for the middle classes. In

his comic invective against 'Snobs' – persons of vulgar or ostentatious

nature – Thackeray reserves special condemnation for 'those individuals

who can, and don't give dinners at all'.[36] Mrs Beeton, meanwhile, posits

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[35] Flanders, Victorian House, p. xxvi.

[36] William Makepeace Thackeray, The Book of Snobs: and, Sketches and Travels in
London, in The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray (London: Smith, Elder, 1879), Vol.
XIV, p. 80.

WALTON. SURREY.

By Sir C. Barry.

Plate 28.

Walton.

Baker's Room

Bake House

Yard

Larder

Oven

Cook's Room

Kitchen

Scullery

Housekeeper's Room

Lobby

Still Room

Servants' Hall

COURT

Stewards Room

Butler's Pantry

Saloon

Entrance

Gallery

Carriage Porch

Breakfast Room

Dining Room

Corridor

Library

TERRACE

GROUND FLOOR.

Principal Staircase

Scale, 1 Inch to 30 Feet.

Figure 13: Floorplan from Robert Kerr, <u>The Gentleman's House; or, How to Plan English Residences, From the Parsonage to the Palace</u>, 2nd ed.

(London: John Murray, 1865).

dining as 'the privilege of civilization', arguing that, 'the nation which knows how to dine has learnt the leading lesson of progress'.[37] As keen ambassadors of nineteenth-century British progress, both at home and abroad, the upper and middle classes considered the giving of dinner parties to be their particular social duty, something to be endured if not always enjoyed. And if they were obliged, intermittently, to open up their dining rooms to friends and acquaintances, then it was their responsibility also to leave, on occasion, the sanctuary of that space in order to attend dinners in other households.

The importance of this reciprocal arrangement is shown in Thackeray's Vanity Fair, where the ambitious Pitt Crawley instructs his wife, Lady Jane, 'to be friendly with the Fuddlestones, and the Wapshots, and the other famous baronets, their neighbours', so as to cultivate a healthy (and potentially profitable) relationship between themselves and their social peers. As a result of Lady Jane's overtures, a variety of distinguished guests come to dine

> pretty frequently at the Hall (where the cookery was so good, that it was clear Lady Jane very seldom had a hand in it), and in return Pitt and his wife most energetically dined out in all sorts of weather, and at all sorts of distances.[38]

Personally, Sir Pitt cares little for joviality, being 'a frigid man of poor health and appetite'; nevertheless, he considers 'that to be hospitable and

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[37] Beeton, Book of Household Management, p. 905.

[38] William Makepeace Thackeray, Vanity Fair, ed. J. I. M. Stewart (1848; London: Penguin, 1968), p. 527.

condescending' is 'quite incumbent on his station', and thus 'every time ...

he got a headache from too long an after-dinner sitting', he praised himself

on being 'a martyr to duty'.[39]

Quite apart from the inconvenience of leaving one's home ('a man ...

must have a very good opinion of himself when he asks people to leave their

own fireside ... for the sake of coming to see him,' grumbles Mr John

Knightley in Austen's Emma[40]), going out to dinner posed a further potential

problem for the class-conscious nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. As

Flanders points out, 'Victorian society was hierarchical but porous': its social

conventions were 'intricate, but ... open to all', with money functioning as

'the lubricant that allowed people to slide up and down the social register'.[41]

Class boundaries were not impenetrable and, consequently, those subjects

properly 'outside' of one's own social stratum could potentially, through their

industry or good fortune, be found seated around the same dinner table as

oneself. In a world where minute cultural differences were rigorously

scrutinised, and insidious meanings attached to such details as birth, place

of residence and source of income, who to invite to dinner and which dinner

invitations to accept were matters of scrupulous judgement for socially-

aware subjects. The fear of sharing a meal with those of inferior status was

one which reverberated throughout the nineteenth century.

In Emma (1816), for example, the sensibilities of the eponymous

young heroine are offended by an invitation to dine with the Coles, a family

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[39] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 527.

[40] Jane Austen, Emma, ed. Ronald Blythe (1816; London: Penguin, 1966), p. 134.

[41] Flanders, Victorian House, p. 253.

'of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel', whose recent 'increase

of means' has been accompanied by an augmentation of social outlook.

Having added to their home, their servants, and general style of living, it is

widely anticipated among the residents of Highbury that the Coles will take

to 'keeping dinner-company', though 'the regular and best families' in town

'Emma could hardly suppose they would presume to invite – neither

Donwell, nor Hartfield, nor Randalls'. Indeed, she determines,

> nothing should tempt her to go, if they did .... The Coles were
>
> very respectable in their way, but they ought to be taught that it
>
> was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior
>
> families would visit them.[42]

The pleasurable anticipation of refusal is thwarted, however, when Emma's

invitation fails to materialise, although the residents of Donwell and Randalls

have both received, and accepted, theirs. Deriving little comfort from the

conciliations of her friends, who tell her 'I suppose [the Coles] will not take

the liberty with you; they know you do not dine out', Emma comes to resent

'being left in solitary grandeur, even supposing the omission to be intended

as a compliment'. Therefore, when the 'insult' from the Coles finally arrives

('they would have solicited the honour earlier, but had been waiting the

arrival of a folding-screen from London, which they hoped might keep

[Emma's father] from any draught of air, and therefore induce him the more

readily to give them the honour of his company'), Emma finds she is 'not

absolutely without inclination for the party' and allows herself to be

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[42] Austen, Emma, pp. 217-18.

persuaded to attend.[43] In the event, the dinner party proves a source of great satisfaction: Miss Woodhouse is 'received with a cordial respect which could not but please, and given all the consequence she could wish for'.[44] Thus, she does not 'repent her condescension in going to the Coles', for 'all that she might be supposed to have lost on the side of dignified seclusion, must be amply repaid in the splendour of popularity'.[45]

The humorously-relayed incident of the Coles' social gathering reveals two important ways in which the dinner party, with its accompanying transgression of inside/outside demarcations, could be rendered acceptable to nineteenth-century diners. Firstly, it was a ritualised process. Emma's reservations about attending a party populated in part by her social inferiors are allayed by the fact that the Coles display a proper degree of deference to her as mistress of Hartfield: their gathering is governed by certain unspoken but, nonetheless, powerful rules of propriety, suggesting a concern for rank and order. Flanders notes that 'precedence – the order in which people went in to dinner, and where they were seated – was taken with extreme seriousness' throughout the nineteenth century. For those unversed in the minutiae of social convention, books were available listing 'the precise rankings of various professions ... [noting] who in each field was superior to whom, and which professions took precedence over others'.[46] Mrs Beeton, for example, offers the following directions to her readers:

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[43] Austen, Emma, pp. 218-19.

[44] Austen, Emma, p. 223.

[45] Austen, Emma, p. 239.

[46] Flanders, Victorian House, p. 248.

Dinner being announced, the host offers his arm to, and places on his right hand at the dinner-table, the lady to whom he desires to pay most respect, either on account of her age, position, or from her being the greatest stranger in the party. If this lady be married and her husband present, the latter takes the hostess to her place at table, and seats himself at her right hand. The rest of the company follow in couples, as specified by the master and mistress of the house, arranging the party according to their rank and other circumstances which may be known to the host and hostess.[47]

Such intricacies of etiquette provided a rich seam of comedy for nineteenth-century British authors. In Pride and Prejudice (1813), Jane and Elizabeth Bennett are horrified when their youngest sibling, Lydia, hastily married following an illicit affair, insists on parading her new conjugal status by leading her sisters into the dining room as first in consequence. 'Ah! Jane', she announces with brazen insouciance, 'I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman'.[48]

In The Last Chronicle of Barset (1867), meanwhile, Trollope reveals the manifold opportunities for blunder arising from decisions regarding precedence. Unwitting hostess Mrs Dobbs Broughton selects Mr Crosbie, the son-in-law of an earl, to take her down to dinner; however, the narrator notes,

[47] Beeton, Book of Household Management, p. 13.

[48] Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice, ed. Tony Tanner (1813; London: Penguin, 1972), p. 329.

there was a barrister in the room, and Mrs Dobbs Broughton ought
to have known better. As she professed to be guided in such
matters by the rules laid down by the recognised authorities, she
ought to have been aware that a man takes no rank from his wife.
But she was entitled I think to merciful consideration for her error
.... Amidst the intricacies of rank how is it possible for a woman to
learn and to remember everything? If Providence would only send
Mrs Dobbs Broughton a Peer for every dinner-party, the thing
would go more easily; but what woman will tell me, off-hand, which
should go out of a room first; a CB, an Admiral of the Blue, the
Dean of Barchester, or the Dean of Arches?[49]

This plea for tolerance is undermined somewhat by the narrator's later claim
that the snubbed barrister is by no means 'immoderately severe' when he
speaks afterwards of his hostess as 'the silliest and most ignorant old
woman he had ever met in his life'.[50] Knowledge of and conformity to an
implicit code of conduct were imperative at the Victorian table.

Humorous breaches of dining-room etiquette, such as those
described above, abound in nineteenth-century fiction, but do not feature
simply as a source of comedy. Threaded through such seemingly innocent
textual moments is a serious underlying concern: the desire to impose on
proceedings the sort of order witnessed in Frith's <u>Many Happy Returns</u>. If
the Victorian dining room could not be closed off completely to intrusions

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[49] Anthony Trollope, <u>The Last Chronicle of Barset</u>, ed. Sophie Gilmartin (1867; London:
Penguin, 2002), p. 238.

[50] Trollope, <u>Last Chronicle of Barset</u>, p. 238.

from the outside world, then, in representation at least, it could be ordered

decorously so as to guard against the unregulated intermixing of higher and

lower classes. Social mingling of another kind was permitted, and even

encouraged, at the nineteenth-century dinner table, however. As the first

chapter of this thesis contends, the dinner table, with its alternate positioning

of men and women, afforded a rare opportunity for the fostering of romantic

relations between the sexes.[51] This factor, following the concern for rank

and order, represents the second reason for Emma Woodhouse's toleration,

and eventual enjoyment, of the Cole family's dinner party in Austen's early-

nineteenth-century novel. Although a young woman of considerable

financial means, Emma's social existence is straitened by the habits of her

valetudinarian father. The Coles' party represents a rare foray into the

outside world, and comes to be viewed as a source of pleasure not least

because it situates her in the company of Frank Churchill, one of the few

eligible (and sufficiently socially-elevated) bachelors in Highbury to warrant

her attention. Their innocent flirtation affords her 'many pleasant

recollections the next day' and, although Frank is subsequently revealed to

be a man unworthy of Emma's love, the occasion of the dinner party helps to

set in motion events that will reveal to her the true object of her affection, the

noble Mr Knightley, thus providing textual justification for her presence at a

gathering held by her social inferiors.[52]

In this light, the nineteenth-century dinner party can be read as a key

institution, a potential instigator of marriage, the importance of which

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[51] See Chapter 1, pp. 81-87, 91-96.

[52] Austen, Emma, p. 239.

increased as the century progressed. John Burnett points out that, as the

sons of Victorian middle-class families travelled abroad to 'administer and

missionize the Empire', at home, 'daughters competed keenly for those who

remained'; by the 1870s, therefore, the dinner party had become invaluable

as a 'means of matrimonial introduction'.[53] Ambitious parents made anxious

arrangements in hopes of securing suitable spouses for their children. In

Framley Parsonage (1861), Trollope exposes the covert machinations in

place at a dinner party held by Lady Lufton, where the hostess and her

friend, Mrs Grantly, manipulate matters so that Griselda Grantly (object of

Lady Lufton and Mrs Grantly's 'matrimonial speculations') comes to be

seated beside young Lord Lufton, an eligible peer.[54] 'There was no

management apparent in this to anybody', the narrator asserts, in a tone

which suggests quite the opposite to the knowing reader.[55]

For the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, the dinner party was

endowed with a consolidatory potential: although, on the one hand, it

involved opening up the inner sanctum of the family home to outsiders, on

the other, its interminglings could produce lucrative alliances between

prominent families, helping to secure and fortify the position of the Victorian

middle classes. Dining with fellow members of one's social circle, therefore,

was not properly eating 'out', but rather eating 'in' an extension of the

bourgeois family home. Thackeray, for one, was keen to advocate the

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[53] Burnett, Plenty and Want, p. 208.

[54] Anthony Trollope, Framley Parsonage, eds. David Skilton and Peter Miles (1861; London: Penguin, 2004), p. 153.

[55] Trollope, Framley Parsonage, p. 156.

succession of 'homely' dinners between intimates over the trend for ostentation and parade. 'The "dinner at home",' he asserts,

> ought to be the centre of the whole system of dinner-giving. Your usual style of meal – that is, plenteous, comfortable, and in its perfection – should be that to which you welcome your friends, as it is that of which you partake yourself.[56]

By minimising the difference between dining at home and dining with friends, Thackeray diminishes the affiliated threats of eating out and admitting outsiders into one's home. The serenity, comfort and invulnerability of the middle-class dining room could be secured by the creation of an equivalence between social peers: if those gathered around the dinner table were 'insiders' of the same class or standing, with corresponding worldviews, then the dining room would always represent an unassailable haven, no matter who presided over it. This incipient sense of bourgeois culture as a kind of extended family (albeit one replete with petty prejudices and class anxieties), transformed the act of 'eating out' into one of 'eating in', positing the unfamiliar dining room as a virtual home away from home. In this way, the middle classes were able to alleviate their fears regarding the transgression of inside/outside boundaries and avert the threat of disruption to the social order on which their hegemony was founded.

Dining Out: Clubs and Restaurants

Owing to the emphasis placed on domesticity in nineteenth-century culture, and Victorian culture in particular, the act of dining out en famille was

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[56] Thackeray, Book of Snobs, p. 82.

virtually unheard of among the bourgeoisie at that time. As various

historians of the period have been keen to point out, when the middle

classes did venture outside of the sanctuary of their dining rooms, this was

usually a matter of exigency rather than pleasure. A lengthy or arduous

journey, for example, may have necessitated a stop at an inn or tavern,

institutions which possessed poor reputations for the quality and selection of

their culinary offerings. Certainly, 'guests were lucky if they had any choice

at all', according to Sarah Freeman, 'a single set meal evidently being the

norm at all except the largest and most popular' hostelries.[57]

The fictional epitome of this type of guesthouse is to be found in Sir

Walter Scott's novel, St. Ronan's Well (1823), where the formidable

landlady, Meg Dods,

> with the despotism of Queen Bess herself, ... ruled all matters with
>
> a high hand, not only over her men-servants and maid-servants,
>
> but over the stranger within her gates, who, if he ventured to
>
> oppose Meg's sovereign will and pleasure, or desire to have either
>
> fare or accommodation different from that which she chose to
>
> provide for him, was instantly ejected with that answer which
>
> Erasmus tells us silenced all complaints in the German inns of his
>
> time, Quære aliud hospitium, or, as Meg expressed it, 'Troop aff
>
> wi' ye to another public.'[58]

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[57] Sarah Freeman, Mutton and Oysters: The Victorians and their Food (London: Victor

Gollancz, 1989), pp. 279-80.

[58] Sir Walter Scott, St. Ronan's Well (1823; London: Macmillan, 1901), pp. 9-10.

As the nearest alternative was located some sixteen miles from Meg's

establishment, the unhappy complainant in this case 'had no other refuge

save by deprecating the wrath of his landlady, and resigning himself to her

will'.[59] Defeated, he could, at least, console himself with a serving of Meg's

much-celebrated 'cock-a-leeky' or 'savoury minced collops', dishes which

sound infinitely more appetising than the usual English public-house fare.[60]

In the course of his Rural Rides (1830) around the British countryside,

William Cobbett preferred to dine upon 'nuts and apples' gathered from the

roadside than pay 'eighteen pence' for 'three pennyworths of food' at an

Oxford coaching inn.[61] Writing later in the century, the American author,

Nathaniel Hawthorne, was similarly unimpressed with the standard of fare

available to weary travellers. 'The living at the best of English hotels ...

deserves but moderate praise', he complains,

> and is especially lacking in variety. Nothing but joints, joints,
>
> joints; sometime, perhaps, a meat-pie, which, if you eat it, weighs
>
> upon your conscience with the idea that you have eaten the
>
> scraps and rejected relics of other people's dinners.[62]

According to Hawthorne, such unappetising offerings do not even represent

good value for money. 'We pay like nabobs, and are expected to be content

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[59] Scott, St. Ronan's Well, p. 10.

[60] Scott, St. Ronan's Well, p. 10.

[61] William Cobbett, Rural Rides (1830; London: Peter Davies, 1930), Vol. I, p. 30.

[62] Nathaniel Hawthorne, The English Notebooks (1853-1856), eds. Thomas Woodson and

Bill Ellis, in The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne (Columbus: Ohio

State University Press, 1997), Vol. XXI, p. 278.

with plain mutton', he grumbles, adding, 'the English seem to have no conception of better living than this'.[63]

Yet, although the inns and hotels of early- and mid-nineteenth-century Britain were universally condemned, being the subject of invectives from natives and tourists alike, another institution which accommodated dining outside the home was celebrated, at least among certain sections of the population. The private club, according to Thomas Walker, gastronome and author of the weekly journal, The Original, represented for its members

> a sort of palace ... kept with the same exactness and comfort as a private dwelling. Every member is a master, without any of the trouble of a master. He can come when he pleases, and stay away as long as he pleases, without anything going wrong. He has the command of regular servants, without having to pay or to manage them. He can have whatever meal or refreshment he wants, at all hours, and served up with the cleanliness and comfort of his own house. He orders just what he pleases, having no interest to think of but his own. In short, it is impossible to suppose a greater degree of liberty in living.[64]

Resounding through this celebration of independent living is a remembrance of home: the appeal of the club seems to reside in its ability to conjure the dependability of domesticity, while simultaneously freeing its members from the responsibilites attached to that state of affairs. In particular, the clubs of

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[63] Hawthorne, English Notebooks, p. 278.

[64] Quoted in Henry C. Shelley, Inns and Taverns of Old London (London: Pitman & Sons, 1909), pp. 267-68.

the nineteenth century were valued for their food, the standard and convenience of which often surpassed that to be found at home. Eating was the very raison d'être of certain establishments: the Sublime Society of Beefsteaks, for example, founded by John Rich in 1736 and patronised by some of Britain's most eminent gentlemen until its closure in 1869, was famed for its bizarre rituals and dedication to the consumption of steak and port wine. Every Saturday night, its members (who never exceeded twenty-four in number) could watch from the dining room as their steaks were prepared on a huge gridiron. A second, less infamous, Beef Steak Club, set up during the reign of Queen Anne, was also in existence, testifying to the popularity of that dish among London's male elite.

Clubs with less overt connections to the consumption of food also enjoyed excellent culinary reputations in the nineteenth century. By the 1840s, one in particular had come to be associated in the popular consciousness with the provision of exceptional fare: the Reform. The renown of this Whig-affiliated establishment rested largely upon the expertise of its head chef, Alexis Soyer, who had left his native France after the July Revolution of 1830. During his lengthy reign at the Reform, 'clever Alexis', as he was named by the anonymous author of London at Dinner (1858), helped to redress 'the antiquated excrescences and abuses of the kitchen'[65] by installing a custom-built cooking space which substituted gas and steam power for coal, thus keeping preparation areas 'as white as a

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[65] London at Dinner; or, Where to Dine (London: 1858), p. 18.

young bride'.[66] As well as introducing such practical reforms, Soyer, along

with his contemporaries Charles Élme Francatelli and Louis Eustache Ude

(both, at different times, chefs at Crockford's famous gambling club), helped

to revolutionise clubland cookery by introducing classic French cuisine,

expertly prepared, to the palates of London's aristocracy. As Annette Hope

points out, 'for men who wished to dine well away from home, clubs offered

the ideal solution'.[67] Little wonder patrons such as Thomas Walker were

adamant regarding their virtues.

Yet, the dislocation from family life inherent in club dwelling was

perceived as dangerous by some. Thackeray, in particular, was keen to

point out the implicit threat posed by gentlemen's clubs to Victorian family

values. 'Clubs ought not, in my mind, to be permitted to bachelors,' asserts

the narrator of his Book of Snobs (1879):

> Instead of being made comfortable, and cockered up with every
>
> luxury, as they are at Clubs, bachelors ought to be rendered
>
> profoundly miserable, in my opinion. Every encouragement
>
> should be given to rendering their spare time disagreeable. There
>
> can be no more odious object, according to my sentiments, than
>
> young Smith, in the pride of health, commanding his dinner of
>
> three courses.[68]

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[66] Quoted in Annette Hope, Londoners' Larder: English Cuisine from Chaucer to the Present
(Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1990), p. 153.

[67] Hope, Londoners' Larder, p. 154.

[68] Thackeray, Book of Snobs, p. 161.

Instead of eating out in a monosexual environment, 'young Smith' should, according to the narrator, be installed safely

> at the festive tea-table ... by the side of Miss Higgs, sipping the
>
> bohea, or tasting the harmless muffin; while old Mrs. Higgs looks
>
> on, pleased at their innocent dalliance, and my friend Miss Wirt,
>
> the governess, [performs] Thalberg's last sonata in treble X.,
>
> totally unheeded, at the piano.[69]

The comic tone of these observations masks a serious concern. From 'innocent dalliances', conducted over afternoon tea, fruitful matches could materialise. The sequestering of young men in the cloistered environment of private clubs, however, threatened to produce, at best, a generation of middle-aged bachelors, whose single status would endanger the proliferation and prosperity of the upper middle classes; and, at worst, a set of profligates whose immoderate habits would render them forever unfit for the state of marriage.

This fear is apparent in much Victorian fiction, where club dwellers are invariably portrayed as dissolute and degenerate. The miseries of Lord Lowborough in Anne Brontë's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848), for instance, are attributed to his regular presence at 'club[s], and ... gaming-houses, and such like dangerous places of resort'.[70] Having renounced gambling following the loss of his fortune, Lowborough acquires 'another habit that bothered him nearly as much': an obsession with 'the demon of drink'. His thirst for alcohol is fuelled by the 'kind friends' at his club who,

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[69] Thackeray, Book of Snobs, p. 161.

[70] Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848; London: Dent, 1976), p. 152.

according to one of their number, Arthur Huntingdon, 'did all they could to second the promptings of his own insatiable cravings'.[71] Indeed, when Lowborough attempts to abstain from alcohol, some club members protest against this conduct:

> They did not like to have him sitting there like a skeleton at a feast, instead of contributing his quota to the general amusement, casting a cloud over all, and watching, with greedy eyes, every drop they carried to their lips – they vowed it was not fair; and some of them maintained, that he should either be compelled to do as others did, or expelled from the society.[72]

Lowborough is eventually tempted from abstinence by Huntingdon, a character whose fondness for alcohol and extravagant living leads him to an early grave. In nineteenth-century representation, to consume food and drink in clubs, to dabble with the illicit pleasures of the world outside the family home, was to flirt with the danger of moral degeneracy and even death.

Significantly, the solution sought by Lowborough in order to elevate him from his miserable state is to try to reinsert himself within the domestic sphere by finding a wife. 'Succeed or fail,' he tells Huntingdon, 'it will be better than rushing headlong to destruction at that d—d club'.[73] Thackeray, likewise, posits a commitment to family living as the antidote to excess and extravagance: his cautionary tale of Sackville Maine makes clear the danger

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[71] Brontë, Tenant of Wildfell Hall, p. 150.

[72] Brontë, Tenant of Wildfell Hall, p. 152.

[73] Brontë, Tenant of Wildfell Hall, pp. 155-56.

of eating at clubs instead of eating at home. The story's narrator is invited to dine, along with his friend Wagley, at the Sackville family home, Kennington Oval, a place of idyllic domesticity. 'This is better than dining at the "Sarcophagus"', the narrator thinks to himself, eagerly tucking into roast mutton and 'as good a glass of port-wine as any in England', for

> everything about this family and house was so good-natured, comfortable, and well-conditioned, that a cynic would have ceased to growl there .... Sackville Maine was the best of hosts ... a good, kind, simple, honest, easy fellow – in love with his wife – well disposed to all the world – content with himself, content even with his mother-in-law.[74]

The blissful comfort of the Oval is disrupted, however, when the narrator and Wagley nominate Sackville as a member of their club; from this time, he begins to shun the pleasure of home-cooked meals in favour of a chop at the 'Sarcophagus', eventually becoming 'a perfect epicure, ... [dining] commonly at the Club with the gourmandising clique there'.[75] Further vices accumulate, among them smoking ('where it is introduced into a family I need not say how sad the consequences are, both to the furniture and the morals') and billiards ('he played matches of a hundred games ... and would not only continue until four or five o'clock in the morning at this work, but would be found at the Club of a forenoon, indulging himself to the detriment of his business, the ruin of his health, and the neglect of his wife'). Financial ruin and domestic woe are, needless to say, the consequences of this

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[74] Thackeray, Book of Snobs, p. 185.

[75] Thackeray, Book of Snobs, p. 192.

unhappy tale, prompting the narrator to bewail his own imprudence in

introducing Sackville to 'that odious "Sarcophagus"'.[76] In its way,

Thackeray's lighthearted fable represents a condemnation of club-living no

less serious than that offered by The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.

According to the ideals of nineteenth-century culture, then, eating

outside of the home was a dangerous activity. The scope of this threat was

not limited, however, to those gentlemen wealthy or well-connected enough

to belong to private clubs. Restaurants, too, with their socially-varied

clientele, were perceived of as antithetical to family values. These

commercial establishments for the provision of food and refreshment, so

familiar today, were, in the nineteenth century, of fairly recent invention.

Although coffee-houses and taverns had long catered for hungry customers,

the widespread development of premises intended for the explicit

consumption of food came only with the disruptive force of the French

Revolution. As Ian Kelly points out, prior to that time, French caterers, or

traiteurs, had been subject to strict guild practices; following the events of

1789, however, 'the guild restrictions were overturned, freeing up the

catering economy in Paris'.[77] This burgeoning trade was boosted by the

presence of numerous accomplished chefs who had previously been

employed in the now-dissolved aristocratic households. While some of

these skilled artisans chose to remain in France, others moved to England,

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[76] Thackeray, Book of Snobs, pp. 191-92.

[77] Ian Kelly, Cooking for Kings: The Life of Antonin Carême, the First Celebrity Chef

(London: Short, 2003), p. 34.

where they opened restaurants serving proficiently-prepared meals to those who could afford them.

Coupled with the widespread availability of culinary expertise was a new-found demand on the part of an affluent bourgeoisie for skillfully prepared food to be consumed outside the home. From the early nineteenth century onwards, restaurants and cafés proliferated across Europe. In Britain, such establishments tended to be referred to as 'eating-houses': the appellation 'restaurant' was used sparingly until the late Victorian era, possibly because of its overtly French etymology.[78] In the moralistic nineteenth-century consciousness, restaurants were associated with a continental lifestyle, which implicitly involved the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure outside the family home; where they are referred to in Victorian literature, it is generally in the context of libertinism or moral laxity. In Wilkie Collins's <u>The Moonstone</u> (1868), for instance, the irresponsibility of young Franklin Blake is signified to the reader through the revelation that he has run up debts with the proprietor of a Parisian restaurant where he frequently dined.[79] In <u>Vanity Fair</u>, meanwhile, the financially straitened Rebecca and

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[78] Originally, 'restaurant' was the name of a French soup: designed to revive the body and spirit of hungry consumers, it was supposed to have, quite literally, a restorative ('restaurant') effect. Eventually, the appellation 'restaurant' also came to be applied to the institutions which served the soup, and, when the menus offered by such places began to expand and diversify from the early nineteenth century onwards, the name remained. See Kelly, <u>Cooking for Kings</u>, pp. 33-34 and E. S. Dallas, <u>Kettner's Book of the Table</u> (1877; London: Centaur, 1968), pp. 377-79.

[79] Wilkie Collins, <u>The Moonstone</u>, ed. John Sutherland (1868; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 334.

Rawdon Crawley patronise the famous Café de Paris, funding their extravagant lifestyle through Rawdon's successes at the card and billiard tables.[80]

Although restaurants, varying in degrees of exclusivity, flourished in nineteenth-century Britain, suggesting a measure of popularity among the general public, pictorially and textually, such places were always the scene of concern, even when that concern was veiled with the cloak of comedy. One problem associated with these establishments was that, unlike the ordered family dining room, restaurants were places of clamour and commotion. According to Sarah Freeman, the Albion, a fashionable London tavern, popular for its post-theatre suppers, was, by midnight, a <u>mêlée</u> of 'noise and confusion ... with the waiters reciting the menu and (as was also usual) shouting orders to the kitchen through speaking-trumpets'.[81] In Collins's <u>No Name</u>, the unfortunate Mrs Wragge is left with a permanent buzzing in her head, 'like forty thousand million bees', following her time as a waitress in Darch's Dining-Rooms. Indeed, in moments of severe agitation, remembrances of past orders –

> Carrots and gooseberry tart – peas-pudding and plenty of fat – pork and beef and mutton, and cut 'em all, and quick about it – stout for one, and ale for t'other – and stale bread here, and new bread there – and this gentleman likes cheese, and that gentleman doesn't – ... oh lord! oh lord!! oh lord!!! –

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[80] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 430.

[81] Freeman, <u>Mutton and Oysters</u>, p. 279.

spill from her lips in violent excitement, much to the displeasure of her fastidious husband.[82] Nothing further from the seclusion of Kerr's model family dining room can be imagined.

A further negative aspect of restaurant dining, according to the paragons of Victorian virtue, was its excessive regard for appearances: restaurants were as much places for seeing and being seen as for eating. As Joanne Finkelstein notes, dining out is always a public performance,[83] and this emphasis on visuality and self-presentation generated much comic material for the authors of the nineteenth century. In <u>Bleak House</u> (1853), Dickens equates eating out with ostentation and a selfish desire for public acclaim through the character of old Mr Turveydrop. A faintly ridiculous figure with an obsession for 'deportment', Turveydrop instructs his son, Prince, to consume a hasty meal of cold mutton in between teaching duties while he, with little concern for their embarassed finances, dines out at a restaurant:

> 'I suppose,' said Mr Turveydrop, shutting his eyes and lifting up his shoulders, with modest consciousness, 'that I must show myself, as usual, about town.'
>
> 'You had better dine out comfortably, somewhere,' said his son.

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[82] Collins, <u>No Name</u>, p. 205.

[83] Joanne Finkelstein, <u>Dining Out: A Sociology of Modern Manners</u> (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 27.

'My dear child, I intend to. I shall take my meal, I think, at the French house, in the Opera Colonnade.'[84]

In view of his culinary proclivities, it seems fitting that Mr Turveydrop regularly identifies himself with the Prince Regent, a fellow gourmand and lover of pomp and display.

Dickens's character was not alone in his desire to be seen while eating out; as the great chef Auguste Escoffier remarked later in the nineteenth century, 'since restaurants allow of observing and of being observed ... it was not long before they entered into the lives of Fortune's favourites'.[85] One of the most revered establishments of the late nineteenth century was the Café Royal on Regent Street. Opened by Daniel Nichols and his wife Célestine in 1865, this restaurant quickly installed itself as a firm favourite with London's social elite, counting such literary and artistic luminaries as Aubrey Beardsley, George Bernard Shaw, James Abbott McNeill Whistler and Oscar Wilde among its clientele. According to Annette Hope, 'fashionable London had never seen anything quite like the Café Royal, with its painted ceilings, gilded caryatids and mirrored walls'.[86] The brilliant opulence of the surroundings, intensified by the abundance of reflective surfaces on display, appears to confirm Finkelstein's suggestion that restaurants are 'enjoyed as a form of ... spectacle in which social

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[84] Charles Dickens, Bleak House, ed. Stephen Gill (1853; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 212.

[85] Quoted in Hope, Londoner's Larder, p. 158.

[86] Hope, Londoner's Larder, p. 154.

relations are mediated through visual images'.[87] In Victorian culture, this obsession with visuality was simultaneously accepted as part of a class-based need to indulge in acts of social display, to show off one's wealth, standing or fashionableness, and disparaged as the symptom of a growing superficiality which threatened to undermine 'genuine' conviviality and sociability.

Finkelstein concurs with this concern, describing the restaurant as the scene of a kind of practiced civility, which comprises 'routine forms of conduct' and 'clichéd styles of sociality'.[88] Certainly, in representations of lower class establishments of the nineteenth century, the act of eating out is transposed into an opportunity to display pretentions to social advancement, as diners mimic the behaviour associated with their genteel counterparts. In Bleak House, Dickens gives a comic account of such downmarket dining when the 'legal triumvirate' of Mr Guppy, Young Smallweed and Tony Jobling 'betake themselves to a neighbouring dining-house, of the class known among its frequenters by the denomination Slap-Bang'.[89] The diminutive Smallweed leads the way:

> They know him there, and defer to him. He has his favourite box,
>
> he bespeaks all the papers, he is down upon bald patriarchs, who
>
> keep them more than ten minutes afterwards. It is of no use trying
>
> him with anything less than a full-sized 'bread', or proposing to him

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[87] Finkelstein, Dining Out, p. 2. See Chapter 1 of this thesis, pp. 118-23, for an analysis of the importance of mirrors and reflective surfaces to nineteenth-century dining spaces.

[88] Finkelstein, Dining Out, pp. 16-17.

[89] Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 297, 294.

any joint in cut, unless it is in the very best cut. In the matter of gravy he is adamant.[90]

It is not only the staff who defer to Smallweed's authority: 'conscious of his elfin power, and submitting to his dread experience, Mr Guppy consults him in the choice of that day's banquet', subsequently selecting veal, ham and French beans upon his recommendation.[91] Smallweed's mastery of the dinner table is completed by a display of proper disdain for the waitress ('Without slugs, Polly!' he commands sarcastically when ordering cabbage) and a grandiose summary of the bill at the end of the meal.[92] The refinement of 'Mr Guppy's entertainment' is undermined, however, by the location in which it takes place: the restaurant's tablecloths are besmirched with 'eruptions of grease and blotches of beer', while the 'artificially whitened cauliflowers' on display in the window are as false as the company's pretensions to civility.[93] Thus, the nineteenth-century restaurant, with its emphasis on appearance and display, is represented as anathema to the genuine warmth and sociability of the family dining room portrayed by the likes of Frith.

The act of eating out was not simply opposed to domestic dining, however. According to Victorian ideals, the restaurant could actively damage the institution of the family. Until the very end of the nineteenth century, British restaurants were an exclusively male domain: no woman (or

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[90] Dickens, Bleak House, p. 294.

[91] Dickens, Bleak House, p. 294.

[92] Dickens, Bleak House, p. 297.

[93] Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 297, 294.

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rather, no respectable woman) would ever consider eating there. Many

eating houses were of the downmarket variety described by Dickens: plain in

décor, they were invariably furnished with a series of stalls (individual tables

being the preserve of expensive French establishments) and a carpet of

sand or woodchip to absorb any spillages. Such places, with their 'constant

coming in, and going out, and running about, and ... clatter of crockery, ...

and shrill crying for more nice cuts down the speaking pipe', were,

unsurprisingly, deemed completely unsuitable for decorous young ladies

unaccustomed to such noise and commotion.[94] Even in better class

establishments, female diners were rare. The author of the prototype

restaurant guide, London at Dinner, bemoans the existence of 'one long

standing evil' in the British capital: namely, 'the difficulty of finding an Hotel

or Restaurant where strangers of the gentler sex may be taken to dine'.[95]

Although the presence of women was supposedly permissible in a small

number of relatively high-class establishments, on the whole, dining out was

a male-dominated activity. As Richard Sennett points out:

> In the restaurants of the 19th Century, a lone, respectable woman
>
> dining with a group of men, even if her husband were present,
>
> would cause an overt sensation, whereas the dining out of a
>
> bourgeois man with a woman of lower station was tacitly but

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[94] Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 294-97.

[95] London at Dinner, p. 11. The text adds, 'It is true that, since our intercourse with the

Continent, some coffee-rooms have been opened where gentlemen may take their wives

and daughters; but it has not yet become a recognised custom, although confectioners'

shops are resorted to by ladies alone' (p. 11).

studiously avoided as a topic of conversation among any of those near him.[96]

The proper place for the 'fairer sex' to enjoy food was, according to Victorian ideology, within the safe confines of the family home. When a woman did enter a public eating place, it was invariably as a person of low moral or social standing: a mistress, prostitute or servant.[97] It was not until Cesar Ritz, manager of the restaurant at the famous Savoy Hotel, and his equally renowned chef, Auguste Escoffier, realised the financial benefits of encouraging women to dine out that such behaviour became acceptable among the upper classes.[98] Even so, by the end of the nineteenth century, restaurant dining was still the privilege of men – and a few, emboldened 'New Women'. For the average woman, the only place to eat out respectably was one of the new ABC or Lyons' tea-shops. These places were not only safe environments for unaccompanied women, but had the added advantage of female lavatories; as Judith Flanders points out, prior to their inception 'women could go out only for as long as they didn't have to "go"'.[99]

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[96] Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 23.

[97] See Finkelstein, Dining Out, p. 40.

[98] Ritz enticed fashionable society hostesses such as Lady Randolph Churchill and the Duchess of Malborough to hold dinner parties at the Savoy, first in private rooms, then in the public restaurant behind discreetly placed screens and, finally, in open view. See Hope, Londoners' Larder, pp. 157-58.

[99] Flanders, Victorian House, p. 359.

For the majority of the nineteenth century, then, restaurants were the preserve of men and, as such, were posited in implicit opposition to a proper regard for family values. Although many male authors of the Victorian era, Dickens and Thackeray among them, regularly enjoyed the fare of London's chop-houses and taverns, their texts nevertheless tend to suggest a degree of disquiet with this trend for dining outside the family home. According to the values of the Victorian bourgeoisie, the outer world was a dangerous place, cursed with a superficial regard for appearances and replete with temptation. Should a married man find it necessary to dine regularly away from home, then something must be amiss within the family unit, or more specifically with his wife. In the preface to her Book of Household Management (1861), Mrs Beeton warns that

> men are now so well served out of doors, – at their clubs, well-
> ordered taverns, and dining-houses, that in order to compete with
> the attractions of these places, a mistress must be thoroughly
> acquainted with the theory and practice of cookery, as well as be
> perfectly conversant with all the other arts of making and keeping
> a comfortable home.[100]

While it was acceptable practice for bachelors to purchase their evening meal from a local cookshop or eating-house, as Solomon Gills and Walter Gay do in Dickens's Dombey and Son (1848), the culinary needs of married men should always be catered for at home, according to nineteenth-century

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[100] Beeton, Book of Household Management, p. iii.

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mores.[101] This helps to explains why the waiter at 'The Dragon of Wantly' in

The Last Chronicle of Barset reports a sharp downturn in trade: although the

men of Barchester enjoy 'a little bit of dinner now and again at a hotel', he

tells Mr Toogood, 'they don't do it' for fear of incurring the wrath of their

wives.[102]

A married man eating out was the cause of some consternation in

nineteenth-century culture; when a married woman chose to dine away from

home, however, something was judged to be very wrong indeed. Inquiring

as to the whereabouts of Lady Dedlock in Bleak House, Inspector Bucket is

told by a servant that her Ladyship is 'out to dinner':

> 'Goes out pretty well every day, don't she?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> 'Not to be wondered at!' says Mr Bucket. 'Such a fine woman
>
> as her, so handsome and so graceful and so elegant, is like a
>
> fresh lemon on a dinner-table, ornamental wherever she goes.'[103]

Bucket attributes Lady Dedlock's predilection for dining out to a desire to

sparkle in society; the reader, however, may discern that her aversion to

dining in stems from her incompatibility with the state of familial harmony

associated with the domestic dining room. Unbeknown to her husband,

Lady Dedlock is the mother of an illegitimate child, and this secret slowly

diminishes her emotional capacity, eventually destroying her marriage and

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[101] Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son, ed. Peter Fairclough (1848; London: Penguin,
1970), p. 92.

[102] Trollope, Last Chronicle of Barset, p. 414.

[103] Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 750-51.

precipitating her tragic death. In <u>Dombey and Son</u>, a woman eating out is

again the signal of domestic disorder when Edith Dombey, secreted in

France after fleeing her miserable marriage, is provided with a meal from the

'Golden Head' restaurant by her fellow fugitive, the villainous Carker.[104]

Even unimpeachable instances of female consumption outside the

family home could be characterised textually as matters of guilt or shame.

When beautiful Bella Wilfer decides to treat her father to dinner at

Greenwich in <u>Our Mutual Friend</u>, the occasion is described by Dickens in his

chapter title as 'an innocent elopement'. In keeping with the tenor of this

paradoxical appellation, the language of intrigue and adultery punctuates the

narration of this morally-benign event. Bella delights in being referred to as

her father's 'lovely woman', and fusses over him with the attentiveness of a

sweetheart. 'Might I ... observe,' Mr Wilfer hints delicately, as the couple

travel to Greenwich, 'that perhaps it might be calculated to attract attention,

having one's hair publicly done by a lovely woman in an elegant turn-out in

Fenchurch Street?'[105] At the meal itself, Bella teases her father mercilessly

about the secret status of their assignation. 'I have got you in my power,'

she announces deviously:

> 'This is a secret expedition. If ever you tell of me, I'll tell of you. I'll
>
> tell Ma that you dined at Greenwich.'
>
> 'Well; seriously, my dear,' observed [her father], with some
>
> trepidation of manner, 'it might be as well not to mention it.'

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[104] Dickens, <u>Dombey and Son</u>, pp. 851-52.

[105] Dickens, <u>Our Mutual Friend</u>, p. 370.

'Aha!' laughed Bella. 'I knew you wouldn't like it, sir! So you keep my confidence, and I'll keep yours. But betray the lovely woman, and you shall find her a serpent. Now, you may give me a kiss'.[106]

The co-conspirators are keen to keep the status of their dinner secret so as to avoid Mrs Wilfer's condemnation of their extravagance. In spite of this, the meal and its circumstances are, in essence, innocuous. Why, then, does the hint of immorality slip into its portrayal? It seems that the idea of an unmarried couple eating out together was incompatible with Victorian notions of decency: therefore, a sense of impropriety clings to what is essentially an innocent textual moment in <u>Our Mutual Friend</u>.

The act of dining out, popularised in the nineteenth century through the rise of the restaurant, was nonetheless invested with a disruptive potential in the fiction of the period. Although clubs and restaurants invited the consumption of food in an 'inside' space, this was by no means equivalent to the security or familial accord associated with the domestic dining room. Eating out, therefore, was presented to the Victorians as a morally dubious, and potentially dangerous, activity. Doing so in clubs or restaurants was preferable, however, to eating out of doors, a practice associated with unruly forms of behaviour and working-class culture.

Eating Out: Street Food

If the Victorian club provided facilities for upper-class gentlemen to dine outside the home, then street stalls constituted a less prestigious equivalent

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[106] Dickens, <u>Our Mutual Friend</u>, p. 375.

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for working-class people. Henry Mayhew, in his lengthy analysis of street

life, London Labour and the London Poor (1851), quotes from a

contemporary article on the eating habits of the generic 'Street Boy', for

whom:

> The kerb is his club, offering all the advantages of one of those
>
> institutions without any subscription or ballot. Had he a few pence,
>
> , he might dine equally well as at Blackwall, and with the same
>
> variety of delicacies without going twenty yards from the pillars of
>
> St. Clement's churchyard.[107]

In urban areas, particularly, a vast array of consumables could be purchased

from market or itinerant sellers. Unprepared goods, such as fruit,

vegetables, raw fish and meat, were commonly vended from stalls or

'hawked' through the streets by door-to-door salesmen, while, for the hungry

worker on his or her way home following a day's labour, food ready for

consumption could be bought for a small fee.

Mayhew estimates that, by the mid-nineteenth century, there were

approximately 30,000 costermongers working in the streets of London

alone.[108] Street food, in all its variety, evidently proliferated at this time; its

sale and purchase, however, were invested with a dangerous potential. This

had long been the case. In The English Table in History and Literature,

Charles Cooper refers to 'a curious enactment of the sixteenth century

[forbidding] street fruiterers from selling plums and apples', in case 'the sight

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[107] Henry Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor (1851; London: Frank Cass, 1967),

Vol. I, p. 159.

[108] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 4.

of them offered such temptations to apprentices and servants that they were led to steal their employers' money in order to gratify their longing'.[109] The law was soon repealed; however, the belief that street food, particularly that of great quality or rarity, could instigate imprudent desire in those whose limited means should be deployed elsewhere continued to hold sway in the nineteenth century. For the Victorians, economy equalled virtue and appetite, sin. The selling of goods in the open air encouraged the latter condition by creating an arena of temptation and immoderate desire. In Oliver Twist (1838), for instance, the sight of a market stall filled with diverse specimens of apple prompts Charley Bates to exhibit 'some very loose notions concerning the rights of property', much to the amazement of young Oliver.[110]

Yet the threat of vice was not limited to the purchasers (or pilferers) of street food; sellers, too, were invariably associated with immorality. In his introduction to London Labour, Mayhew 'others' such people by subjecting them to a quasi-ethnological analysis. 'Of the thousand millions of human beings that are said to constitute the population of the entire globe,' he asserts,

> there are – socially, morally, and perhaps even physically
>
> considered – but two distinct and broadly marked races, viz., the

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[109] Charles Cooper, The English Table in History and Literature (London: Sampson & Low, 1929), p. 3.

[110] Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, ed. Angus Wilson (1838; London: Penguin, 1966), p. 113.

wanderers and the settlers – the vagabond and the citizen – the

nomadic and the civilized tribes.[111]

Numbering street sellers among the former category, Mayhew goes on to list

the various threats embodied in this social class: their 'animal' nature, their

'lax ideas of property', their 'general improvidence', their 'repugnance to

continuous labour' and 'utter want of religion'.[112] He later concludes, 'that

the costermongers belong essentially to the dangerous classes none can

doubt'.[113] Inherent in the danger posed by street sellers is an affiliation with

the outdoors, a lack of fixity which contrasts sharply with the stability and

security of inside spaces and, in particular, the bourgeois family home.

That is not to say that the middle classes did not trade with such

people. Sarah Freeman cites a nineteenth-century source describing the

cross-class custom at St. John's market in Liverpool:

> On Saturdays ... [at] about eleven o'clock in the morning the
>
> avenues are thronged with elegantly dressed ladies, and persons
>
> of the highest respectability; towards the afternoon the market is
>
> less thronged until night, when multitudes pour into it, either for the
>
> purpose of gazing about or making purchases.[114]

Markets were largely unregulated spaces, and it was this potential for the

promiscuous mixing of classes that so disturbed the moralists of the

Victorian period. As Elizabeth Wilson points out, in the crowded streets of

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[111] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 1.

[112] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 3.

[113] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 101.

[114] Quoted in Freeman, Mutton and Oysters, pp. 30-31.

the metropolis, 'the gentleman and, worse still, the gentlewoman were forced to rub shoulders with the lower orders', finding themselves 'buffeted and pushed with little ceremony or deference'.[115] Class was no marker of distinction: one 'fish-huckster' interviewed by Mayhew assured him 'that if Prince Halbert [sic] was to stop him in the street to buy a pair of soles of him, he'd as soon sell him a "rough pair as any other man"'.[116]

The visual tumult of the Victorian marketplace is successfully captured in Phoebus Levin's 1864 painting of Covent Garden Market (1864; Figure 14). Perhaps the most striking aspect of this image is the sheer mass of bodies on display: the painting teems with the threat of disorder as the various classes of London society mix and intermingle. Respectable working-class housewives evaluate the produce displayed by rustic-looking farmers and market gardeners; gentlemen in top hats examine exotic fruits while shabbily dressed costermongers push past, carrying trays laden with pineapples and other tropical imports upon their heads; a young dandy proffers a hot potato to his lady companion (a woman of dubious respectability judging by her loose red hair and bright pink shawl); and street children gambol in the gutters and side alleys. In the light of such indiscriminate cross-class encounters, it is hardly surprising to find that the Victorians characterised street spaces as the site of 'uncertainty, disorientation and alarm'.[117]

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[115] Elizabeth Wilson, The Sphinx in the City (London: Virago, 1991), p. 29.

[116] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 53.

[117] Wilson, Sphinx in the City, p. 29.

Figure 14: Covent Garden Market, Phoebus Levin (1864), Museum of London.

Mayhew, too, attests to the 'bustle and activity' of Covent Garden Market in an account which could serve as the textual accompaniment to Levin's painting. At around six o'clock every Saturday morning, Mayhew writes,

> buyers and sellers stream to and from [Covent Garden] in all directions, filling every street in the vicinity .... Along each approach to the market ... nothing is to be seen, on all sides, but vegetables; the pavement is covered with heaps of them waiting to be carted; the flagstones are stained green with the leaves trodden under foot; sieves and sacks full of apples and potatoes, and bundles of brocoli [sic] and rhubarb, are left unwatched upon almost every doorstep; the steps of Covent Garden Theatre are covered with fruit and vegetables; the road is blocked up with mountains of cabbages and turnips; and men and women push past with their arms bowed out by the cauliflowers under them, or the red tips of carrots pointing from their crammed aprons, or else their faces are red with the weight of the loaded head-basket.[118]

Implicit in this catalogue of disorder is a concern with the misappropriation of spaces: the steps to the Theatre have been transformed into temporary market stalls, while the tributary roads feeding the 'Garden' no longer facilitate the passage of traffic, being blocked up with carts and trays of fresh produce. Mayhew documents further misuses: empty baskets serve as makeshift shelters for the children of the streets (Levin's painting also depicts youngsters sleeping in these temporary homes), while the communal

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[118] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 81.

water-pump is used as a washstand by some enterprising street dwellers.[119]

Even at night, the market is the scene of shambolic disarray. The narrator of

Our Mutual Friend evokes swarms of 'young savages always flitting about

[the] place, creeping off with fragments of orange-chests, and mouldy litter';

piles of 'trodden vegetable refuse'; and numerous 'dozing women-

drunkards', sheltering in unsanitary doorways.[120] Buying, selling, eating,

drinking, sleeping, bathing: the mixed functionality of the marketplace is a far

cry from the purposeful segregation of the family home described by Kerr.

Further to the visual restlessness of the Victorian market was the

considerable noise created by its attendees. In one of a collection of

sketches written under the pseudonym 'Boz', Dickens enumerates the

competing sounds to be heard at Covent Garden:

> Men are shouting, carts backing, horses neighing, boys fighting,
>
> basket-women talking, piemen expatiating on the excellence of
>
> their pastry, and donkeys braying. These and a hundred other
>
> sounds form a compound discordant enough to a Londoner's ears,
>
> and remarkably disagreeable to those of country gentlemen.[121]

The streets were noisy places – much to the displeasure of the nineteenth-

century bourgeoisie. 'I've got a good jacketing many a Sunday morning,'

one street seller tells Mayhew, 'for waking people up with crying mackerel,

but I've said, "I must live while you sleep"'. Mayhew provides an extensive

list of the cries to be heard at markets such as London's Billingsgate, where

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[119] Mayhew, London Labour, pp. 82-83.

[120] Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, pp. 798-99.

[121] Charles Dickens, Sketches by Boz (1836; London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 49.

the manifold voices appear to have been as varied as the articles on sale.

The principal cries, 'uttered in a sort of cadence', included: 'Ni-ew mackerel,

6 a shilling'; 'Buy a pair of live soles, 3 pair for 6d.'; 'Real Yarmouth bloaters,

2 a penny'; and, loudest of all, 'New herrings alive, 16 a groat'.[122] Little

wonder that, for many Victorian subjects, buying food out of doors was a

'bewildering' experience.[123]

Human bodies and voices were not the only things to abound at

nineteenth-century markets: at Smithfield, animals, too, thronged the streets

on market day, raising concerns about sanitation among the health-

conscious middle classes. In Oliver Twist, Dickens plays upon the hygiene-

related fears of his readership in an invocation of the old market at

Smithfield, where, we are told:

> the ground was covered, nearly ankle-deep, with filth and mire;
>
> and a thick steam, perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the
>
> cattle, and mingling with the fog, which seemed to rest upon the
>
> chimney-tops, hung heavily above .... The hideous and
>
> discordant din that resounded from every corner of the market;
>
> and the unwashed, unshaven, squalid, and dirty figures constantly
>
> running to and fro, and bursting in and out of the throng; rendered
>
> it a stunning and bewildering scene, which quite confounded the
>
> senses.[124]

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[122] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 52.

[123] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 9.

[124] Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. 203.

Live meat markets were a potent source of disorder: escaped animals made frequent forays into surrounding streets, much to the distress of unsuspecting pedestrians. Quoting from the Parliamentary Papers of 1849, Sarah Freemen describes the chaos occurent when a bullock broke loose from his drover and 'made his way into a coffee house in high Holburn': sauntering across the room, the beast 'took a deliberate survey of himself' in a large mirror, and 'not liking the appearance of one or two customers', proceeded to break some seats, the windows and the door.[125] An escaped 'Mad Bull!' is the cause of similar confusion in <u>Dombey and Son</u>, and results in the separation of young Florence Dombey from her nurse and brother on the insalubrious London streets.[126]

Yet, in spite of its associated dangers and the nuisance of noise, dirt and disorder, the purchase of unprepared foodstuffs from streets and stalls was a practice familiar to all but the highest classes (whose servants performed the task for them). The purchase of food for consumption <u>on</u> the streets was another matter, however. As previously suggested, the act of eating formed a source of real anxiety for the Victorians and, though the dining room, with its discernible order, went some way to relieve these fears, the practice of eating out of doors, in spaces free from the restraints associated with domestic interiors, still induced a kind of panic, particularly among the middle classes. The reasons for this were twofold: firstly, street food was connected with the poor and the working classes and, secondly, it was associated with immoral spaces and behaviour.

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[125] Freeman, <u>Mutton and Oysters</u>, p. 35.

[126] Dickens, <u>Dombey and Son</u>, p. 128.

Mayhew, with reference to the former concern, demonstrates how the streets could furnish a hungry worker with his or her daily requirement for food. 'Men and women, and most especially boys,' he claims,

> purchase their meals day after day in the streets. The coffee-stall supplies a warm breakfast; shell-fish of many kinds tempt to a luncheon; hot-eels or pea-soup, flanked by a potato 'all hot', serve for a dinner; and cakes and tarts, or nuts and oranges, with many varieties of pastry, confectionary, and fruit, woo to indulgence in a dessert; while for supper there is a sandwich, a meat pudding, or a 'trotter'.[127]

Conventional Victorian morality consistently failed to recognise that the frequency with which the working classes 'ate out' had more to do with need than choice. John Burnett points out that 'urban life necessarily meant a greater dependence on ... food retailers', partly because living conditions among working people were 'overcrowded and often ill-equipped for the practice of culinary arts', and partly because 'many women worked at factory or domestic trades and had little time or energy left for cooking' at the end of the day.[128] As a result of these factors, a hot jacket potato or piece of fried fish would often commend itself to those on their way home from a hard day's labour. A female oyster-seller tells Mayhew, 'My heartiest customers, that I serve with the most pleasure, are working people'.[129]

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[127] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 158.

[128] Burnett, Plenty and Want, p. 42.

[129] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 75.

Yet, nineteenth-century moralists continued to condemn street dining as an activity typical of the frivolity of the working classes. In response to concerns raised by reformers regarding the diet of Britain's labouring population, many employers argued that their workers were, by nature, 'extravagant and improvident', and that 'their incomes would be quite adequate for their needs if only they were laid out economically and not squandered on expensive foods and drink'.[130] This censorious attitude towards working people and street consumption is vividly portrayed in Ford Madox Brown's narrative painting, Work (1852-65; Figure 15). Framed with Biblical quotations extolling the virtues of effort and exertion, Brown's depiction of a crowded English street is a moralistic endorsement of industry (in all its forms) over the iniquity of idleness. Central to the image is a group of manual labourers who represent, according to Brown himself, the glory of the great 'British excavator, or navvy, ... in the full swing of his activity'.[131] The activity of at least one of these labourers has been fuelled, however, by the produce of the 'humpbacked, dwarfish' beer-seller to the right of the group, who calls his wares 'lustily', in defiance of the lady distributing temperance tracts (entitled 'The Hodman's Haven, or drink for thirsty souls') to the left of the painting. Work is venerated; yet, the sustenance necessary for workers to complete their tasks (or, more specifically, the consumption of it on the street) is conceived of in a more ambivalent way. The 'pastry-

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[130] Burnett, Plenty and Want, p. 48.

[131] Ford Madox Brown, The Exhibition of WORK, and other Paintings, by Ford Madox Brown (1865), in The Art of Ford Madox Brown, Kenneth Bendiner (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 131-56 (p. 152).

Figure 15: <u>Work</u>, Ford Madox Brown (1852-65), Manchester City Art Gallery.

cook's tray', held aloft by a boy behind the tract-distributer, is, according to Brown, 'the symbol of superfluity', while the orange-seller in the right-hand margins of the picture, though accorded rather more sympathy by the artist, is, too, an unwanted figure in society: the policeman behind her, having caught her 'in the heinous offence of resting her basket on a post', has just '[administered] justice in the shape of a push, that sends her fruit all over the road'.[132]

Consumption outdoors repelled the upstanding subjects of nineteenth-century Britain, although, curiously, their opprobrium extended only so far as the urban classes. Compare, for example, Thomas Unwins's depiction of Haymakers at Dinner (c. 1822; Figure 16) with Eyre Crowe's The Dinner Hour, Wigan (1874; Figure 17). According to one critic, the former represents 'an arcadian idyll of happy workers enjoying their noonday food and drink': bathed in a golden light, its subjects recline in various positions of languor, the soft curves of their bodies mirroring the undulations of the surrounding landscape.[133] The overall impression is one of happy synthesis between workers and nature, a subject eminently palatable to nineteenth-century consumers of art. Crowe's image, by contrast, represents a group of factory girls taking their dinner break outside a Wigan cotton mill. Here, the lurid yellow sky jars with the red brick of the buildings and chimneys, and the female figures in the frieze-like group appear stiff and unwelcoming. Common as such scenes must have been in everyday life, in art, this image was unique: working women, shown eating on the streets,

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[132] Brown, The Exhibition of WORK, pp. 153-55.

[133] Lionel Lambourne, Victorian Painting (London: Phaidon, 1999), p. 137.

Figure 16: <u>Haymakers at Dinner</u>, Thomas Unwins (c.1822), Victoria and
Albert Museum, London.

Figure 17: <u>The Dinner Hour, Wigan</u>, Eyre Crowe (1874), Manchester City Art
Gallery.

were not considered suitable subjects for the attention of serious artists, nor moralistic spectators. Indeed, some critics condemned Crowe for having engaged with the subject at all, the <u>Athenaeum</u> stating 'we think it was a pity Mr. Crowe wasted his time on such unattractive materials'.[134]

The particular censure reserved for representations of women eating outdoors in urban settings may be attributable to the association of outside consumption with immoral activities, such as prostitution. In <u>London Labour</u>, Mayhew tells his readers that two types of coffee stall exist on the streets of the capital: those that are set up at 'three or four in the morning' to serve the needs of decent working people, and those that 'make their appearance at twelve at night' for 'the accomodation of the "night-walkers" – "fast gentlemen" and loose girls'. It is piteous, he adds,

> to see a few young and good-looking girls, some without the indelible mark of habitual depravity on their countenances, clustering together for warmth round a coffee-stall, to which a penny expenditure, or the charity of the proprietor, [has] admitted them.[135]

Occasionally, prostitutes themselves took to selling oranges and other fruits as a 'blind', in order to gain access to public houses and evade the attentions of the police.[136] It is interesting to note, however, that many of the street sellers interviewed by Mayhew regard 'fallen women' as among their most pleasant customers. The comments of a trader of sheep's trotters are

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[134] <u>Athenaeum</u>, 9 May 1874, p. 637.

[135] Mayhew, <u>London Labour</u>, p. 184.

[136] See Freeman, <u>Mutton and Oysters</u>, p. 45.

typical: 'I have had worse sauce,' she claims, 'from modest women, as they called themselves, than from the women of the town, for plenty of them knows what poverty is, and is civiler, poor things'.[137]

Some of the worst behaved customers were to be found in and around the pubs and theatres where many night traders hawked their wares. Such places tended to be endowed with morally-dubious reputations, owing to their associations with gambling, drunkenness and lewdness. Nevertheless, they represented a dependable source of custom for the various sellers listed by Mayhew and, thus, hungry late-night revellers could choose from a wide range of foodstuffs – oranges, sheep's trotters, hot eels, hot green peas, whelks, fried fish and ham sandwiches – to enjoy with their evening's entertainment. It seems, however, that purchases were not always intended for the sole purpose of consumption: according to Mayhew, orange peel and nutshells served as makeshift missiles for the boys in the back row of the 'Vic Gallery', 'a good aim being rewarded with a shout of laughter' from the assembled company there.[138]

Eating outdoors, then, came to be associated with the spread of bad behaviour, indecency and vice in nineteenth-century representation. Even when customers were merely poor, as opposed to criminal or immoral, the consumption of street food was inevitably characterised as indecorous. Mayhew describes with some disdain the patrons of the coffee stalls at Covent Garden, who '[munch] away at their slices [of bread and butter], as if

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[137] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 173.

[138] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 19.

not a moment could be lost'.[139] For the respectable or genteel Victorian

subject, eating on the streets was a matter of shame. 'It's not a very few

times that gentlemen ... will stop – just as it's getting darkish, perhaps, – and

look about them, and then come to me and say very quick: "Two penn'orth

for a whet"', one oyster seller tells Mayhew, adding that such customers

habitually 'swallow their oysters as if they was taking poison in a hurry'.[140]

Another trader, this time of whelks, claims that servant girls from wealthy

houses rarely eat his produce alfresco: 'I dare say they're afraid their young

men may be about, and might think they wasn't ladies if they eat whelks in

the street', he surmises.[141] According to the rules of Victorian social

behaviour, only penury or profligacy could induce a lady to indulge in such

an act.

Owing to its links with disorder and desire, immodest behaviour and

immoral spaces, street food became a prime target for the regulatory

impulse of the newly-formed nineteenth-century police force. By the 1850s,

the effects of the Victorian establishment's desire for order were already

being felt. To a description of the New Cut market on a Saturday night,

equating the commotion there with that of Babel, Mayhew appends the

following addendum:

> Since the above description was written, the New Cut has lost
>
> much of its noisy and brilliant glory. In consequence of a New
>
> Police regulation, 'stands' or 'pitches' have been forbidden, and

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[139] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 83.

[140] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 75.

[141] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 165.

each coster, on a market night, is now obliged, under pain of the lock-up house, to carry his tray, or keep moving with his barrow.[142] A gingerbread-nut seller affirms, 'the police are a great trouble .... They say there's no rest for the wicked; but, in the streets, there's no rest for a man trying to make an honest living, as I'm sure I do. I could pitch anywhere, one time'.[143]

Traders and their wares were not the only things to come under the watchful eye of the police: noise, too, was conceived of as a problem in need of regulation. According to Mayhew, an Act of Parliament was introduced to try to outlaw the muffin man's bell; in practice, however, the prohibition was 'as inoperative as that which forbad the use of a drum to the costermonger', and failed to suppress vigorous ringing by sellers in the suburbs.[144] Threaded through Mayhew's assessment of urban life is an intimation that these efforts to superintend street food, as well as the people who sold it, were doomed to fail. The contempt with which street traders regarded the law can be inferred from the revelation that papers printed with Acts of Parliament, purchased from stationers or old book shops, were used to wrap the sweets sold by itinerant confectioners.[145] Mayhew himself attempts to assert order on the trade in street food by rigorously classifying its sellers, customers and consumables in <u>London Labour</u>. The professed purpose of his encyclopaedic tome is to a certain extent undone, however, by his

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[142] Mayhew, <u>London Labour</u>, p. 10.

[143] Mayhew, <u>London Labour</u>, pp. 200-01.

[144] Mayhew, <u>London Labour</u>, p. 202.

[145] Mayhew, <u>London Labour</u>, p. 204.

admission that 'the mind is long baffled in its attempts to reduce [those who

obtain their living in the streets of the metropolis] to scientific order or

classification'.[146] Instead of stabilising outdoor space through the

categorisation of those who ate and traded there and, in this way, containing

the threat posed by outside consumption, Mayhew manages only to bear

witness to its heterogeneity, its proliferation, and the consequent

impossibility of imposing order on the consumption of food outside of the

bourgeois dining room.

Inside Out: The Picnic

The link between working-class festivities and disorderly dining had long

been in place. In his examination of folk culture in the work of François

Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin stresses the importance of food and feasting to

medieval carnival. Contrary to official celebrations sponsored by church or

state, which lauded order, truth and fixity, carnivals, Bakhtin claims, were

liberated from the 'norms of ettiquette and decency imposed at other times':

> As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival
>
> celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from
>
> the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical
>
> rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true
>
> feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was
>
> hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.[147]

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[146] Mayhew, London Labour, p. 3.

[147] Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana

University Press, 1984), p. 10.

Characterised by disruption, excess and a jubilant inversion of normal values, carnival represented for its participants a kind of 'second life', governed by 'parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings': the 'peculiar logic of the "inside out"'.[148] By the nineteenth century, such outbursts of popular disorder had been largely suppressed. Bakhtin notes that, in bourgeois literature, images of eating and drinking came to represent not a 'banquet for all the world', as had previously been the case, but matters of 'private gluttony and drunkenness', 'confined to the house and the private chamber', expressing the 'contentment and satiety of the selfish individual'.[149] In spite of these attempts to closet consumption in the dining room, however, 'break outs' sporadically occurred. Elements of the carnivalesque can be identified in the accounts of outdoor eating already discussed in this chapter: the trade in street food described by Mayhew, in particular, bears traces of the kind of disorder evoked by Bakhtin.

In depictions of nineteenth-century fairs and festivals, the residue of medieval carnival becomes even more apparent. 'If the Parks be "the lungs of London",' muses the narrator of the Sketches by Boz (1836),

> we wonder what Greenwich Fair is — a periodical breaking out, we
>
> suppose, a sort of spring-rash: a three days' fever, which cools the
>
> blood for six months afterwards, and at the expiration of which
>
> London is restored to its old habits of plodding industry, as

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[148] Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, p. 11.

[149] Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, pp. 301-302.

suddenly and completely as if nothing had ever happened to disturb them.[150]

Described in terms of an ague or bodily derangement, Greenwich Fair was, every Easter and Whitsun until its closure in 1857, the scene of chaotic indulgence, inciting an excessive appetite for food and alcohol in its attendees. In addition to the ubiquitous barrels of beer, 'real spice nuts', 'pen'orths of pickled salmon (fennel included)', 'oysters, with shells as large as cheese-plates, and divers specimens of a species of snail' were among the delights to be sampled at Greenwich according to 'Boz', who documents a somewhat hazy recollection of finding himself 'on the top of a hackney-coach, at something past four o'clock in the morning, with a rather confused idea of [his] own name, or place of residence' following a day's indulgence at the fair.[151] Nathaniel Hawthorne, on a visit to the final celebrations at Greenwich, was dazzled by its 'festal aspect' – the 'oyster-stands', 'stalls of oranges' and 'gilt gingerbread' on display there – though rather less impressed with the general salubrity of the English public.[152] 'I remember little more than a confusion of unwashed and shabbily dressed people,' he writes in Our Old Home, adding, 'it taught me to understand why Shakespeare, in speaking of a crowd, so often alludes to its attribute of evil odour.'[153]

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[150] Dickens, Sketches by Boz, p. 111.

[151] Dickens, Sketches by Boz, pp. 114, 111.

[152]Nathaniel Hawthorne, Our Old Home: A Series of English Sketches, in The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1863; Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1970), Vol. V, pp. 234-35.

[153] Hawthorne, Our Old Home, pp. 234-35.

Implicit in Hawthorne's condemnation of the 'unfragrant crowd' at Greenwich is a mistrust of the masses, a fear of the unruly, ungovernable mob.[154] Even during the mid-nineteenth century, some sixty years after the turbulence of the French Revolution, concerns continued to crop up regarding the possibility of a popular uprising in Britain. In the light of such fears, it is significant that the structure of carnival, whether in its medieval or nineteenth-century incarnation, involves a specific inversion from low to high: carnival is, in essence, the domain of the commonalty. Crucially, however, its festivities are usually figured (as in the quotation from 'Boz' above) as a kind of release from the tensions and anxieties of everyday life, a transitory outbreak of disorder that enables the lower classes afterwards to submit, more or less passively, to the manifold structures of power governing their day-to-day lives. Under such a formula, one might suppose that the relatively privileged middle and upper classes, the protectors of the status quo, would be obliged to forgo the joyous disorder of carnival. While the working classes were accorded occasional cultural sanction to invert the general order of things and, in terms of food, enjoy unrestrained consumption in an outside setting, the bourgeois, it seems reasonable to presume, would be compelled to maintain the social order and submit at all times to the hegemony of the dining room, its strictures and laws. This, however, was not the case.

Originally conceived of as a fashionable social entertainment, in which each person present contributed a share of the provisions, the nineteenth-century picnic – a pleasure party, usually involving an excursion

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[154] Hawthorne, Our Old Home, p. 235.

to the country, where participants would enjoy a meal out of doors – allowed the respectable middle classes to leave the secure, inner space of their dining rooms in order to experience the thrill of eating out in the wildness of natural surroundings.[155] This impulse was directly related to the popularity of Romanticism. According to Georgina Battiscombe, author of English Picnics, the vogue for outdoor entertainments

> may ... be regarded as springing from the nature-cult popularised
>
> by Rousseau .... Before the Romantics had made nature
>
> fashionable no one connected the idea of pleasure with the notion
>
> of a meal eaten anywhere except under a roof.[156]

Desirous of witnessing the 'primitive' beauty and power of Nature firsthand, the Romantics and their devotees discovered that an outdoor picnic allowed them to satiate simultaneously their appetite for wild, uninhabited landscapes, and the more prosaic nutritional needs of their own bodies. In a diary entry from 4 May 1802, Dorothy Wordsworth describes a walking excursion with her brother, William, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in which the party rest upon a 'moss covered Rock' and eat their dinner, devouring

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[155] In early usage, 'picnics' were not necessarily outdoor affairs. The term could also be applied to soirées where each guest contributed an item of fare. The Times, 16 March 1802, gives the following definition: 'A Pic-Nic Supper consists of a variety of dishes. The Subscribers to the entertainment have a bill of fare presented to them, with a number against each dish. The lot which he draws obliges him to furnish the dish marked against it, which he either takes with him by carriage, or sends by a servant' (p. 3).

[156] Georgina Battiscombe, English Picnics (London: Harvill Press, 1949), p. 3.

concurrently the 'glorious wild solitude' of a 'great waterfall'.[157] Likewise, the

character of Fanny Price in Mansfield Park identifies Nature as a feast for

the eyes. 'You will think me rhapsodizing,' she tells Miss Crawford, as the

pair sit in the Parsonage shrubbery, 'but when I am out of doors ... I am very

apt to get into this sort of wondering strain. One cannot fix one's eyes on the

commonest natural production without finding food for a rambling fancy'.[158]

In the Victorian period, too, an appetising view was considered

essential to the success of a picnic excursion. 'A picnic should be held

among green things,' asserts the narrator of Trollope's Can You Forgive

Her? (1864-65), adding:

> There should be trees, broken ground, small paths, thickets, and
>
> hidden recesses. There should, if possible, be rocks, old timber,
>
> moss, and brambles. There should certainly be hills and dales –
>
> on a small scale, and, above all, there should be running water.[159]

The narrator's final direction, that 'there should be no expanse' – 'Jones

should not be able to see all Greene's movements, nor should Augusta

always have her eye upon her sister Jane' – indicates that, by the mid-

nineteenth century, picnicking had as much to do with romantic as Romantic

sensibilities.[160] Unhindered by the static seating arrangements of the dinner

table, incipient lovers could take advantage of the opportunity to wander

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[157] Dorothy Wordsworth, The Grasmere Journals, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford: Clarendon

Press, 1991), p. 95.

[158] Austen, Mansfield Park, p. 174.

[159] Anthony Trollope, Can You Forgive Her?, ed. David Skilton (1864-65; London: The

Trollope Society, 1989), p. 66.

[160] Trollope, Can You Forgive Her?, p. 66.

freely and enjoy each other's company outside of the rigorous rules of propriety governing the Victorian dining room.

Something of the wildness of unfettered nature appears to permeate the participants of nineteenth-century picnics. Representations of such occasions are invariably framed in terms of an embryonic romance, which is usually clandestine or improper in character. William Henry Fisk's painting The Secret (1858) is typical in this respect: peeping through a gap in a hedgerow, an inquisitive young girl, wide-eyed with astonishment, discovers a secret liaison between two lovers, while the remainder of her party, located on a hill in the background, carry on with their picnic, blissfully unaware of the intrigue unfolding a short distance away (Figure 18). As this example, with its romantic interlude, suggests, the picnic features in Victorian representation as a kind of bourgeois version of carnival, offering the middle classes a moment of temporary liberation from the strict constraints of the dining room, submitted to at all other times. Furthermore, as with the medieval carnivals discussed by Bakhtin, laughter is central to proceedings. An element of comedy accompanies the indecorous behaviour alluded to here: the expression of innocent astonishment on the face of the young girl, along with the image of the portly gentleman attempting to net butterflies in the background, affords a degree of humour to Fisk's narrative painting.

Nevertheless, the dangers of unruly behaviour could not be completely disregarded in nineteenth-century representation. The comical aspect of The Secret is undermined by the grave expression on the face of the female lover. Her solemnity indicates that her conscience is troubled by the illicit nature of her secret relationship, an impression intensified by the
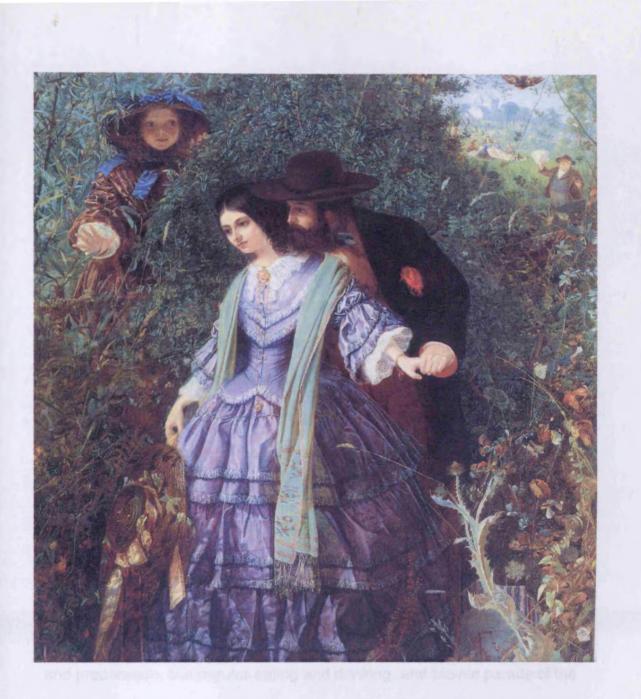
Figure 18: The Secret, William Henry Fisk (1858), private collection.

pose of the young spectator, whose arm extends forwards in a gesture

signifying 'Stop!' As the prescient Elinor Dashwood warns her sister,

Marianne, in Austen's Sense and Sensibility (1811), 'I am afraid that the

pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety'.[161] In

keeping with this sentiment, picnics were rarely permitted to proceed without

incident in nineteenth-century art and literature. If the dinner table was the

proper location for the fostering of nascent romance, then the picnic, owing

to its associations with the carnivalesque, disorder and inversion, threatened

frequently to thwart, rather than further, happy bourgeois couplings.

This is certainly the case in Emma, where a picnic excursion to Box

Hill ends, quite literally, in tears for the novel's eponymous heroine. The

event is blighted from its very beginnings: originally conceived of as an

exclusive outing for Emma, her friends the Westons and 'two or three more

of the chosen only', the expedition is hijacked by the vulgar Mrs Elton, much

to Emma's displeasure. What was to have been 'a quiet, unpretending,

elegant' gathering will now, she supposes, be overwhelmed by 'the bustle

and preparation, the regular eating and drinking, and pic-nic parade of the

Eltons'.[162] Notably, the term 'picnic' is employed somewhat disparagingly

here: through its connection with the Eltons, the word comes to signify

something tasteless, unrefined and ostentatious. Such negative

connotations were not uncommon in the early nineteenth century, owing in

part to the exploits of the notorious Picnic Club, a short-lived society

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[161] Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, ed. Ros Ballaster (1811; London: Penguin, 2003), p. 69.

[162] Austen, Emma, p. 348.

frequented by fashionable members of Regency England. While 'there is no reason to suppose its proceedings were particularly indecorous', writes Georgina Battiscombe,

> the general public clearly thought otherwise. A series of prints ... entitled <u>A Woman of Fashion's Journal</u> supplies proof of the club's evil reputation. Under the date May 1st, 1802, is inscribed the caption 'Indulged in half an hour's reflection; resolved on reformation; resigned from the Picnic Society'.[163]

Early-nineteenth-century representation reveals a degree of slippage between the supposed immorality of the Picnic Club and the perceived immodesty of the picnic lunch, and this helps to explain the textual distaste for outdoor-eating conveyed in <u>Emma</u>. When Mrs Elton proposes holding a 'gipsy party' at Donwell, with 'a table spread in the shade', the reader is encouraged to concur instead with the opinion of Mr Knightley, who asserts:

> My idea ... will be to have the table spread in the dining-room. The nature and the simplicity of gentlemen and ladies, with their servants and furniture, I think is best observed by meals within doors. When you are tired of eating strawberries in the garden, there shall be cold meat in the house.[164]

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[163] Battiscombe, <u>English Picnics</u>, p. 6.

[164] Austen, <u>Emma</u>, p. 351. Mr Knightley has another reason for avoiding an outdoor meal: 'He wished to persuade Mr Woodhouse, as well as Emma, to join the party; and he knew that to have any of them sitting down out of doors to eat would inevitably make him [Mr Woodhouse] ill' (p. 352). Even taking account of this self-interest, however, the general textual disdain for picnics remains evident.

Appreciative of the inherent orderliness of the dining room, the novel appears to favour inside over outside and, consequently, figures the outdoor picnic as a prelude to disorder. A love of nature and a fancy for food may be acceptable pursuits when considered individually but, in the world of Emma at least, it seems the two should never be combined.

These textual reservations appear justified by the ill-fated excursion to Box Hill. Although the tourists are blessed with fine weather 'and all the other outward circumstances of arrangement, accommodation, and punctuality were in favour of a pleasant party', the day is marred by 'a languor, a want of spirits, a want of union, which could not be got over'.[165] The group fragments into smaller parties of mutual interest, which fail to reassemble even on the production of the picnic lunch. More significantly, the behaviour of certain participants (most notably that of Frank Churchill and Emma) falls some way short of the standard of decorum usually elicited around the family dinner table. Bored by proceedings, Emma allows herself to be flattered by Frank, who, unbeknown to the rest of the group, is engaged to Jane Fairfax. Although neither party places much weight upon his false gallantry,

> in the judgement of most people looking on it must have had such an appearance as no English word but flirtation could very well describe. 'Mr Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively.' They were laying themselves open to that very phrase.[166]

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[165] Austen, Emma, p. 361.

[166] Austen, Emma, p. 362.

The sense of impropriety attached to Emma's behaviour at the picnic is later compounded by her rudeness to Miss Bates. When, for Miss Woodhouse's entertainment, Frank demands from each of the party 'either one thing very clever ... or two things moderately clever – or three things very dull indeed', the loquacious, but good-natured Miss Bates exclaims, 'That will just do for me, you know. I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan't I?' Emma's uncharitable response – 'Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me – but you will be limited as to number – only three at once' – further discomposes the spirits of the assembled party and later induces Mr Knightley to reprimand his favourite for her unseemly behaviour.[167] Emma leaves the picnic thoroughly ashamed at her actions and tearful at having exposed herself to ill opinion in one she so valued. Although the differences between the pair come to be resolved, resulting eventually in matrimonial union, the text nevertheless propagates the idea that to venture outside the decorous environment of the dining room for a picnic is to flirt with the possibility of disorder and the suspension of romantic hopes.

In Victorian fiction, too, picnics are placed in conflict with amorous aspirations. Allan Armadale, hero of Wilkie Collins's Armadale (1866), attempts to further his prospects with the object of his affection, Miss Eleanor Milroy, by inviting that young lady, her father and some friends on a picnic excursion to the Norfolk Broads. As with the trip to Box Hill in Emma, events do not proceed according to plan. The 'first hitch' takes the form of a letter announcing the imminent arrival of Miss Milroy's new governess, Miss Gwilt.

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[167] Austen, Emma, p. 364.

The problem of her unexpected advent is quickly resolved, however, by

Allan's lawyer, Pedgift Junior, who suggests leaving a note 'begging her to

join ... the picnic, and putting a carriage at her own sole disposal to take her

there'.[168] In spite of this resolution, the initial party gathered in Major Milroy's

parlour

> would hardly have conveyed the idea to any previously
>
> uninstructed person introduced among them, of a party assembled
>
> in expectation of a picnic. They were almost dull enough, so far as
>
> outward appearances went, to have been a party assembled in
>
> expectation of a marriage.[169]

Spirits are temporarily revived, however, on the journey to the picnic spot.

Pedgift manages matters so that he, Major Milroy and the Reverend Samuel

Pentecost travel in one carriage, while Allan, Eleanor and the rather deaf

Mrs Pentecost take another. As the old lady sleeps for most of the journey,

Allan looks forward to the opportunity of 'making love' to his precious

'Neelie', unchaperoned; his soft words are rudely interrupted, however, by

Mrs Pentecost's resonant snoring and Pedgift Junior's ill-timed commentary

on passing 'objects of interest' from the carriage in front.[170]

On reaching the Broads, the members of the pleasure party hire a

boat and row to a little nest of islands, where they stop for lunch. At first, the

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[168] Wilkie Collins, Armadale, ed. Catherine Peters (1866; Oxford: Oxford University Press,

1989), pp. 289-90.

[169] Collins, Armadale, p. 291.

[170] Collins, Armadale, p. 294.

picnic appears to bring equanimity to the group, leading the narrator to exclaim:

> How inestimably important in its moral results – and therefore how praiseworthy in itself – is the act of eating and drinking! ... At the opening of the hampers from Thorpe-Ambrose, sweet Sociability ... exhaled among the boating party, and melted in one friendly fusion the discordant elements of which that party had hitherto been composed.[171]

The harmony does not last, however: when Pedgift produces an accordion, Allan and Mrs Pentecost argue over the compostition of a song, and the Reverend Samuel is incapacitated by 'a smart indigestion', the result of earlier overindulgence.[172] Worse still, the burgeoning romance between Allan and Neelie is threatened by a misunderstanding. Coquettishly requesting the initial of the person upmost in his thoughts, Eleanor is mortified when Allan ('who knew nothing whatever of women's natures') replies 'M', in reference to his absent friend, Midwinter.[173] Humiliated, she takes refuge in silence and petulantly refuses to take part in the planned 'gipsy tea-making' at Hurle Mere, where the party were to have met Midwinter and Miss Gwilt.[174] Her obstinacy backfires, though, when Allan suggests waiting alone at Hurle Mere while the others return to the carriages by boat. The picnic ends in discomposure and vexation for all. As Mrs

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[171] Collins, Armadale, p. 301.

[172] Collins, Armadale, p. 304.

[173] Collins, Armadale, p. 311.

[174] Collins, Armadale, p. 309

Pentecost remarks, with a smile of sour satisfaction, 'This ... is what you call

a day's pleasure, is it? Ah, what fools we all were to leave our comfortable

homes!'[175]

Quarrels, romantic mix-ups, ill humour and indigestion: it is hardly

surprising that outside consumption was portrayed as potentially disorderly

for the middle classes in nineteenth-century representation. Though picnics

were evidently popular (the sheer number of references to such occasions in

art and literature attests to that), a certain apprehension seems to have

remained with regard to excursions outside the family dining room. In fiction,

this fear is frequently dealt with by presenting events within a comic frame.

Although the picnic generally functions as an impediment to romantic hopes,

a hurdle to be overcome before matrimony is achieved, that romantic

resolution will be realised is never a matter of doubt. The very structure of

comedy necessitates a happy denouement: thus, comedy functions as a

reassuring way to deal with the threat of disorder.

A further strategy employed by the Victorians in order to contain the

disruption inherent in picnic feasts was to civilise the natural surroundings in

which they took place. This domesticating impulse is not always

immediately apparent: part of the attraction of eating outdoors at this time

emanated from a desire to sample the unfettered, unsophisticated existence

enjoyed by the figure of the Gypsy in the Victorian imagination. From

George Borrow's Lavengro (1851) and Romany Rye (1857) to the paintings

of Augustus John, nineteenth-century representation reveals a recurrent

fascination with the possibility of abandoning the trappings of 'civilised' life in

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[175] Collins, Armadale, p. 314.

order to experience a more simple, 'natural' existence. The phenomenon of the picnic figures as part of this desire: it is no coincidence that participation in such occasions is regularly referred to in Victorian art and literature as 'gipsying'.[176] However, attempts to replicate an 'authentic' Gypsy lifestyle end all too often in disaster for the impractically-attired and ill-equiped middle classes, as the diary of Francis Kilvert, curate of Clyro in Radnorshire, reveals. On a picnic to Snodhill Castle, the author and his friends aspire to boil potatoes 'gipsy fashion', by suspending a pot from 'three sticks ... propped together, meeting in a point' over a fire. Calamity strikes, however, when 'flames ... burnt through one of the supports', causing the pot to come crashing down, 'hissing into the midst of the flames'.[177] Chaos ensues:

> There were loud cries and everyone was giving unheeded advice
> at once. At length the pot was settled upright on the embers,
> more water having been poured in, and another armful of dry
> wood heaped upon it, so that the pot was in the midst of a glowing
> fire. Twenty minutes passed, during which the gentlemen stood
> round the fire staring at the pot .... Then the pot hook was
> adjusted, the pot heaved and swung off the fire, a fork plunged
> into the potatoes and they were triumphantly pronounced to be
> done to a turn. Then there was a dispute how they should be

---

[176] See, for example, Austen, Emma, p. 351; Collins, Armadale, pp. 288-89, 309; Thomas Hardy, Under the Greenwood Tree (1872; London: Macmillan, 1949), pp. 135, 136, 138. See also the painting Londoners Gypsying by Charles Robert Leslie (1820), The Geffrye Museum, London.

[177] Francis Kilvert, Kilvert's Diary 1870-1879, ed. William Plomer (London: Guild, 1986), p. 42.

treated. 'Pour away the water,' said one. 'Let the water stay in the pot,' said another .... They were, however, poured out on the ground and then the pot fell upon them, crushing some and blackening others.[178]

Eventually, the ill-starred potatoes are 'handed round the table cloth, every one being most assiduous and urgent in recommending and passing them to his neighbour'.[179] Attempts to imitate Gypsy-style living were invariably fated to fail, it seems, for the unhappy bourgeoisie.

In order to combat such culinary catastrophes, nineteenth-century picnickers often tried to impose the regulation native to the interior dining room onto the wild outdoors. By transporting the accoutrements of the dinner table outside, it was reasoned, the order of indoor consumption could, likewise, be transposed onto the picnic blanket. Military-style organisation was therefore required. Among the 'Things not to be forgotten at a Picnic', Mrs Beeton includes:

> A stick of horseradish, a bottle of mint-sauce well corked, a bottle of salad dressing, a bottle of vinegar, made mustard, pepper, salt, good oil, and pounded sugar. If it can be managed, take a little ice. It is scarcely necessary to say that plates, tumblers, wine-glasses, knives, forks, and spoons, must not be forgotten; as also teacups and saucers, 3 or 4 teapots, some lump sugar, and milk, if

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[178] Kilvert, Kilvert's Diary, pp. 42-43.

[179] Kilvert, Kilvert's Diary, p. 43.

this last-named article cannot be obtained in the neighbourhood.

Take 3 corkscrews.[180]

Some Victorian picnickers disapproved of this trend to transfer inside

outside. In Robert Surtees' Plain or Ringlets? (1860), the narrator rails, 'We

hold that a pic-nic is not a pic-nic where there are well-arranged tables and

powdered footmen to wait. It is merely an uncomfortable out-of-door

dinner'.[181] Nevertheless, in the main, such domestic-style management

appears to have reassured Victorian sensibilities by assuaging the sense of

disorder inherent in picnic outings. Notably, it is only when Kilvert and

companions revert to the rituals of the dinner table at Snodhill Castle – 'after

luncheon the gentlemen entrenched themselves upon a fragment of the

Castle wall to smoke and talk local news and politics and the ladies

wandered away by themselves' – that a degree of propriety is brought to

proceedings.[182] If, like carnival, the nineteenth-century picnic is governed by

the peculiar logic of the 'inside out', then the appellation, in this case,

appears to hold a double meaning, referring at once to the topsy-turvy

rationale of the carnivalesque and the accompanying desire to impose the

laws of interior space onto an unruly, outside world.

The compelling need to manage outdoor spaces and, in particular,

outdoor consumption, can be identified in one of the most celebrated of

nineteenth-century paintings: The Derby Day (1856-58), by William Powell

Frith (Figure 19). 'Oh, mama,' exclaimed one of Queen Victoria's children,

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[180] Beeton, Book of Household Management, p. 960.

[181] Robert Surtees, Plain or Ringlets? (1860; Bath: George Bayntun, 1926), p. 19.
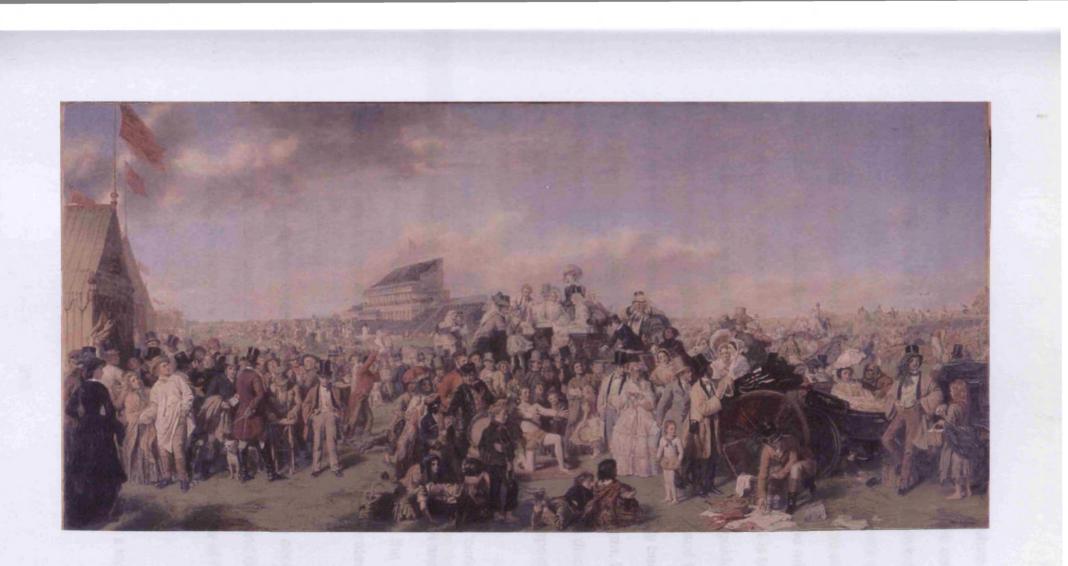
[182] Kilvert, Kilvert's Diary, p. 43.

Figure 19: <u>The Derby Day</u>, William Powell Frith (1856-58), Tate Gallery, London.

with reference to the great crowds who flocked to see the picture in the Royal Academy, 'I never saw so many people before'.[183] The comment could apply equally as well to the image itself, which is populated by a vast cross-section of Victorian society. The space depicted appears disturbingly unregulated: Gypsies, flower sellers, tricksters and thieves rub shoulders with rustics, swells, gamblers and respectable citizens. In the midst of the mêlée, a footman lays out a picnic lunch and, interestingly, it is to this section of the painting that the spectator's gaze is directed, guided by the outstreched arms of the acrobat in the centre of the picture and the hungry gaze of his assistant, close by. Why might this be? Possibly because the picnic basket and its appurtenances, the food and the footman, function as a tranquil centre of bourgeois respectability in the midst of the disorder of Derby Day. Surrounded by ravenous looks from a circle of spectators, the picnic can be read as a representation of order under siege.

However, as Christopher Wood points out, there is a 'curiously static, immobile' element to Frith's painting: the assembled children and working-class figures appear 'frozen', and thus fail to encroach upon the revered space of the picnic blanket in any serious way. Wood elaborates that, in this image,

> the Derby has been sanitized, ordered, and made acceptable to
>
> the middle-class audience. There is petty crime and disorder, but
>
> it is kept strictly under control. This is the essence of Frith's

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[183] Quoted in Christopher Wood, Victorian Painting (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 64.

panoramas, and why they were so popular. They present

Victorian society as it wanted to see itself.[184]

By imposing a strict order onto the crowds who populate Derby Day, Frith

effectively segregates and secures the bourgeois picnic from undesirable

intrusions and thus, like so much nineteenth-century representation, dispels

the possibility of disorder inherent in outdoor consumption. The Victorian

picnic, it seems, was a potentially troublesome, but ultimately controllable

affair.

Or was it? In spite of attempts to abate its threat through the

establishment of a comic narrative frame, or the translation of indoor

decorum outside, a residual danger appears to have remained. Impropriety

permeates the picnic. Tellingly, Luce Giard equates the picnic blanket with

the bed sheet, arguing that

> the luncheon on the grass, with its softly stretched-out bodies that
>
> allow themselves to be seen under the seductive veil of clothes,
>
> with its guests who allow themselves double entendres that would
>
> be unacceptable in an austere dining room, this meal encourages
>
> one, through the rural sweetness of its absence of decorum, to
>
> consider the possibility of another kind of intimacy. It is already
>
> rather cleverly lascivious – it speaks to the guests of something
>
> else, another proximity, another feast.[185]

This 'possibility of another kind of intimacy' is made powerfully apparent in

perhaps the most famous of all nineteenth-century picnic paintings: Edouard

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[184] Wood, Victorian Painting, p. 65.

[185] Giard, 'Plat du Jour', p. 196.

Manet's <u>Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe</u> (1862-63; Figure 20). A bourgeois

reworking of the classical Renaissance <u>fêtes champêtres</u>, Manet's image

makes manifest the links between the modern picnic, the carnivalesque and

the immodest behaviour supposedly induced by both through its depiction of

a nude woman relaxing beside two men in full dress, a picnic lunch laid out

before them. Rejected by the conservative jury of the official Salon, <u>Le</u>

<u>Déjeuner</u> went on to scandalise French society when exhibited in the Salon

des Refusés in 1863, where it was reportedly described by the Emperor,

Napoleon III, as an offence against modesty; his wife, the Empress,

supposedly could not even bring herself to look at it. Although, in Britain,

Manet's painting could be (and was) dismissed as a mere example of

continental decadence, it was not quite so easy to dispel the residual fears

surrounding outside consumption in Victorian culture. The sort of anxieties

generated by <u>Le Déjeuner</u>, with its exterior setting and explicit equation of

food and immorality, morphed into a more concrete fear of the possibility of

improper relations prospering at picnics in 'real life'.

Representations have a curious habit of actively constructing the

realities they are supposed passively to reflect. In 1887, a 'mixed picnic' for

the male and female students of Cardiff University was permitted to take

place at Caerphilly Castle, South Wales: its participants are shown in Figure

21. A year later, however, the University issued a revised policy with regard

to such excursions, stating:

> All entertainments in which both men and women students take
>
> part are attended with certain risks but ... these dangers become
>
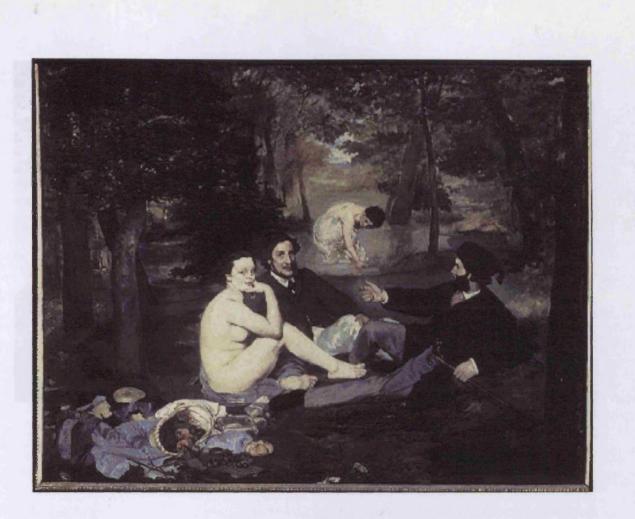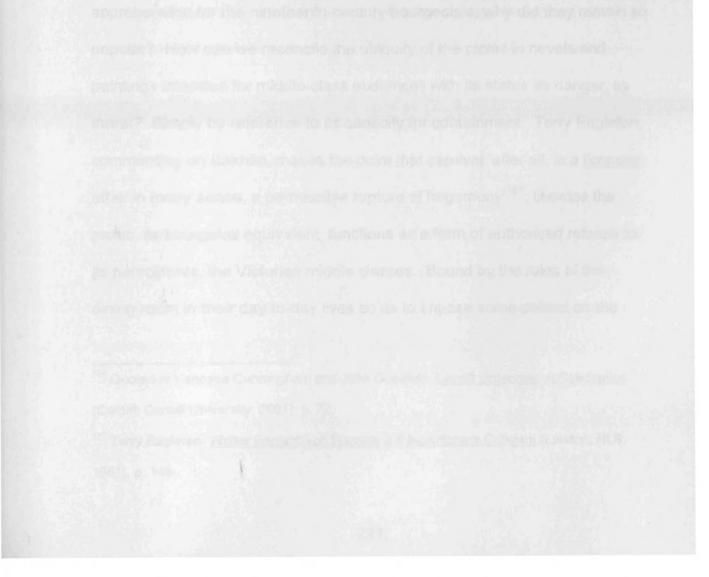> much greater when the amusement takes the form of a pic-nic, as

Figure 20: <u>Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe</u>, Edouard Manet (1862-63), Musée

D'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 21: Photograph of Cardiff University students on a 'mixed picnic',
Caerphilly (1887), Cardiff University.

the unrestrained intercourse during a long walk makes it difficult

for those ladies who act as chaperones to exercise sufficient

vigilance.[186]

What might have happened on the 1887 picnic? We will never know, as the

(presumably scandalous) details were suppressed by the University

authorities. We do know, however, that, as a result of the 'difficulties'

experienced by the hapless chaperones, further mixed outings among

students were banned. In Victorian culture, picnics and propriety evidently

did not mix.

Transgression: Outside In

If instances of outside eating, and picnics in particular, were matters of such

apprehension for the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, why did they remain so

popular? How can we reconcile the ubiquity of the picnic in novels and

paintings intended for middle-class audiences with its status as danger, as

threat? Simply by reference to its capacity for containment. Terry Eagleton,

commenting on Bakhtin, makes the point that carnival 'after all, is a <u>licensed</u>

affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony'[187]; likewise the

picnic, its bourgeios equivalent, functions as a form of authorised release for

its participants, the Victorian middle classes. Bound by the rules of the

dining room in their day-to-day lives so as to impose some control on the

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[186] Quoted in Vanessa Cunningham and John Goodwin, <u>Cardiff University: A Celebration</u>

(Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2001), p. 72.

[187] Terry Eagleton, <u>Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism</u> (London: NLB,

1981), p. 148.

ambivalent act of eating, the bourgeois were furnished on the picnic

excursion with an outlet for indecorous behaviour, an opportunity to indulge

in the sort of disorderly acts against which they defined themselves at other

times, without disrupting the social hierarchy in any significant way. For, by

displacing the danger inherent in consumption <u>outside</u> the family home, the

Victorians were able to preserve the sanctity of that space, as well as the

validity of the inside/outside dichotomy on which their social status and

discursive dominance were predicated. The picnic serves as a legitimate

location for disorder and, accordingly, its associated disruption is usually

comical in nature and inevitably imbued with the promise of future resolution.

Yet the fact that the picnic, in its symbolic function, was deemed

necessary at all belies Victorian culture's confidence in its ability to

segregate inside and outside spaces, their concomitant values and social

distinctions. The picnic in nineteenth-century representation can be read as

the symptom of a cultural anxiety regarding the potential for outer disorder to

transgress the 'secure' borders of the bourgeois family home and infiltrate

the orderly environment of the dining room, for, on closer examination, this

interior space is not as impregnable as it at first seems. Earlier in the

chapter, Frith's <u>Many Happy Returns</u> was offered up as the epitome of

Victorian domestic order by virtue of its reliance upon spatial and social

segregation. The sense of safety and familial harmony identified in the

painting is augmented further by the supplementary knowledge that Frith

used his own family as models, figuring himself as the head of the

household: the security of the depicted dining room is fortified by the fact

that its occupants, in 'real life', come from the inner sanctum of Victorian

bourgeois society. Almost. For a rogue elment is present to upset the

happy equilibrium of the image. The grandfather, seated at the extreme

right of the painting, is based not upon a member of the artist's family, nor

even a member of the middle classes, but rather an old man discovered by

Frith in the workhouse.[188] In this light, it is significant that he appears at the

edge of the picture, in a peripheral position similar to that occupied by the

maid; even in the fictional realm of representation, outsiders are forbidden

access to the inner world of the family dining table, that microcosm of the

Victorian social order.

The anxiety of infiltration evinced in Many Happy Returns permeates

other nineteenth-century genres, too. One of the stock characters to feature

in the satirical publication Punch was that of the local greengrocer hired to

wait at dinner parties in households lacking a permanent butler. A cartoon

from 1874, in which a child recognises the new 'butler' to comic effect

(Figure 22), and an article from 1850, entitled 'The Greengrocer who Waits

at Parties', suggest the incongruity and sense of disruption engendered by

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[188] In his autobiography, Frith writes, 'The grandfather in "The Birthday" was a man who had

seen better days, and found refuge in the workhouse for his old age'. He adds, 'I am

indebted to the workhouse for some very good elderly models', but notes regretfully that 'the

freedom with which artists were allowed to select sitters from the "asylum of poverty" no

longer exists'. Significantly, the unavailability of workhouse models is attributed to their

predilection for disorderly spaces and outside consumption: 'the reason given us', Frith

claims, 'is the impossibility of the "inmates", whether male or female, being able to pass the

public-house on their homeward route, without leaving there much of their sitting-money in

exchange for drink'. William Powell Frith, My Autobiography and Reminiscences (London:

Richard Bentley, 1887), Vol. I, p. 263.

AN INTERPELLATION.

Master Dick (his "first appearance" at "a dinner-party," and puzzled by the strange Waiter—the Greengrocer of the neighbourhood). "'MA, HAS 'PA BOUGHT THAT MAN, OR ON'Y HIRED HIM !!!'"

Figure 22: Cartoon from <u>Punch</u>, 66 (1874), p. 94.

the appearance of this 'outside' agent within the family home. 'Call on him to-morrow,' <u>Punch</u> directs:

> Catch him behind his apron, and you will not recognize in the soiled hands that are playing at marbles with the potatoes, the BEAU BRUMMEL of the Berlins who helped you so gracefully to blanc-mange the evening before.[189]

Although, in the late nineteenth century, the engagement of professional caterers to assist with large dinner parties became fashionable practice and, in certain cases, a sign of distinction (one Rosa Lewis built a highly successful reputation from organising social gatherings for luminaries such as Lady Randolph Churchill), the introduction of alien figures into the bourgeois dining room remained a source of considerable concern, as the examples from <u>Punch</u> suggest.

The serious implications of transgressive invasions into the family home are made clear in <u>Vanity Fair</u>, where the unsegregated seating arrangements at Sir Pitt Crawley's dinner table pave the way for governess Becky Sharp's opportunist infiltration into his family. The lack of ceremony and order with which Sir Pitt takes his meals is signalled early in the text: at his London residence, the Baronet shares his table with Tinker, the charwoman, much to Becky's astonishment.[190] When her own time comes to dine with the Crawley family, Becky avails herself of the opportunity to charm Sir Pitt's son, the enraptured Rawdon. Sir Pitt himself is similarly enthralled and later proposes to Miss Sharp, to the horror of his family.

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[189] 'The Greengrocer who Waits at Parties', <u>Punch</u>, 18 (1850), p. 72.

[190] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p.105.

However, as she has already pledged herself to Rawdon in secret, Becky's eventual entrance into society is made in the guise of Mrs, rather than Lady, Crawley – a scandalous infiltration, nonetheless.

More discomforting than the manifest invasion of outer elements into the Victorian dining room was the prospect of something of the abject-outside existing already within its walls. In The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White make the point that nineteenth-century culture worked primarily to encode 'all that which the proper bourgeois must strive not to be in order to preserve a stable and "correct" sense of self'.[191] Yet, in spite of the presence of such well-defined limits, a worrying sense of the untenability of this logic of exclusion remained. The unspoken fear of nineteenth-century culture – the always-already presence of the outside inside – finds its expression in a text rejected as immoral by the critics of its time: No Name. The novel begins with a happy, bourgeois family, the Vanstones, gathered around their breakfast table, chatting merrily about the entertainments of the night before; all is harmonious and convivial, the textual equivalent of Frith's Many Happy Returns. The arrival of the morning post, however, shatters the fragile security of the Vanstones' domestic world: a letter from New Orleans causes the normally imperturbable Mr Vanstone to pale and his wife to flush. The contents of the letter are kept secret from the couple's two daughters, Norah and Magdalen, as well as the reader. Its impact, however, is immediately felt:

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[191] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 178. ˋ

For the first time, perhaps, in their lives, the family sat round the

breakfast-table in painful silence. Mr. Vanstone's hearty morning

appetite, like his hearty morning spirits, was gone. He absently

broke off some morsels of dry toast from the rack near him,

absently finished his first cup of tea – then asked for a second,

which he left before him untouched.[192]

The cause of this domestic disruption is later revealed: Mr Vanstone is

married, but not to the woman who currently lives with him as his wife. The

purpose of the letter at breakfast was to notify him of the death of his legal

spouse, an American whom he had imprudently married during his youth.

Although, after its receipt, steps are taken to rectify the situation, the

untimely deaths of both Mr and Mrs Vanstone render their (now cognisably

illegitimate) children homeless, penniless and, most significantly in the eyes

of Magdalen, nameless. As the lawyer, Mr Pendril, informs their governess,

'Mr. Vanstone's daughters are Nobody's Children .... The accident of their

father having been married, when he first met with their mother, has made

them the outcasts of the whole social community'.[193] Thus, even in their

happiest (and, ostensibly, most respectable) moments, the Vanstone girls

have been 'outsiders' around their own breakfast table. The invulnerability

of the dining room as space of consumption is blasted by the exposure of

that which Victorian culture designates at 'other', as outer, within its very

confines.

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[192] Collins, No Name, pp. 19-20.

[193] Collins, No Name, pp. 138-39.

The middle-class dining room, then, far from representing a space of safety opposed to the club, the restaurant and the street, constitutes a transgressive domain where the limits of bourgeois identity are called radically into question. As Michel Foucault suggests, where transgression displays the 'flash of its passage',

> the limit opens violently onto the limitless, finds itself suddenly carried away by the content it had rejected and fulfilled by this alien plenitude which invades it to the core of its being. Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes.[194]

Or perhaps even 'to recognize itself for the first time', for it is not its guarantee of security but its very penetrability, the ever-present promise of violation, that constitutes the structure of the limit.[195] There is no limit without transgression; similarly, there is no transgression without limits. The boundaries of nineteenth-century cultural identity, encapsulated, for the middle classes, within the four walls of the family dining room, are at once necessary and untenable in Victorian representation. The 'inside' of bourgeois domesticity, with its emphasis on order, regulation and control, can exist only in relation to an 'outside' which, paradoxically, proves to be its undoing, revealing itself, disconcertingly, within that to which it is officially

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[194] Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 29-52 (pp. 33-34).

[195] Foucault, 'Preface to Transgression', p. 34.

opposed. The limits of nineteenth-century bourgeois respectability, tied

inextricably in representational practice to spaces of consumption, as well as

the act of eating itself, are simultaneously exposed and called into question

by the transgression of these spaces, the discovery within them of that which

should properly be excluded. 'Eating in' and 'eating out' exist in Victorian

representation not as distinct acts tied to fixed territories but rather as liminal

activities where discursive hierarchies are interrogated and the spectre of

the reviled, but necessary other is always present at the feast.

Chapter 3 – 'Eating the Other': Food, Race and Cultural Identity

While feasting her eyes upon the paintings displayed in a foreign art gallery,

Lucy Snowe, the habitually cool and impassive heroine of Charlotte Brontë's

Villette (1853), is excited to a momentary state of zealous indignation by the

portrait of an exotic female. It represents, she tells the reader,

> a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated
>
> that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude suitable for the
>
> reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from
>
> fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed:
>
> very much butcher's meat – to say nothing of bread, vegetables,
>
> and liquids – must she have consumed to attain that breadth and
>
> height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-
>
> reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad
>
> daylight blazed round her; she appeared in hearty health, strong
>
> enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a
>
> weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting
>
> bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a
>
> sofa.

Lucy continues:

> She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown
>
> covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance
>
> of material – seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery –
>
> she managed to make inefficient raiment .... On referring to the

catalogue, I found that this notable production bore the name 'Cleopatra'.[1]

Significantly, much of Lucy's invective against 'this dusk and portly Venus of the Nile' is phrased in terms of food or the language of consumption: the implicitly orientalised Cleopatra of the painting is to be condemned primarily, it seems, for the excessive nature of her bodily appetites.[2]

Such an association of food and 'otherness' is by no means unique or original. In linking racial identity with excessive consumption, Lucy Snowe draws upon a myth of widespread cultural currency in nineteenth-century Britain – namely, that the non-white, non-Western peoples of the world can be characterised by an unrestrained appetite for food that betrays their essentially carnal nature, and thus justifies their colonisation by the cerebral empire-builders of the West. Furthermore, according to this mythology, the gluttonous desire displayed by oriental figures such as the Cleopatra signifies a (distinctly non-British) love of luxury and a predisposition to indulge in other sins of the flesh: notably, Lucy's insistence upon the indecent pose and insufficient apparel of the painting's subject conflates racial and cultural identity with actual and sexual appetite. Food, then, for Lucy, as for many characters in nineteenth-century fiction, functions as a versatile signifier by which to convey the supposedly edacious and lascivious nature of the other, an efficacious means of suggesting the failure of non-

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[1] Charlotte Brontë, Villette, eds. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (1853; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 250.

[2] Brontë, Villette, p. 256.

white races, in particular, to elevate the strictures of the mind above the desires of the body.

It would be wrong to infer from this reading, however, that the racial other features in nineteenth-century representation only as a consumer of comestibles. Lucy's own suggestion that, instead of whiling away the afternoon on a sofa, the Cleopatra should undertake the work of 'two plain cooks' reveals a second way in which Victorian Britain conceived of the other in relation to food: as harvester or producer. For much of the nineteenth century (and, indeed, beyond), people of non-white racial origin or 'foreign' cultural background were involved, both directly and indirectly, in the preparation of food for the British nation (for example, as workers on colonial plantations or as domestic servants in the employ of grand country houses). This, Lucy appears to intimate, is a more suitable relationship for such subjects to maintain with regard to food: as the inherent inferiors of white, Western colonisers, 'others', like the Cleopatra, should refrain from excessive consumption in order to fulfil a more fitting, subservient role.

Yet, if Lucy's tirade against the 'huge, dark-complexioned gipsy-queen' of the painting situates the racial other as both consumer and producer, her own visual consumption of this Orientalist image suggests that its exotic 'mulatto' fulfils another function in relation to food: that of consumable.[3] The sustained reference to the 'affluence of flesh' on display in the picture indicates that, for Lucy, the Cleopatra resembles the very 'butcher's meat' she is accused of having eaten. In an act of unwitting hypocrisy, Lucy gorges herself upon the vision of the Egyptian queen while

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[3] Brontë, Villette, pp. 251\ 258.

simultaneously condemning the latter's gluttonous appetite. Furthermore, by sharing her visual feast with the reader, Lucy renders Brontë's audience complicit in her act of consumption, transforming the status of the Cleopatra, in one swift move, from 'eater' to that of 'eaten'.

Consumer, producer, consumable: as this brief analysis has shown, those who differ from the hegemonic norm sustain a series of connections with food in nineteenth-century representation. And while the tools of oppression used to subdue the Victorian 'other' (a gloriously discordant amalgam of racial, political, cultural and geographical difference, caught up in a single signifier of alterity) vary dramatically according to such factors as time and place, a certain pattern of conformity emerges regarding its representational relationship to eatables and acts of consumption.[4] By examining some further presentations of food, race and cultural difference, this chapter will explore nineteenth-century society's overwhelming desire to 'eat the other', along with its concomitant fear of the consequences of doing so, and, in this way, expose the power relations inherent in portraying identity in terms of food.

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[4] In this chapter, I use the term 'other' in connection with people of various racial and cultural origins: Europeans, Africans, Indians, Australian Aboriginals. In doing so, I acknowledge that the lived experiences of these nineteenth-century subjects differed greatly according to their individual circumstances; I do not wish to imply that all colonised nations experienced the effects of imperialism in the same way, nor that the lives of an African-born slave and an Irish labourer, for example, were exactly equivalent. However, I do believe that a certain contiguity exists in the way these disparate peoples were represented in relation to food in nineteenth-century British culture, and it is upon this representational accordance that my thesis will focus.

Food and Cultural Identity

Eclecticism, according to theorist Jean-François Lyotard, 'is the degree zero of contemporary general culture':[5] we live in an age characterised by diversity, and nowhere is this postmodern proliferation of choice more evident than in the arena of food. Today, one can enjoy an 'authentic' Indian meal in London, 'traditional' Japanese sushi in New York, and the ubiquitous McDonald's hamburger virtually anywhere in the world (or so it seems). What we eat need no longer correspond to where we live; this, however, was not always the case.

The current vogue for 'authentic' international cuisine was made possible, to a large extent, by the improvements in shipping witnessed during the late nineteenth century. During this period of free trade, more and more of Britain's food supply originated abroad, rendering the development of quicker, more efficient methods of transportation imperative. The construction of newer, faster vessels ensured that perishable goods from the colonies could be transported to Britain in minimal time, while advances in refrigeration techniques meant that, by the 1880s, even meat could be imported, frozen, from such faraway lands as Australia and Argentina. Improved methods of communication via steamships and rail contrived to bring exciting, fresh tropical produce – pineapples, bananas, citrus fruits and coconuts – to the dinner tables of Victorian society.[6] In this way,

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[5] Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?', in The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985 (London: Turnaround, 1992), pp. 9-25 (p. 17).

[6] For further information regarding improvements in transportation and their effects upon British diet in the late Victorian era, see John Burnett, Plenty and Want: A Social History of

technological advancements furnished British consumers with opportunities

to taste the sort of exotic fare that had previously been the exclusive

preserve of travellers abroad.

References to this enhanced access to foreign produce find their way

into the representation of the time. When Walter Gay departs for Barbados

in Dombey and Son (1848), he promises to send his uncle 'ship-loads' of

'lively turtles, and limes ... and preserves ... and all that sort of thing'.[7]

Joseph Nash's illustration, Colonial Produce, meanwhile, depicts a scene

from the Great Exhibition of 1851, in which Victorian families stroll around

stalls filled with foods from the colonies, such as sugar cane, melons and

pineapples (Figure 23). A cartoon from Punch, dated 1873, suggests the

popularity of such exotic fruits among the middle and upper classes, while

simultaneously satirising the social ambitions of newly-prosperous members

of the working classes: set in a greengrocer's shop, it depicts a 'lady' politely

disputing the price of a pineapple and a 'successful collier' offering a

sovereign for the same article, on condition that the grocer tells him how to

cook it (Figure 24). Although (as the cartoon suggests) not the habitual fare

of the lower classes, tropical fruits were much sought-after among the

aristocracy, to the extent that some members of the landed gentry attempted

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Food in England from 1815 to the Present Day, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 115-

19, and Annette Hope, Londoners' Larder: English Cuisine from Chaucer to the Present

(Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1990), pp. 116-19.

[7] Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son, ed. Peter Fairclough (1848; London: Penguin, 1970),

p. 331.

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Figure 23: <u>Colonial Produce</u>, Joseph Nash (1852), Museum of London.

FROM THE COAL DISTRICTS.

My Lady. "I'M AFRAID I MUST GIVE UP THE PINE-APPLE, MR. GREEN! EIGHT SHILLINGS IS *REALLY* TOO MUCH!"
Successful Collier. "JUST PUT 'UN UP FOR ME, THEN, MASTER. 'ERE'S 'ARF A SOVEREIGN; AND LOOK 'ERE—YER MAY KEEP THE CHANGE IF YER'LL ONLY' TELL US 'OW TO COOK 'UN!"
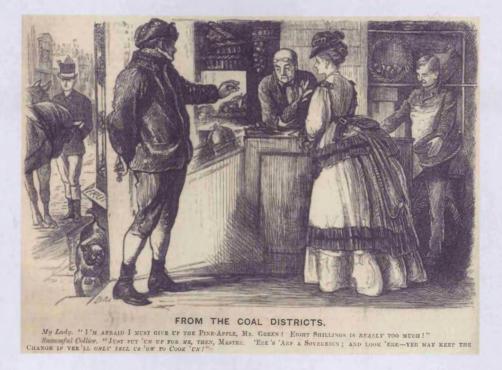
Figure 24: Cartoon from <u>Punch</u>, 65 (1873), p. 164.

to cultivate their own in specially-constructed hothouses.[8] In <u>Northanger</u>

<u>Abbey</u> (1818), General Tilney proudly displays his 'pinery' (a building where

pineapples were grown) to visiting guests.[9]

For those unable to grow their own exotic produce, efficient transport

links between home and the colonies proved invaluable. By the end of the

century, luxuries from far-flung locations were readily available at British

dinner tables. When Dr Aziz, a character in E. M. Forster's <u>A Passage to</u>

<u>India</u> (1924), suggests that the sweet-tasting mangoes of the sub-continent

could be used as a means to persuade visitors to extend their stay there, his

friend Mr Fielding replies, 'Even mangoes can be got in England now ....

They ship them in ice-cold rooms. You can make India in England

apparently, just as you can make England in India'. Yet, as Miss Quested, a

visitor to India, makes clear in her response to this statement, to do so is, in

both cases, 'frightfully expensive'.[10] Access to the fruits of empire, even in

the early years of the twentieth century, depended largely upon one's ability

to pay for it.

Prior to the Victorian era, what was consumed depended almost

entirely on what was produced, or could be bought, locally. Even staple

items such as bread varied according to region: throughout the eighteenth

century, the brown household loaf consumed by agricultural labourers in the

northern and western counties of England was invariably made from barley,

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[8] Henry Mayhew confirms that, initially, 'the sale for pines was chiefly among "the gentry"'.
<u>London Labour and the London Poor</u> (1851; London: Frank Cass, 1967), Vol. I, p. 84.

[9] Jane Austen, <u>Northanger Abbey</u>, ed. Marylin Butler (1818; London: Penguin, 1995), p.
155.

[10] E. M. Forster, <u>A Passage to India</u> (1924; London: Penguin, 1979), p. 62.

rye and oats, whereas wheat grain was more often used in home baking by

the dwellers of the south.[11] With production and consumption tied so

intrinsically to geographical location, it is hardly surprising to find that certain

places became associated with particular types of food, both at local and

national level. What is more interesting to note, however, is the way in which

the association of food and territory expanded to include connections

between the inhabitants of certain localities and their perceived regional

character: the nineteenth century was a time when a number of myths were

established and consolidated regarding food, race and cultural identity.

Of course, many of the links between food and national character

propagated during the Victorian era remain common today. The figure of the

famous roast-beef-eating yeoman, John Bull, is still recognisable as the

epitome of a certain type of Britishness, much as he was for the writers and

cartoonists of the nineteenth century. Originally created by John Arbuthnot

for a series of pamphlets published in 1712, John Bull enjoyed a new wave

of popularity in the nineteenth century, particularly during the aftermath of

the Napoleonic Wars, when his image was used to stir up national sentiment

against France. A favourite of Punch, Arbuthnot's creation also features in

Brontë's Villette, where he is affectionately invoked by Mrs Bretton with

reference to her son, John Graham. 'Has he not rather the air of an incipient

John Bull?' the old lady teases, adding, 'he used to be slender as an eel, and

now I fancy in him a sort of heavy-dragoon bent – a beef-eater tendency'.[12]

William Makepeace Thackeray, too, makes semi-affectionate, semi-satirical

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[11] See Burnett, Plenty and Want, p. 4.

[12] Brontë, Villette, p. 233. \

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reference to the 'beef-eating British' in <u>Vanity Fair</u> (1848).[13] During a tour

abroad, the novel's inveterate gourmand, Jos Sedley, declares with a sigh

that 'for good streaky beef, really mingled with fat and lean, there [is] no

country like England'.[14] On his return home from Bengal, he tests out his

hypothesis by heading straight for the Royal George Hotel, where, the

narrator notes, 'the sight of [the] magnificent round of beef ... which

perennially [greets] the eyes' of returning travellers is 'so invigorating and

delightful, that a man ... might well like to stop some days there'.[15] In the

case of roast beef, it seems, Jos's prodigious appetite is accorded a degree

of textual sanction.

Yet the nineteenth-century association of beef and Britishness did not

stem simply from a national predilection for that food, as Ben Rogers points

out in <u>Beef and Liberty: Roast Beef, John Bull and the English Nation</u>.

Although the English middle and upper classes have long been portrayed as

great beef-eaters (since the sixteenth century, travellers to the country have

commented on the 'extraordinary' quantity of animal flesh consumed

there[16]), the link between Britishness and roast beef represents something

more than an incidental symbol of nationhood. Beef signifies a cultural

identity: coded as plain, hearty and unpretentious, it embodies the supposed

virtues of those who consume it. During the nineteenth century, and

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[13] William Makepeace Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, ed. J. I. M. Stewart (1848; London: Penguin,

1968), p. 82.

[14] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 327.

[15] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 670.

[16] Quoted in Ben Rogers, <u>Beef and Liberty: Roast Beef, John Bull and the English Nation</u>

(London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), p. 11.

specifically in the period following the Napoleonic Wars, this aspect of roast

beef consumption was of particular importance: meat-eating came to

symbolise the unaffected stoicism of the British nation and was contrasted

with the effete epicurism of the French. In her Book of Household

Management (1861), Mrs Beeton confirms:

> Roast beef has long been a national dish in England. In most of
>
> our patriotic songs it is contrasted with the fricasseed [sic] frogs,
>
> popularly supposed to be the exclusive diet of Frenchmen.
>
> 'O the roast beef of old England,
>
> And O the old English roast beef.'
>
> This national chorus is appealed to whenever a song-writer
>
> wishes to account for the valour displayed by Englishmen at sea
>
> or on land.[17]

Food, in the nineteenth century, was the focus of a fierce patriotism. The

fact that, in reality, many of the poorest members of the British population

could afford to eat meat no more than once a week (and then in all

probability bacon because of its relative cheapness in comparison with the

prohibitively-priced joint of beef) was of no consequence: the power of myth

renders historical 'truth' irrelevant, and so the British became known as 'les

rosbifs', meat-eaters whose cultural disposition was echoed in their diet.[18]

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[17] Isabella Beeton, Beeton's Book of Household Management (1861; London: Chancellor

Press, 1994), p. 307.

[18] Burnett quotes the Victorian agricultural economist, James Caird, who commented in

1880 that 'thirty years ago not more than one-third of the people of this country consumed

animal produce more than once a week'. See Plenty and Want, p. 11.

Other nations, too, came to be characterised by what they ate at this time. The French, according to nineteenth-century stereotype, were sophisticated gourmands whose over-refined cookery revealed their decadent, dandified nature; tellingly, in an 1824 letter to his future wife Jane Welsh, Thomas Carlyle describes Paris as a 'land of fops and pastry-cooks'.[19] The Italians, meanwhile, were characterised by a salacious sexuality. Drawing upon a paper on the history of ice cream in Scotland, Sidney Mintz suggests that the early inclination of Glaswegians to associate ice cream with immorality can be attributed to the fact that the pioneers of ice cream retailing in Glasgow were Italians.[20] Here, the character of the food – sweet, creamy, enticing – is conflated with the supposed character of the people – luxurious, extravagant, sexual – in such a way that the one becomes inextricably tied to the other.

The nineteenth century, then, was a time when a number of stereotypes connecting culinary and cultural identity were forged in the popular imagination. In some cases, these associations were positive, and came to be adopted by the group or nation in question as a means of self-affirmation; at other times, they were disparaging, an articulation of the

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[19] Thomas Carlyle to Jane Welsh, 28 October 1824, in The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle, eds. Charles Richard Sanders and Kenneth J. Fielding (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1970), Vol. 3, p. 178.

[20] Sidney W. Mintz, Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 74.

difference between one culture and an (implicitly inferior) other.[21] More

often, however, culinary stereotypes involved a combination of meanings, as

in the case of Britishness and beef: here, the link between food and nation

was adopted proudly by the native people as a symbol of their strength and

resolve, at the same time that the appellation 'les rosbifs' was applied

mockingly to the British as a term of abuse by the French. Whether used

positively or negatively, however, by the nineteenth century, food had

become firmly established as a signifier of cultural identity: for the Victorians,

what you ate corresponded infallibly with who you were.

Food and the Cultural Other: The Irish

The tendency to articulate alterity in terms of food came to bear on one

nation in particular in nineteenth-century representation; although

geographically proximate and, since the 1800 Act of Union, politically bound,

Ireland and the Irish were portrayed as other to the British mainland and its

inhabitants in contemporary art and literature. As with the French and

Italians, the primary signifier of this cultural difference was an item of food:

the Irish were inextricably associated with the potato, its cultivation and

consumption, in the British popular imagination.

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[21] As Allison James points out, food is one of the primary forms through which notions of

otherness are asserted: 'Simple equations such as "we eat meat, they don't", "we eat horse,

they don't", "they eat insects, we don't", affirm, in shared patterns of consumption and

shared notions of edibility, our difference from others'. Allison James, 'How British is British

Food?', in Food, Health and Identity, ed. Pat Caplan (London and New York: Routledge,

1997), pp. 71-86 (p. 72).

So easily understood was this culinary affiliation, its representation required no prior explanation or mediation in the texts and images of the period. When the egotistical George Osborne is disinherited by his father in Vanity Fair, he tells his friend Dobbin that he is unsuited to a life of penury, qualifying his claim with the declaration: 'I wasn't brought up on ... potatoes, like old O'Dowd', the major of his regiment.[22] In Charlotte Brontë's Shirley (1849), meanwhile, Mr Malone, the curate of Briarfield, is said to speak 'in a tone which ... proclaims him at once a native of the land of shamrocks and potatoes'.[23] In each of these cases, the Irishness of the character under discussion is not cited explicitly, nor need it be: a casual reference to the potato is more than sufficient to signify to readers the Celtic cultural origins of both O'Dowd and Malone.

The link between potatoes and the Irish has a long history. First introduced to the country some time in the seventeenth century, the potato quickly became Ireland's major food crop, a source of sustenance and income for the nation's many agricultural labourers. The potato blight of 1845, which ruined successive harvests and plunged much of the population into abject poverty and starvation, reinforced the affiliation between nation and vegetable in the minds of the British people. Yet, it was not only as producers but also as consumers of potatoes that the Irish were renowned: 'their food consists of potatoes and potatoes only', Frederick Engels declares in The Condition of the Working-Class in England (1845), a sentiment

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[22] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 290.

[23] Charlotte Brontë, Shirley, eds. Andrew and Judith Hook (1849; London: Penguin, 1974), p. 41.

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shared by Henry Mayhew, who suggests in <u>London Labour and the London</u> <u>Poor</u> (1851) that Irish immigrants frequently feed on potatoes for both breakfast and dinner.[24]

Even cookery manuals, such as Eliza Acton's <u>Modern Cookery for</u> <u>Private Families</u> (1855), reveal an unconscious association of Ireland and the potato. Under the sub-heading, 'Potatoes: Remarks on their properties and importance', Acton asserts that the potato '<u>must</u> be very nutritious' or else 'it would not sustain the strength of thousands of people whose almost sole food it constitutes'. It may not be advisable 'to depend for subsistence on a root of which the crop unhappily is so frequently in these days destroyed or greatly injured by disease', she adds,

> but we can easily comprehend the predilection of an entire people
>
> for a tuber which combines, like the potato, the solidity almost of
>
> bread, with the healthful properties of various other fresh
>
> vegetables, without their acidity.[25]

Although this passage makes no direct reference to Ireland and the Irish, its allusions to the prevalence of potato-eating among an 'entire people' and the devastating impact of disease in the potato crop would have automatically signalled 'Irishness' to contemporary readers. And if the trace of Irishness is not obvious enough in this section of <u>Modern Cookery</u>, the next, how 'To boil

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[24] Frederick Engels, <u>The Condition of the Working-Class in England</u> (1845), in <u>Karl Marx</u> <u>and Frederick Engels: Collected Works</u> (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), Vol. 4, pp. 265-596 (p. 390); Mayhew, <u>London Labour</u>, p. 113.

[25] Eliza Acton, <u>Modern Cookery for Private Families</u> (1855; Lewes: Southover Press, 1993), p. 267.

potatoes: as in Ireland', makes plain the correlation between foodstuff and nation.[26]

There is, however, some residual ambiguity in Acton's text. Potatoes were a staple item in the diet of almost all British workers in the mid-nineteenth century, regardless of nationality. As Acton points out, they were 'cheap, wholesome and satisfying'; the reference to the 'thousands of people' who consume them, therefore, could pertain to the working classes in general, as opposed to the Irish in particular.[27] Engels acknowledges the ubiquity of the potato at the tables of British urban workers, especially in households where money is limited. 'The habitual food of the individual working-man naturally varies according to his wages', he states, elaborating,

> where wages are less, meat is used only two or three times a week, and the proportion of bread and potatoes increases. Descending gradually, we find the animal food reduced to a small piece of bacon cut up with the potatoes; lower still, even this disappears, and there remain only bread, cheese, porridge, and potatoes.[28]

Yet, after admitting the prevalence of potatoes in the British working-class diet, Engels goes on to re-affiliate the vegetable with the Irish population: 'on the lowest round of the ladder', he affirms, 'among the Irish, potatoes form the sole food'.[29]

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[26] Acton, <u>Modern Cookery</u>, p. 267.

[27] Acton, <u>Modern Cookery</u>, p. 267.

[28] Engels, <u>Condition of the Working-Class</u>, p. 372.

[29] Engels, <u>Condition of the Working-Class</u>, p. 372.

The persistence with which references to the Irish and potatoes occur in nineteenth-century writing suggests that the two enjoyed a special relationship in the contemporary cultural consciousness which exceeded the simple association of producer with produce, consumer with consumable. If food functions like a language, sustaining and signifying manifold meanings, then the connotations attached to the potato seem to have been used by nineteenth-century writers to convey something specific about the Irish cultural identity. This is certainly the case in Cottage Economy (1823), where author William Cobbett conflates the supposed qualities of the potato with the presumed attributes of the Irish national character in order to assert, and justify, his antipathy to both. Designating the potato 'Ireland's lazy root', Cobbett urges British agricultural labours to abandon this article of fare in favour of home baking and the traditional household loaf.[30] His hostility towards the potato seems to stem directly from its connection to the Irish and, by extension, poverty. 'The misery and degradation of the Irish [are] chiefly owing to the use of the potatoe [sic] as the almost sole food of the people', he proclaims, adding elsewhere, 'its cultivation has increased in England with the increase of the paupers'.[31] His aversion to the Irish, meanwhile, by a process of circular reasoning, emanates from their presumed preference for potatoes: 'Ireland's lazy root', according to Cobbett, 'is the root, also, of slovenliness, filth, misery, and slavery'.[32] The appellation 'lazy' is used in conjunction with the potato throughout Cobbett's

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[30] William Cobbett, Cottage Economy (1823; Bromyard: Landsman, 1974), p. 79.

[31] Cobbett, Cottage Economy, pp. 81, 62.

[32] Cobbett, Cottage Economy, p. 62.

work because, in the opinion of the author, the vegetable is not only easy to cultivate, but also easy to cook, requiring no particular 'skill in [its] preparation'.[33] In Cottage Economy, a self-fulfilling logic is at work: the potato is a 'lazy root' because it requires little effort to produce or prepare and is the chosen crop of the 'lazy' Irish, and the Irish are a lazy race because of their preference for the potato.

This confluence of food and 'inherent' national character held widespread implications, not least for the many immigrant workers in mainland Britain, regarding whom a number of contradictory myths were in circulation. Condemned for their indubitable indolence, Irish labourers were at the same time criticised for their eagerness to take on unskilled work for meagre pay.[34] Mayhew's account of a visit to Rosemary Lane, an area of London much populated by the Irish, exemplifies this inconsistent attitude. He states:

> The one thing that struck me during my visit to this neighbourhood,
> was the apparent listlessness and lazy appearance of the people
> .... And yet it is curious that these people, who here seemed as
> inactive as negroes, will perform the severest bodily labour,
> undertaking tasks that the English are almost unfitted for.[35]

At once lazy and willing to assume arduous, physically-demanding work, the Irish are subject to 'a defined cultural antipathy' in Victorian writing, as Neil

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[33] Cobbett, Cottage Economy, p. 59.

[34] This practice, according to Engels, engendered competition among workers, depressed wages and degraded the position of the English working classes. See Condition of the Working-Class, p. 392.

[35] Henry Mayhew, London Labour, p. 111.

McCaw points out.[36] In Elizabeth Gaskell's North and South (1855), this antipathy is transformed into violent rage when Mr Thornton's striking workforce storm the gates of Marlborough Mill in order to protest over the nameless, faceless Irish hands who have been imported to take their places. Although the howling mob is demonised in Gaskell's text (its yells are compared to 'the demoniac desire of some terrible wild beast'), its members are also accorded a degree of textual understanding: Margaret Hale, the novel's heroine, can easily comprehend why the Milton men, 'gaunt as wolves ... with starving children at home' are 'enraged beyond measure at discovering that Irishmen [have been] brought in to rob their little ones of bread'.[37]

The emotive language used in this part of North and South confers an element of nobility onto the English workers: though starving, the strikers will not degrade themselves by agreeing to work for the sort of pitiful wages and poor conditions tolerated by the immigrant Irish, the text seems to imply. The notion that Irish workers were content to abase themselves by accepting demeaning work or, alternatively, charity in the form of poor relief is also expressed (with habitual contempt) by Cobbett. In his Rural Rides (1830), he compares the fortitude of the English with the fecklessness of the Irish, suggesting, 'never, in this country [England], will the people be base enough to lie down and expire from starvation under the operation of the extreme

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[36] Neil McCaw, 'Some Mid-Victorian Irishness(es): Trollope, Thackeray, Eliot', in Writing Irishness in Nineteenth-Century British Culture, ed. Neil McCaw (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 129-57 (p. 129).

[37] Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, ed. Patricia Ingham (1855; London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 175-76.

unction! Nothing but a <u>potatoe-eater</u> [sic] will ever do that'.[38] The hardiness

of English workers results from their diet, Cobbett suggests. The sight of a

turnip-hoer in Eastdean, Sussex, breakfasting on a 'good lump of household

<u>bread</u> and not a very small piece of <u>bacon</u>', incites him to exclaim:

> What sort of <u>breakfast</u> would this man have had in a mess of <u>cold</u>
>
> <u>potatoes</u>? Could he have <u>worked</u>, and worked in the wet, too, with
>
> such food? Monstrous! No society ought to exist, where the
>
> labourers live in a hog-like sort of way.[39]

The reference to 'hogs' here is significant because, for Cobbett, the potato

diet of the Irish 'is but one remove from that of the pig, and of the ill-fed pig

too'.[40] This notion was widespread in nineteenth-century culture. An

English interviewee of Mayhew in <u>London Labour</u> concurs with Cobbett's

opinion, though in rather less decorous terms: 'To — with your 'taty-pot,

they're only meat for pigs,' he reportedly curses.[41]

Not only was the potato considered pig's food, it was also thought to

engender pig-like habits. In <u>Cottage Economy</u>, Cobbett describes with

disgust the 'Irish style' of consuming the vegetable: after '[scratching] them

out of the earth with their paws', he attests, the Irish 'toss' their potatoes 'into

a pot without washing, and when boiled, turn them out upon a dirty board,

and then sit round that board, peel the skin and dirt from one at a time and

eat the inside'.[42] The suggestion of foraging, and substitution of the word

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[38] William Cobbett, <u>Rural Rides</u> (1830; London: Peter Davies, 1930), Vol. 1, p. 167.

[39] Cobbett, <u>Rural Rides</u>, p. 167.

[40] Cobbett, <u>Cottage Economy</u>, p. 58.

[41] Mayhew, <u>London Labour</u>, p. 113.

[42] Cobbett, <u>Cottage Economy</u>, p. 60.

'paws' for 'hands', here, is noteworthy: by introducing this bestial imagery into his account, Cobbett effectively intimates not only the 'slovenly and beastly' culinary habits of the Irish but also the transformative effect of the potato.[43] This 'hog-like' food transmutes the Irish consumer into the animal with which it is culturally aligned: in representational terms, the Irish <u>become</u> pigs, debased and dehumanised beasts, directly opposed to the civilised English.

Insidious allusions to the pig-like Irish pervade nineteenth-century texts. Mayhew evokes the image of immigrant workers 'huddled together like pigs' in the cargo ships which transported them from Ireland to the British mainland.[44] In similar vein, Engels contends that the living accommodation of Irish labourers is generally approximate to a 'pig-sty'.[45] Quoting from James Kay's <u>The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester</u> (1832), he alleges that in 'Little Ireland', an area of Manchester,

> a whole Irish family is often accommodated on a single bed, and sometimes a heap of filthy straw and a covering of old sacking hide them in one undistinguished heap, debased alike by penury, want of economy and dissolute habits .... To these fertile sources of disease [are] sometimes added the keeping of the pigs ... in the house, with other nuisances of the most revolting character.[46]

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[43] Cobbett, <u>Cottage Economy</u>, p. 59.

[44] Mayhew, <u>London Labour</u>, p. 112.

[45] Engels, <u>Condition of the Working-Class</u>, p. 377

[46] Engels, <u>Condition of the Working-Class</u>, p. 365.

Interestingly, this quotation is not entirely accurate, containing one small

addition to Kay's original text. According to an editorial footnote in The

Condition of the Working-Class, Engels himself appended the word 'Irish' to

the first sentence of the passage, desirous, it seems, of distinguishing

between the living conditions of bestial Irish labourers and their more

civilised English counterparts.[47]

Engels' association of Irishness and pigs, implicitly made in the

extract quoted above, is rendered explicit in a later chapter on 'Irish

Immigration', where he claims:

> The Irishman loves his pig as the Arab his horse, with the
>
> difference that he sells it when it is fat enough to kill. Otherwise,
>
> he eats and sleeps with it, his children play with it, ride upon it, roll
>
> in the dirt with it, as any one may see a thousand times repeated
>
> in all the great towns of England.[48]

The textual (and, apparently, lived) proximity of 'Irishman' and beast, as

attested to here, effectively conflates the one with the other. This

representational fusion is rendered visible in an 1881 edition of the comic

newspaper, Funny Folks, where, in a 'strikingly graphic representation' of

'The Dragon and St. George', England, in the form of its patron saint, is

depicted lying prostrate beneath rebellious Ireland, a dragon with a 'snarling

pig's head'.[49] The somewhat anomalous appearance of the pig in this

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[47] See footnote, Condition of the Working-Class, p. 365.

[48] Engels, Condition of the Working-Class, p. 391.

[49] See Michael de Nie, 'Britannia's Sick Sister: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798-

1882', in Writing Irishness, pp. 173-93 (pp. 187-88).

cartoon testifies to the ready assimilation of animal and Irish nation in the British popular imagination.

Through the consumption of 'Ireland's lazy root', a food fit only for pigs according to certain commentators, the Irish came to be characterised as lazy, slovenly and bestial – associations which had serious consequences during the Great Famine of the late 1840s, when popular opinion had a perceptible influence on public policy. According to Margaret Mead, 'so righteous was the assumed association between industriousness and food' in the minds of the Victorian ruling classes 'that, during the Irish famine, soup kitchens were set up out of town so that the starving could have the moral advantage of a long walk to receive the ration that stood between them and death'.[50] As Michael de Nie points out, 'the negative stereotypes that informed British conceptions of Ireland figured prominently in press accounts of ... Famine relief efforts' and, 'ultimately, this stereotyping served to reinforce ideas that somehow a native Irishness was ... at fault for the nation's problems'.[51] Engels certainly implies this to be the case: 'that poverty manifests itself in Ireland ... is owing to the character of the people, and to their historical development', he affirms in The Condition of the Working-Class.[52] An 1847 edition of the Spectator, meanwhile, argues that 'Ireland and England must know that the pauperism of Ireland is the direct

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[50] Margaret Mead, 'The Changing Significance of Food', in Food and Culture: A Reader, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 11-19 (p. 13).

[51] De Nie, 'Britannia's Sick Sister', p. 173.

[52] Engels, Condition of the Working-Class, p. 559.

fruit of the idleness of Ireland'.[53] In the light of Cobbett's remarks, this allegation can be seen to function on two levels, at once signifying, by metaphorical means, the 'innate' laziness of the Irish people and indirectly indicting Ireland's nutritional over-dependence upon the 'fruit of idleness', or 'Ireland's lazy root': the potato.[54] Thus, the articulation of 'Irishness' in terms of food took on a powerful complexity in the Victorian era, serving not only to signify the 'otherness' of this cultural identity but also to explain the distress of the Irish nation in the mid-nineteenth century.

Food and the Racial Other: Black Slaves and Servants

It is notable that Mayhew, in an earlier-quoted section of London Labour, compares the perceived idleness of the Irish with that of 'negroes' because, in nineteenth-century art and literature, a number of parallels existed between presentations of the black racial other and his or her Celtic counterpart. Both were portrayed as inherently slothful, brutish and recalcitrant; both were implicitly 'simianised' in pictorial representation, so as to suggest their difference from, and inferiority to, white colonisers; and,

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[53] Quoted in de Nie, 'Britannia's Sick Sister', p. 178.

[54] Even commentators sympathetic to the Irish cause, such as Alexis Soyer, questioned the country's over-reliance on the potato as a means of sustenance. In an address to the Irish nation, Soyer writes, 'I do not mean to tax you with waste and extravagance, but merely to impress upon your minds that the country produces plenty of vegetable and animal substances, and the waters washing your magnificent shores teem with life ... and that they only require to be properly employed to supply the wants of every one with good, nourishing, and palatable food'. The Modern Housewife or Ménagère (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1856), p. 482.

most importantly for this study, both were conceived of, culturally, in relation to food.[55] Whereas the Irish were indissolubly associated with potatoes in the British imagination, however, black subjects were linked to the cultivation and production of tropical goods.

This alimentary connection had been in place since the earliest days of the transatlantic slave trade, when, as Sidney Mintz points out, enslaved workers 'were consigned principally to agricultural labor in the Caribbean region, particularly on plantations and especially sugar plantations – large-scale agricultural estates producing basic commodities for European markets, including coffee, tobacco, chocolate, indigo, cotton, and, above all, sugar, rum, and molasses'.[56] The conception of the racial other as producer of food continued well into the nineteenth century, manifesting itself even after the abolition of slavery in British-administered colonies.[57] As Joseph

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[55] For further discussions of the links between Irish and black subjects in nineteenth-century culture, and the 'simianisation' of the Irish in particular, see L. Perry Curtis Jnr., Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971), Elsie Michie, 'From Simianized Irish to Oriental Despots: Heathcliff, Rochester and Racial Difference', Novel, 25 (1992), 120-40, and Richard Dyer, White (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 52-53.

[56] Mintz, Tasting Food, p. 37.

[57] The abolition of slavery was a drawn-out, somewhat haphazard affair, with legislation being introduced at different times by different imperial powers. From the first decade of the nineteenth century, the British had begun to enact various resolutions designed to restrict the slave trade and improve the treatment of slaves, such as the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. It was not until the Emancipation Act passed through Parliament in 1833, however, that the British colonies were obliged to enact laws to free their slaves. This task was undertaken with varying degrees of speed and enthusiasm: in the Bahamas, for

Chamberlain contends in his meditations on 'The True Conception of Empire' (1897), Western powers such as Britain tended to view their colonial concerns as convenient sources of sustenance (and, by extension, wealth), to be plundered and usurped by the 'mother country' as and when she pleased. 'We began to be, and we ultimately became, a great Imperial Power in the eighteenth century', he explains,

> but, during the greater part of that time, the colonies were regarded, not only by us, but by every European Power that possessed them, as possessions valuable in proportion to the pecuniary advantage which they brought to the mother country, which, under that order of ideas was not truly a mother at all, but appeared rather in the light of a grasping and absentee landlord desiring to take from his tenants the utmost rents he could exact.[58]

Tacit in Chamberlain's analysis is the notion that, actually, it was colonial lands that enacted the role of 'mother' in imperial relationships, supplying succour and nutriment to greedy colonial powers.

The concept of the colonised as acquiescent provider permeated nineteenth-century culture. Even such liberal Victorian thinkers as John Stuart Mill refused to acknowledge the islands of the Caribbean as anything more than tenured land, farmed under the proprietorship of the industrialised

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example, indentured slaves were not actually freed until 1838, the year in which British colonial slavery was finally abolished.

[58] Joseph Chamberlain, 'The True Conception of Empire' (1897), in Empire Writing: An Anthology of Colonial Literature 1870-1918, ed. Elleke Boehmer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 212-15 (p. 212).

nations of the West. In his Principles of Political Economy (1848), Mill

asserts:

> These [exporting communities] are hardly to be looked upon as
>
> countries ... but more properly as outlying agricultural or
>
> manufacturing establishments belonging to a larger community.
>
> Our West India colonies, for example, cannot be regarded as
>
> countries, with a productive capital of their own ... [but are rather]
>
> the place where England finds it convenient to carry on the
>
> production of sugar, coffee, and a few other tropical
>
> commodities.[59]

And if the islands of the West Indies were considered a mere convenience in

the production of food, then so too was its workforce. In his 'Occasional

Discourse on the Nigger Question' (1849), Thomas Carlyle expresses his

belief in white racial supremacy and his consequent concern over the issue

of emancipation in the Caribbean. 'The gods wish besides pumpkins, that

spices and valuable products be grown in their West Indies', he writes,

adding, 'infinitely more they wish, that manful industrious men occupy their

West Indies, not indolent two-legged cattle, however "happy" over their

abundant pumpkins!' If Carlyle neglects to mention here that the presence

of a black labour force in the Caribbean owed more to the activities of

European slave traders than to any design of the gods, he nevertheless

implies that the most must be made of this colonised workforce in order to

produce food for British use:

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[59] John Stuart Mill, Principles of Political Economy (1848; London and New York:

Longmans, Green, 1900), pp. 414-15.

If Quashee will not honestly aid in bringing out those sugars, cinnamons and nobler products of the West-Indian Islands, for the benefit of all mankind, then I say neither will the Powers permit Quashee to continue growing pumpkins there for his own lazy benefit .... If he will not help in bringing out the spices [he] will get himself made a slave again (which state will be a little less ugly than his present one), and with beneficent whip, since other methods avail not, will be compelled to work.[60]

Either willingly or by force, Carlyle indicates, colonised peoples should be obliged to produce and harvest crops for the 'mother country' by which they are governed.

Some Victorians demurred, suggesting that imperial responsibility represented an unnecessary drain upon Britain's resources. In Dickens's Bleak House (1853), the character of Mrs Jellyby is reproached for her obsession with 'telescopic philanthropy': as she devotes herself 'to the subject of Africa; with a view to the general cultivation of the coffee berry – and the natives – and the happy settlement, on the banks of African rivers, of our superabundant home population', her London household succumbs to chaos.[61] Stephen Gill points out that Dickens himself had inveighed against Britain's preoccupation with foreign matters in an 1848 article in the

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[60] Thomas Carlyle, 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question' (1849), in The Works of Thomas Carlyle (London and New York: The Chesterfield Society, n. d.), Vol. VIII, pp. 293-326 (pp. 318-19).

[61] Charles Dickens, Bleak House, ed. Stephen Gill (1853; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 44.

Examiner.[62] Nevertheless, as the nineteenth century progressed, there was a growing sense that greater links with the colonies – Britain's 'outlying manufacturing communities' – should be forged in order to guarantee a sustainable source of food and wealth for the nation, and, by extension, to secure its claim to 'greatness'.

In his inaugural lecture as Slade Professor of Fine Art (1870), John Ruskin advocated just such a policy of imperial expansion, appealing to Britain to 'found colonies as fast and as far as she is able', seize 'every piece of fruitful waste ground she can set her foot on' and teach 'her colonists that their chief virtue is to be fidelity to their country, and that their first aim is to be to advance the power of England by land and sea.'[63] Yet, while Ruskin imagined an emigrant British workforce to be the predominant exponent of this imperial expansion ('if we can get men, for little pay, to cast themselves against cannon-mouths for love of England, we may find men also who will plough and sow for her'[64]), it seems that, post-abolition, it was Afro-Caribbean workers who proved themselves adept at cultivating the land of Britain's West Indian colonies. Having been abandoned upon over-worked, non-productive land following emancipation, many former slaves made use of their agricultural skills in order to subsist and, in time, cultivated for themselves fertile and productive plots. During his travels to the region in the mid-nineteenth century, historian James Anthony Froude documents finding himself in a kind of tropical Garden of Eden. He claims:

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[62] Stephen Gill, Explanatory Notes, Bleak House, p. 920.

[63] John Ruskin, Lectures on Art (1870), in The Works of John Ruskin, eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1905), Vol. XX, p. 42.

In the Antilles generally, Barbadoes [sic] being the only exception, negro families have each their cabin, their garden ground, their grazing for a cow. They live surrounded by most of the fruits which grew in Adam's paradise – oranges and plantains, bread-fruit, and cocoa-nuts, though not apples. Their yams and cassava grow without effort, for the soil is easily worked and inexhaustibly fertile.[65]

Again, food production is presented here as the defining characteristic of the black racial identity. Yet, for Froude, the agricultural capability demonstrated by workers in the Antilles does not indicate a predilection for hard work, nor the capacity for rationality. The black residents of the West Indies, he argues, are merely un-thinking producers, as opposed to self-governing citizens with rights. Of the situation in Grenada, a British colony, he writes:

About 8,000 negro families, say 40,000 black souls in all, now shared the soil between them. Each family lived independently, growing coffee and cocoa and oranges, and all were doing very well .... They were quiet harmless fellows, and if the politicians would only let them alone, they would be perfectly contented, and might eventually, if wisely managed, come to some good. To set up a constitution in such a place was a ridiculous mockery .... The island belonged to England; we were responsible for what we made of it, and for the blacks' own sakes we ought not to try

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[64] Ruskin, Lectures on Art, p. 43.

[65] James Anthony Froude, The English in the West Indies or the Bow of Ulysees (London: Longmans, Green, 1888), p. 49.

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experiments upon them .... If left entirely to themselves, they would in a generation or two relapse into savages.[66]

It should be noted that the accuracy of Froude's claims was much contended. In Froudacity (1889), J. J. Thomas argues that all the 'chief intellectual business' of Grenada, 'whether official ... legal, commercial, municipal, educational, or journalistic, [had] been for years upon years carried on by men of colour'.[67] In spite of this growing independence, however, in the eyes of white Western colonisers, the racial other continued to be conceived of primarily as the source of those indispensable items, coffee, sugar, cocoa and rum, during the nineteenth century.

Pictorial representations of workers on colonial plantations helped simultaneously to make manifest and to fix the role of the other as producer of food. Notably, images of slaves changed little, in terms of structure or content, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An early illustration, from Father J. B. Labat's Nouveau Voyage aux Isles d'Amerique (1722), is typical in its depiction of a black worker passively harvesting colonial produce for what one may safely assume to be European consumption. The servant's stance as he prepares to cut the sugar cane before him is overtly presentational; he appears explicitly to offer up his produce for the delectation of the (implicitly white) viewer of the picture (Figure 25). The inset image of a black slave toiling among a flourishing array of sugar cane in Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management is

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[66] Froude, The English in the West Indies, pp. 55-56.

[67] J. J. Thomas, Froudacity: West Indian Fables Explained (1889; London: New Beacon, 1969), p. 75.

Figure 25: <u>A Negro Servant from America Cutting Sugar Cane</u>, from Father J. B. Labat, <u>Nouveau Voyage aux Isles d'Amerique</u> (Paris: 1772).

Figure 26: Illustration from Isabella Beeton, <u>Beeton's Book of Household Management</u> (1861; London: Chancellor Press, 1994), p. 671.

SUGAR-CANES.

remarkably similar in theme for, although the slave is rather less well-dressed in this example, his open body position implies a gesture of proffering: the reader is silently invited to consume the colonial crop being tended (Figure 26). A nineteenth-century advertisement for lime cordial, likewise, situates black subjects in exotic surroundings so as to promote the product's 'tropical' origins to a predominantly white British market (Figure 27). Images such as these worked at once to confirm and compound the nineteenth-century view that the role of the black race was to produce food for the hungry subjects of imperial powers.

It is interesting to note that the sumptuously-dressed slave shown in Father Labat's travelogue is referred to not as a slave but a 'Negro Servant' for, in eighteenth-century culture, there seems to have been some slippage between the two terms. Douglas A. Lorimer suggests that there was a growing black presence within the British servant population at this time,

> as wealthy planters returned from the prosperous sugar colonies with the visible signs of their riches and power, their black slaves .... Invariably named Pompey, the black page, dressed in the colourful silks and turban of the East, became the pampered favourite in many an aristocratic household.[68]

Considered exotic novelties, these transposed slaves often featured in the family portraits of the British upper classes. In his examination of Hogarth's Blacks, David Dabydeen draws attention to the long-standing tradition of picturing wealthy, white-skinned ladies alongside their 'pet black[s]', who are

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[68] Douglas A. Lorimer, Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978), p. 25.
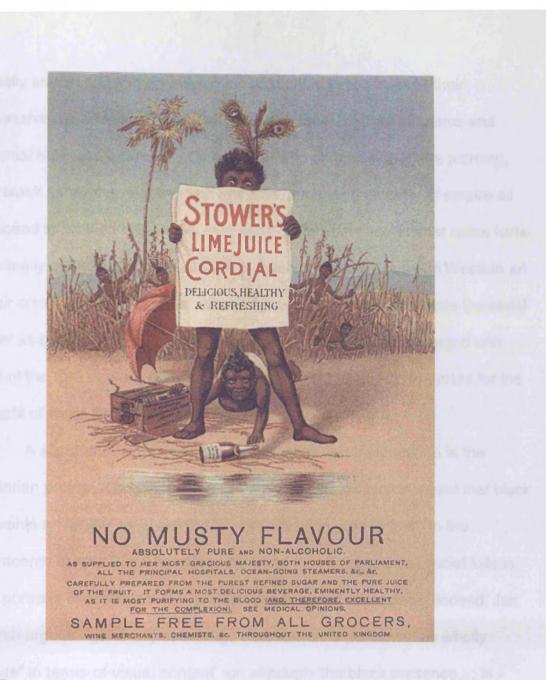
Figure 27: Advertisement for Stower's Lime Juice Cordial (c. 1890).

usually shown offering up a selection of suitably exotic fruits to their impassive mistresses.[69] Included 'only as a token of [the] affluence and colonial business interests' of the person who commissioned the painting, the black servant is, like the fruit he holds, a mere commodity of empire as opposed to an individual in his own right.[70] Dabydeen notes that critics have habitually overlooked the presence of these non-white figures in Western art. Their omission replicates the attitude historically exhibited towards the racial other as bearer of food, whereby the status of the servant is merged with that of the fare served: both are considered colonial goods, imported for the benefit of white British society.

A slight shift in representational practice can be identified in the Victorian period. Lorimer observes that 'changes in fashion meant that black servants no longer received the special attention paid to them in the eighteenth century'.[71] Therefore, the trend for picturing these racial foils in the portraits of prosperous, white families began to disappear. Indeed, Jan Marsh argues, 'generally speaking, Victorian art is perceived as wholly "white" in terms of visual content' for, although 'the black presence ... is greater than may be supposed', it is 'less than it should be, given the importance of the Caribbean, Africa and the USA to British economic power and identity'. Ironically, she points out,

> the expanding art market in the period 1800-1900 grew from
> British prosperity resulting from global commerce, with the traffic

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[69] David Dabydeen, Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 23.

[70] Dabydeen, Hogarth's Blacks, p. 21.

of people, commodities and manufactures, so it can be said that Victorian art owes its existence to those who are relatively absent from its images.[72]

However, although no longer prominently displayed as 'possessions' following the abolition of slavery, black subjects maintained a visual presence in nineteenth-century art, often in relation to food. Sir John Gilbert's watercolour study of a Woman with Fruit Basket (c. 1849) is typical in its association of the racial other with exotic, colonial produce (Figure 28). William Holman Hunt's painting, The Afterglow in Egypt (1854-63), meanwhile, depicts a woman of North-African origin as a kind of Egyptian Ceres, situated in the midst of a plentiful harvest (Figure 29). Even domesticated images, such as Nash's earlier-discussed illustration of the Great Exhibition, draw subtle connections between the racial other and food: here, the title Colonial Produce could be said to relate as much to the black nursemaid in the foreground of the image, employed in the service of a white, middle-class family, as to the tropical fruits on display (Figure 23).

Of course, it was not just in art that the racial other featured as the servant of food: in Victorian literature, too, his or her silent presence can occasionally be identified. Such references, however, tend to be fleeting. When Walter Gay prepares to depart for the Caribbean by boat in Dombey and Son, passing mention is made of the ship's 'black cook in a black

[71] Lorimer, Colour, Class and the Victorians, p. 38.

[72] Jan Marsh, 'The Black Presence in British Art 1800-1900: Introduction and Overview', in Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800-1900, ed. Jan Marsh (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2005), pp. 12-22 (p. 12).

Figure 28: <u>Woman with Fruit Basket</u>, Sir John Gilbert (c.1849), Guildhall Art Gallery, London.

Figure 29: The Afterglow in Egypt, William Holman Hunt (1854-63),
Southampton City Art Gallery.

caboose up to his eyes in vegetables and blinded with smoke'.[73] Rather

more textual attention is paid to Major Bagstock's 'dark' manservant in the

novel: known simply as the 'Native', this unfortunate figure, 'who had no

particular name, but answered to any vituperative epithet', endures 'a world

of misery' in servicing the Major's culinary needs, having to negotiate the

preparation of such foreign items as 'muffins' and 'boiled eggs' at breakfast

time.[74]

The generically-named 'Sambo' in <u>Vanity Fair</u> is, likewise, a recurrent,

yet largely unheard, figure. An employee of the well-to-do Sedley family, he

makes regular appearances around the dinner table of their Russell Square

home, interrupting the incipient romance between Joseph Sedley and Becky

Sharp with his trays of 'sandwiches, jellies, and ... glittering glasses and

decanters'.[75] Although the narrator hints, intriguingly, at the possibility of

documenting the 'real' life of below-stairs characters such as Sambo (the

reader is asked to imagine an alternative text in which, 'instead of the

supremely genteel ... we ... resorted to the entirely low, and described what

was going on in Mr Sedley's kitchen – how black Sambo was in love with the

cook (as indeed he was), and how he fought a battle with the coachman on

her behalf'), this alternative existence is largely suppressed within the

novel.[76] Throughout the text, Sambo is kept in his 'proper' place – that of

domestic servant – and denied the opportunity to voice his opinions (though

his secret contempt for certain members of the Sedley family may be

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[73] Dickens, <u>Dombey and Son</u>, p. 342.

[74] Dickens, <u>Dombey and Son</u>, pp. 346, 344.

[75] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 73.

inferred from his outburst of laughter following a joke made at Jos's expense).[77] When obliged to leave his employment with the Sedleys following the family's financial ruin, Sambo is apparently so indoctrinated in his role as servant of refreshments that he determines, 'with the infatuation of his profession', upon 'setting up a public-house'.[78] Ultimately, like other black figures in white-authored art and literature, Sambo himself is made to confirm and reaffirm the servility of the racial other's role in relation to food.

The Appetite of the Other

Whether figured in the light of producer or servant, the relationship between the racial other and food in nineteenth-century representation seems to have been a predominantly submissive one. However, in apparent contradiction to this contention, the black other was also conceived of as a character of voracious appetite within the Victorian cultural imagination. As Dabydeen points out, this myth has a long history: as far back as 1601, Queen Elizabeth I had expressed her 'discontent' at the 'great numbers of negars and Blackamoors which ... are crept into this realm', chastising them for their excessive consumption of food (food which properly belonged to the native English people) during times of shortage.[79]

The stereotype of the gluttonous other continued to prevail during the following centuries and was adopted with particular vigour by colonial powers eager to justify their policies of imperial expansion. In his account of

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[76] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 88.

[77] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 66.

[78] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 216.

the 'Aboriginals' of Australia (1873), Anthony Trollope portrays the appetite

of the racial other as bestial and uncivilised. 'There is an island', he reports,

Frazer's Island – at the mouth of the Mary River, in which they

[the Aboriginals] are allowed to live without molestation, – no

doubt because the place can be converted to no use by white

settlers, – and here they seem to be almost amphibious. They

live on fish, opossums, iguanas, and whatever can be filched from

or may be given to them by their neighbours on the main land.[80]

For Trollope, the lack of culinary discernment displayed by the inhabitants of

Frazer's Island implies a more general deficiency of judgement,

characteristic of the black race, which renders them unfit to govern their

homeland. In a further suggestion of the animalistic appetite of the

Aboriginal people, he invokes 'the stealing of cattle by tribes of black men, –

or rather the slaughter of cattle, for the black man never has an idea of

taking away the cattle and making them his own, and desires to appropriate

no more than he can eat at the time, but, nevertheless, will kill as many as

he can muster'.[81] Aboriginals, Trollope implies, have no conception of

agricultural cultivation or hard work, being slaves to their immediate bodily

impulses.

This lack of self-control, considered to be inherent in the racial other,

is emphasised in a further story relating to the unrestrained black appetite. 'I

heard of a gentleman', Trollope reports,

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[79] Quoted in Dabydeen, Hogarth's Blacks, p. 17.

[80] Anthony Trollope, Australia, eds. P. D. Edwards and R. B. Joyce (1873; St. Lucia:

University of Queensland Press, 1967), p. 100.

who trained one [an Australian Aboriginal] to be his gamekeeper,

– for they learn to shoot with skill, and are quick in the pursuit of

game. At last, confiding in his black gamekeeper as he would in

one at home, he gave the man his flask to carry. When he shot till

he was thirsty, he asked for his bottle. 'Es massa,' said the

grinning nigger, handing over the empty flask. 'Here him is; no

noting in it.' He was not a bit afraid of his master because he had

stolen all the drink; – nor in such circumstances could there be

any idea of punishing him; you would as soon think of punishing a

dog for eating a mutton chop you had put in his mouth.[82]

The insidious equation of black subject with beast, evident in Trollope's

story, suffuses nineteenth-century writing. Froude identifies a similar

animality in the eating habits of the inhabitants of the Antillies, testifying, in

The English in the West Indies (1888), to the way in which the children of the

colonies

scramble up anyhow, and shift for themselves like chickens as

soon as they are able to peck. Many die in this way by eating

unwholesome food, but also many live, and those who do live

grow up exactly like their parents.[83]

Such an uncivilised mode of consumption is implicated not only in the threat

of ill health but also the proliferation of moral laxity, Froude suggests. Of

black West Indians, he writes:

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[81] Trollope, Australia, pp. 103-04.

[82] Trollope, Australia, p. 110.

[83] Froude, The English in the West Indies, pp. 49-50.

> They sin, but they sin only as animals, without shame, because
> there is no sense of doing wrong. They eat the forbidden fruit, but
> it brings with it no knowledge of the difference between good and
> evil.[84]

Significantly, little mention is made in accounts such as this as to why black subjects, impoverished by Western colonialism, should have to 'scramble' for food; rather, explanations relating to the poor diet of Caribbean workers are subjugated to an irresistible desire to emphasise the animal tendencies and moral degradation of the black race in general.

Admittedly, Trollope does acknowledge a degree of British culpability in the situation of the Aboriginal people, explaining that 'when the white men came to settle in numbers ... the kangaroo ran away, and the fish became scarce in the waters, and the black men lost their usual food'.[85] His sympathy for the position of the native Australians is undermined, however, by his reliance upon the stereotype of the unrestrained appetite of the black other and its signification of a general immorality and bestiality controllable only under colonial rule. Indeed, Trollope implies, even exposure to occidental culture, civilisation and refinement could fail to suppress the innate savagery of the native. He is insistent regarding the essential recalcitrance of the Australian Aboriginal, claiming that this figure is 'infinitely lower in his gifts than the African negro', for, while the latter may be 'taught to work for his bread' when he comes 'within the compass of the white man's power', the Aboriginal, subjugated to his animal instincts, 'cannot be so

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[84] Froude, The English in the West Indies, p. 50.

[85] Trollope, Australia, p. 102.

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taught'.[86] The myth of voracious black appetite continued to prevail, then,

unabated during the nineteenth century, despite the fact that for many

colonised peoples, displaced from their own lands, the threat of starvation

was far more immanent than that of over-indulgence.

It was not only those of a different racial identity whose appetite was

compared unfavourably to that of their white, British counterparts: those

deemed culturally 'other', too, were frequently condemned for gourmandising

in artistic and literary representation. As Edward Said points out in Culture

and Imperialism, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a

time of unprecedented 'nation-making', when cultural differences were

emphasised in order to establish a 'triumphant nationality'.[87] Nowhere was

this process more evident than in the cultural contest between Britain and

France, a struggle which echoed the actual battles fought between these two

countries during the Napoleonic Wars. Although both were content to unite

under the banner of a hegemonic, European 'self' against an (implicitly

inferior) racial 'other' in order to affirm the necessity of colonial rule and the

superiority of white races in general, each nation nevertheless aggressively

'othered' the other in its representational practices so as to assert the

predominance of its own imperial status. As Said suggests, 'no matter how

intimate and closeted the supposed English or French "essence" appears to

be, it was almost always ... fought out with the other great competitor'.[88]

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[86] Trollope, Australia, pp. 108-09.

[87] Edward W. Said, Culture and Imperialism (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 100.

[88] Said, Culture and Imperialism, p. 100.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the main arenas in which this battle for cultural supremacy was engaged was that of food.

Significantly, it is by reference to the 'strangeness' of the kitchen in Madame Beck's boarding school that Lucy Snowe first evokes the cultural alterity of Villette, a fictional European city in which she has found employment as a teacher. Describing her late-night arrival at Beck's pensionnat, Lucy recalls:

> I was led through a long, narrow passage into a foreign kitchen, very clean but very strange .... A cook in a jacket, a short petticoat and sabots, brought my supper: to wit, – some meat, nature unknown, served in an odd and acid, but pleasant sauce; some chopped potatoes, made savoury with, I know not what: vinegar and sugar, I think; a tartine, or slice of bread and butter, and a baked pear.[89]

The rather uncertain tone here suggests Lucy's discomfiture with the strange textures and piquant flavours of continental cookery. From the earliest chapters of the novel, her stringent views on food have been made clear: plain English cooking is valued over the highly-flavoured fare associated with foreign dinner tables. While residing at an 'old ... quiet inn' in London, for instance, Lucy dines upon two simple dishes, 'a plain joint, and vegetables', both of which are deemed 'excellent', and quite sufficient to appease her 'healthy hunger', unlike the 'dainty messes' served, in imitation of the French fashion, at the home of her former employer, Miss Marchmont.[90]

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[89] Brontë, Villette, p. 83.

[90] Brontë, Villette, p. 60.

It is not only the food of Villette that Lucy finds strange, however; the appetite of the cultural other is also foreign to her particularly English sensibilities. On numerous occasions, Brontë's heroine finds herself compelled to comment with astonishment upon the continental capacity to ingest food: of one anonymous pupil at the pensionnat she writes, 'the quantity of household bread, butter, and stewed fruit, she would habitually consume at "second déjeuner" was a real world's wonder – to be exceeded only by the fact of her actually pocketing slices she could not eat'.[91] The children of the school's directrice, Madame Beck, are similarly chastised for their unrestrained appetites. Fifine is described as a 'frank gourmande' ('anybody could win her heart through her palate'), while her sister, Desirée, takes pleasure in raiding the cupboards of the school's storeroom, where she 'plunder[s] the preserves, drink[s] the sweet wine, break[s] jars and bottles, and so contrive[s] as to throw the onus of suspicion on the cook and the kitchen-maid'.[92]

In adulthood, too, the cultural other displays an improper desire for food that is shocking to the mind of Brontë's ascetic English heroine. The pensionnat's German mistress, Fräulein Anna Braun – a 'hearty woman, of about forty-five' – ought, Lucy claims, 'to have lived in the days of Queen Elizabeth, as she habitually consumed, for her first and second breakfasts, beer and beef'.[93] Monsieur Paul Emanuel, meanwhile, is characterised by his taste for sweet things: a lover of 'bon-bons' and 'brioche', he keeps

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[91] Brontë, Villette, p. 269.

[92] Brontë, Villette, pp. 116, 114.

[93] Brontë, Villette, pp. 377-78.

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Lucy's desk well-stocked with a steady stream of 'chocolate comfits' from his personal supply.[94] To Lucy, such demonstrations of boundless appetite are completely alien: as she remarks of her experiences at Madame Beck's school in general, 'all this was very un-English: truly I was in a foreign land'.[95]

The fondness for confectionary evinced by Monsieur Paul indicates not only the immoderate eating habits of continental subjects, but also their inveterate taste for pleasure. A tacit link emerges between food and sensory fulfilment: the former excites the latter, and, in nineteenth-century representation, the cultural other is shown to possess an excessive desire for both parts of this equation in gratification. The connection is made manifest in Charlotte Brontë's <u>The Professor</u> (1857), a text which, like <u>Villette</u>, transposes an emphatically English subject into unfamiliar, European surroundings. William Crimsworth, the novel's narrator and protagonist is, much like Lucy Snowe, the personification of those peculiarly Victorian values, reserve and self-control. Described by Monsieur Pelet, his employer, as a 'cold frigid Islander' (an appellation with which the Englishman does not altogether disagree), Crimsworth prides himself upon his ability to withstand the desires of the body, contrasting this policy of 'self-denying economy' with his continental colleagues' passion for food, as well

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[94] Brontë, <u>Villette</u>, p. 435.

[95] Brontë, <u>Villette</u>, p. 85.

as those baser bodily hungers which represent an equal source of pleasure.[96]

His firm belief in the conflation of actual and sexual appetite in the cultural other can be identified in a comic incident in which Madame Pelet (Monsieur Pelet's mother) invites him to take goûter, or tea, at her home. 'I accepted, of course', Crimsworth tells the reader, but

> as I descended the stairs, I wondered what whim had entered the
> old lady's brain; her son was out, gone to pass the evening at the
> salle of the Grand Harmonie or some other club of which he was a
> member. Just as I laid my hand on the handle of the dining-room
> door – a queer idea glanced across my mind:
>
> > 'Surely she's not going to make love to me,' said I. 'I've heard
> > of old Frenchwomen doing odd things in that line – and the
> > goûter? They generally begin such affairs with eating and
> > drinking, I believe'.[97]

Crimsworth's worst fears appear to be confirmed when he enters the dining room to find Madame Pelet 'dressed out in a light green muslin gown', her table 'carefully spread' with 'fruit, cakes and coffee'.[98] It transpires that the old lady's motives are of the purest sort, however; she merely wishes to suggest to the English master that he take some classes at a neighbouring pensionnat. Yet, even when cleared of the charge of seduction, Madame Pelet is still open to the accusation of gluttony: she eats, according to

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[96] Charlotte Brontë, The Professor, eds. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (1857; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 86, 18.

[97] Brontë, The Professor, p. 64.

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Crimsworth, 'with no delicate appetite', demolishing 'a large portion of the solids' on offer at the tea table, along with 'rather a stiff tumbler of punch'.[99] It seems that the cultural other is unable to escape from the British conception of his or her edacity in Victorian representation.

Although the exemplification of cultural alterity in The Professor is mainly comical in character, the repercussions of the myth of excess appetite in the nineteenth-century racial other were more serious and far-reaching. The act of eating is essentially a carnal one, and if the non-white male was thought to possess an insatiable desire for one sort of bodily pleasure, then, it was assumed, his craving for another was equally as rapacious. Among colonisers, the stereotype of the sexually-insatiable black male was endemic; accusations of rape, lynchings and beatings were the commonplace consequences of presumptions regarding the voracity of the other for white female flesh. In representation, too, the effects of these assumptions were felt. Following the Indian Mutiny of 1857, presentations of rebellious sepoys as man-eating tigers proliferated, the image of the carnivorous wild beast serving as a capacious motif through which to convey the animalistic inclinations of the racial other and the contingent possibility of inter-racial rape.[100] The language of food and consumption merges with that

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[98] Brontë, The Professor, p. 65.

[99] Brontë, The Professor, p. 66.

[100] See, for example, Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 'The Defence of Lucknow':

There was a whisper among us, but only a whisper that past:

'Children and wives – if the tigers leap into the fold unawares –

Every man die at his post – and the foe may outlive us at last –

Better to fall by the hands that they love, than to fall into theirs!

of animality, violation, lust and desire, with the result that actual and metaphorical appetite are confused to the extent that the existence of one bodily hunger is taken as sure evidence of the presence of another.

So well ingrained were these myths of appetite in the ruling cultural consciousness, their status as truth was taken for granted; representations of non-white, non-British subjects as avid consumers were notorious enough to require no anterior justification or explanation. Nevertheless, nineteenth-century culture did set about reiterating and reaffirming these already-known ideas with an alacrity which exposes its need to keep the racial other firmly in place. As Homi K. Bhabha points out, the stereotype

> is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated ... as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual licence of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved.[101]

Thus the myth of the other's excessive appetite was anxiously reproduced within Victorian culture, firstly, to quash residual doubts regarding its validity, and, secondly, to emphasise the point that if non-white races were unable to control their bodily desires, they were unlikely to have the judgement and self-restraint deemed necessary for self-determination. In this way, Western powers were able to justify their continued policy of competitive imperial

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Ballads and Other Poems (1880), in The Works of Tennyson, ed. Hallam, Lord Tennyson (New York: AMS Press, 1970), Vol. 6, ll. 50-53.

[101] Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 66.

expansion: the racial other actively <u>needed</u> the civilising influence of colonialism, or so the argument went.

However, did the myth of appetite go far enough? Was it sufficient in its portrayal of the innate bestiality of other races, the inherent inferiority of other cultures? Apparently not, for, as Bhabha points out, in order for stereotype to be fully effective, it must 'always be in <u>excess</u> of what can be empirically proved or logically construed'.[102] In nineteenth-century representation, then, another, more potent myth materialised, one which drew upon the supposed inclination of the other for both food and flesh – that of the other as cannibal.

The Other as Cannibal

From the earliest days of European overseas exploration, stories emerged relating to the terrible, 'man-eating' propensities of the indigenous peoples of the New World. These terrifying tales, detailing the inherent savagery of the black native, continued to circulate as colonialism spread so that, by the nineteenth century, the idea of the racial other as cannibal was firmly fixed in the white Western consciousness. Myths of cannibalism proved ready reference points for travellers abroad. Froude, for example, makes use of the language of anthropophagy to describe his landing at St. George's, the capital of Grenada. On arriving there, he informs readers,

> the crews of a dozen other boats ... clambered up the gangway
>
> ... shouting, swearing, lying, tearing us this way and that way as if

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[102] Bhabha, <u>Location of Culture</u>, p. 66.

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we were carcases and they wild beasts wanting to dine upon

us.[103]

Previously, Froude has revealed that, 'for centuries', Grenada was known as

'the home ... of man-eating Caribs'.[104] This later evocation of 'wild beasts'

revivifies the historical accusation of cannibalism, hinting that a flesh-eating

tendency may still be in evidence on the island. In its subtle suggestion of

continuity between past and present, Froude's text covertly insinuates that

the black character is unchanging in its essential bestiality and

carnivorousness.

The inherent savagery of the native is also alluded to in Trollope's

accounts of his travels abroad. Of the Australian Aboriginals, he writes:

> In some circumstances of life they practised cannibalism .... With
>
> reference to their cannibal propensities I heard many varying
>
> stories, but I never heard one which accused them of eating white
>
> people. When they do devour human flesh, it is the flesh of their
>
> own people.[105]

To demonstrate this point, Trollope refers to the work of Samuel Bennett, a

contemporary historian who described the practices of consumption

exhibited by natives of the Bunya-Bunya area of Queensland in his History of

Australian Discovery and Colonisation (1865). 'The district in which the

bunya-bunya tree bears fruit is very restricted,' Trollope quotes,

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[103] Froude, The English in the West Indies, p. 53.

[104] Froude, The English in the West Indies, p. 52.

[105] Trollope, Australia, p. 105.

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and it bears in profusion only once in about three years. When

this occurs the supply is vastly larger than can be consumed by

the tribes within whose territory the trees are found.

Consequently, large numbers of strangers visit the district, some

of them coming from very great distances, and all are welcome to

consume as much as they desire; for there is enough and to

spare during the few months while the season lasts. The fruit is of

a richly farinaceous kind, and the blacks quickly fatten upon it.

But after a short indulgence on an exclusive vegetable diet,

having previously been accustomed to live almost entirely upon

animal food, they experience an irresistible longing for flesh. This

desire they dare not indulge by killing any of the wild animals of

the district. Kangaroos, oppossums, and bandicoot are alike

sacred from their touch, because they are absolutely necessary

for the existence of the friendly tribe whose hospitality they are

partaking. In this condition some of the stranger tribes resort to

the horrible practice of cannibalism, and sacrifice one of their own

number to provide the longed-for feast of flesh.[106]

As an appendage to this account, Trollope adds that, while he believes the

story of the bunya-bunya feast to be true, 'having heard it corroborated by

various persons in Queensland', he does not believe that 'cannibalism has

ever been general among the Australian blacks'.[107] Yet he is adamant in his

contention that the Aboriginal people 'were and are savages of the lowest

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[106] Trollope, Australia, p. 106.

[107] Trollope, Australia, pp. 106-07.

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kind'; furthermore, in devoting so much attention to the potential flesh-eating proclivities of this race, Trollope suggests a persistent anxiety with the appetite of the other.[108] In spite of the dubious veracity of the myth, it seems that the image of the racial other as cannibal was readily assimilated in nineteenth-century culture.

One of the principal forms to engage with the idea of the cannibalistic other was the gothic novel. Macabre tales such as John Polidori's The Vampyre (first published in 1819 as 'a tale by Lord Byron') enjoyed immense popularity, stimulating the twin emotions of excitement and fear in a readership ever-hungry for stories of the exotic and the supernatural. Fittingly, Lord Ruthven, the blood-thirsty vampire of Polidori's title, is introduced specifically in terms of his otherness: an alien in the fashionable world of London winter society, he is conspicuously detached from the social throng, as if unable to participate in the mirth which surrounds him. It is this strange joylessness which first attracts him to the attention of young Aubrey, the hero of the story. Intrigued by the mysterious, and apparently origin-less aristocrat, Aubrey decides to accompany him on a grand tour of continental Europe. Here, Ruthven's otherness is affirmed: disowned by Aubrey for his depraved, immoral habits, the strange nobleman comes to be associated with the 'living vampyre', a creature who, according to Eastern European folklore, prolongs his own existence 'by feeding upon the life of a lovely

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[108] Trollope, Australia, p. 105. Edwards and Joyce, editors of the 1967 edition of Trollope's text, stress that there appears to be no evidence of cannibalism in either the Aboriginal or Koori cultures (see footnote, p. 107)

female'.[109] The gradual revelation that Ruthven is responsible for the murder

of Ianthe, a Greek girl with whom Aubrey is in love, combined with his

intention to slake his thirst for innocent blood by marrying Aubrey's sister,

conspire to send the young Englishman mad, inducing in him a kind of self-

inflicted cannibalism whereby he gives 'himself up to his own devouring

thoughts'.[110] Unable to prevent the unhappy union between Ruthven and his

sister, Aubrey dies of an apoplexy, leaving his unfortunate kin, as the

narrator reports with some relish, to glut 'the thirst of a VAMPYRE!'[111]

The racial and cultural otherness of the vampire is a subtle, but not

insignificant, feature of Polidori's text. In a preliminary to the story, readers

are told that 'the superstition upon which this tale is founded is very general

in the East', and that 'among the Arabians it appears to be common'.[112] This

reference to oriental culture implies that the vampire is a thoroughly foreign

figure whose appetite for human flesh can be in some way attributed to his

alterity. The monstrous creation described in Mary Shelley's <u>Frankenstein</u>

(1818) – a product of the same ghost-story writing competition that spawned

Polidori's <u>Vampyre</u> – is similarly orientalised by his appearance ('yellow

skin', 'lustrous black' hair, 'teeth of a pearly whiteness') and uncertain

origins: the composite of bodily materials collected from charnel-houses, the

monster (described, significantly, by his creator as 'my own vampire') sets

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[109] John Polidori, <u>The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre</u>, eds. Robert Morrison and

Chris Baldick (1819; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 9.

[110] Polidori, <u>The Vampyre</u>, p. 18.

[111] Polidori, <u>The Vampyre</u>, p. 23.

[112] Polidori, <u>The Vampyre</u>, p. 240.

about destroying those close to Frankenstein in a manner analogous to that of Polidori's blood-thirsty creation.[113]

The fear of the other as cannibal betrayed in early-nineteenth-century gothic fiction can also be identified, at a more metaphorical level, in later realist novels. Madame Beck, the Machiavellian headmistress of the pensionnat de moiselles in Brontë's Villette, for instance, is figuratively described by Lucy Snowe as a consumer of people. The directrice rules her school by a process of surveillance and espionage, using her 'staff of spies' to uncover information about those in her charge, then, once their usefulness has been exhausted, 'flinging [her informants] from her like refuse rind, after the orange has been duly squeezed'.[114] Similarly, in Vanity Fair, Becky Sharp (a character 'othered' by her half-French origins) is portrayed, in her attempts to snare hapless Jos Sedley, as a ruthless man-eater. Evoking the trope of a siren preying on the flesh of doomed sailors who have fallen under her sway, Thackeray warns readers:

> They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twangling
> their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon to you to
> come and hold the looking-glass; but when they sink into their
> native element, depend on it those mermaids are about no good,
> and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals,
> revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims.[115]

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[113] Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, ed. M. K. Joseph (1818; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 57, 77.

[114] Brontë, Villette, p. 90.

[115] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 738.

Jos later becomes one such victim: when his brother-in-law, Major Dobbin, visits him in Brussels, the once rotund Mr Sedley is discovered 'in a condition of pitiable infirmity', drained both physically and financially by the cannibalistic Miss Sharp, who, but a short time later, inherits the larger part of his estate following his untimely (and somewhat suspicious) death.[116]

Perhaps the most famous conflation of racial otherness and cannibalistic tendencies in Victorian fiction is to be found in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847), where, two nights before her wedding to Mr Rochester, the usually stoical Jane is confronted by a terrifying vision. Bertha Mason, first wife of Jane's husband-to-be, escapes from her prison on the third storey of Thornfield Hall (where she has been secretly sequestered in order to hide her madness and 'gross, impure' nature from the world), enters the bedchamber of the incipient bride, and destroys the wedding veil she finds hanging there.[117] When relating this nightmarish incident to Mr Rochester, Jane clearly figures her unknown intruder as black, emphasising 'the fearful blackened inflation of [Bertha's] lineaments', her 'savage', 'purple' face, swollen 'dark' lips and rolling 'red eyes'.[118] Earlier, the text has revealed that Bertha is a Creole, a term that could apply to a West Indian of any race in nineteenth-century writing. Jane's portrayal of the first Mrs Rochester utilises the language of a specifically black racial identity,

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[116] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 795.

[117] Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, ed. Michael Mason (1847; London: Penguin, 1996), p. 345.

[118] Brontë, Jane Eyre, p. 317.

however – one that associates Bertha with the Jamaican anti-slavery rebels, the Maroons, as critic Susan Meyer points out.[119]

Yet, after seeming to fix Bertha's origins, Jane goes on to attribute a quite different cultural profile to her unsolicited night-time visitor, evoking the figure of 'the foul German spectre – the Vampyre' in her description of Rochester's first wife.[120] Bertha's bloodsucking inclinations have previously been alluded to within the text (she leaves bite marks on the shoulder of her brother and threatens to 'drain [his] heart' in an earlier incident), and are again emphasised following the disclosure of Rochester's bigamous intentions, when 'the lunatic' is reported to have 'sprang and grappled [her husband's] throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek'.[121] This strange fusion of racial identity and vampirism fulfils a dual purpose, attesting to the nineteenth-century fear of cannibalism in the racial other on the one hand, and implicitly advocating an imperial agenda on the other. Like Bertha Mason, the 'inferior' races of the world must to be governed and controlled in order to protect white, British subjects from the potentially devastating effects of the other's uncontrollable appetite, the novel indirectly suggests.

Within nineteenth-century representation, then, the cultural and/or racial other sustains a number of apparently contradictory identities in relation to food. At certain times a passive producer or servant, the other is also characterised as a voracious consumer whose insatiable appetite spills over into a general hunger for carnal pleasure and even encompasses the

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[119] See Susan Meyer, Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 67.

[120] Brontë, Jane Eyre, p. 317.

threat of cannibalism. How are we, as readers of nineteenth-century culture, to account for this strange mythology, this 'curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse ... articulation of multiple belief'?[122] Bhabha provides a possible answer: by knowing the other in these terms, he suggests, 'the colonized population is ... deemed to be both the cause and effect of the system, imprisoned in the circle of interpretation'.[123] In other words, by enmeshing the other in a network of conflicting narratives, nineteenth-century culture was able to rationalise and secure its imperial position. Through a process of successful colonisation, it was argued, non-white races could be civilised, transformed into the most obedient of servants, thus proving the ameliorative potential of imperial expansion and justifying its existence. However, at the same time and in spite of this, it was felt that the threat of appetite in the other could never fully be eliminated, the possibility of its return never completely erased, rendering necessary the continuation of Western domination. In this way, the figure of the other both impelled and justified the existence of colonialism.

While such circular reasoning provided superficial reassurance regarding Britain's imperial project, the nebulous myths informing it emerged from a central anxiety that was not so easy to dispel. The character of the other, it was feared, at once fixed and capable of change, could potentially exceed the boundaries assigned to it. If its appetite could be subdued under colonialism, brought into line with the policy of restraint supposedly

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121 Brontë, Jane Eyre, pp. 239, 328.

122 Bhabha, Location of Culture, p. 82.

123 Bhabha, Location of Culture, p. 83.

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demonstrated by white colonisers, the difference on which the very idea of colonialism was predicated would be irrevocably damaged. The pervading anxiety which gave rise to the myth of the other as cannibal in nineteenth-century representation emanates, then, not so much from the white population's fear of being eaten as from its fear of having the grounds of difference between self and other eaten away, eroded so as to collapse the distinction between black and white, coloniser and colonised. Far from repelling the appetite of the other, therefore, nineteenth-century culture can be seen to have actively desired – hungered for – this efficacious marker of difference in order to maintain the integrity of the coherent, white identity it had authored for itself.

Desiring the Other

A dialectical relationship emerges between the hegemonic, nineteenth-century subject's idea of 'self' and the 'other' with which it was contrasted and by which it was defined. Unable to possess fully the stable subject position to which it aspired, the white, colonising subject positively demanded a recognisable other from which to differentiate itself. In this way, it enacted Lacan's oft-repeated and elusive precept, 'man's desire is the desire of the Other'.[124] Elucidating and elaborating upon this formulation in Écrits, Lacan explains that 'man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired,

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[124] Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; London: Vintage, 1998), p. 235. For an analysis of the

as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other'.[125]

Being depends on otherness: to exist as a subject, one must take up the

position of 'I' in language, the field of the Other.[126] By a parallel process, to

exist as a coloniser, one must first be recognised as such by the other, the

colonised. Thus, posits Bhabha, drawing upon Lacan, 'it is always in relation

to the place of the Other that colonial desire is articulated'.[127] The figure of

the nineteenth-century Western coloniser demands a distinct other from

which to differentiate itself. Ironically, however, its desire for the other

destabilises the independent subject position it had hoped to secure. In its

dependence upon 'the differentiating order of otherness', the self can never

be sufficient unto itself: the unwelcome other always invades articulations of

selfhood, rendering subjectivity irrevocably alienated, fragmented and

partial.[128]

Thus, the desire for the other is caught up in a series of complex

articulations regarding identification and difference, fullness and lack,

revealing the inherent instability of subjectivity and disrupting the boundary

between coloniser and colonised. This disruptive potential, Lacan suggests,

is a feature of desire: unlike pleasure, which is 'a principle of homeostasis',

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multiple significations of 'man's desire is the desire of the Other', see Catherine Belsey,

Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 60.

[125] Jacques Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', in

Écrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; London and New York: Routledge, 2001),

pp. 33-125 (p. 64).

[126] See Chapter 1 of this thesis, pp. 32-33.

[127] Bhabha, Location of Culture, p. 44.

[128] Bhabha, Location of Culture, p. 45.

desire 'meets its limit somewhere ... finds its boundary, its strict relation ... and it is in the relation to this limit that it is sustained as such, crossing the threshold imposed by the pleasure principle'.[129] Desire neither comforts nor reassures; rather, it is 'paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, even scandalous'[130] – much like the desire for the other in nineteenth-century representation.

This longing was not a purely abstract phenomenon; contemporary accounts reveal a material aspect to the white desire for non-white flesh. In a letter to his brother, James Kirkpatrick, the East India Company Resident at Hyderabad in the early 1800s, relates his feelings for Khair un-Nissa, a young Muslim girl of noble birth who, with the assistance of her mother and grandmother, has apparently attempted to 'seduce' him. 'I did once safely pass the firey [sic] ordeal of a long nocturnal interview with the charming subject of the present letter', he claims, adding rather sheepishly:

> At this meeting, which was under my roof, I contrived to command myself so far as to abstain from the tempting feast I was manifestly invited to, and God knows but ill qualified for the task, attempted to argue the Romantic Young Creature out of a passion which I could not, I confess, help feeling myself.[131]

Kirkpatrick's desire for the 'tempting feast' of racial otherness was by no means unique at this time, nor was it restricted to an appetite for carnal pleasure: in the early nineteenth century, it was common practice for British

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[129] Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 31.

[130] Jacques Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus', in Écrits, pp. 311-22 (p. 317).

men in India to take a <u>bibi</u> – an Indian wife or mistress – and, consequently, to immerse themselves in Indian culture. As contemporary observer Thomas Williamson notes in his <u>East India Vade Mecum</u> (1810), 'in the early part of their career ... young men attach themselves to the women of this country [India]; and acquire a liking, or <u>taste</u>, for their society and customs, which soon supersedes every other attraction'.[132] It seems that bell hooks's comments regarding the desire for the other in modern commodity culture apply equally as well to the early nineteenth century: in both periods, otherness is 'offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling', while ethnicity functions as 'spice', a sort of 'seasoning that can liven up ... mainstream white culture', and the female other exists as an appetising dish designed to enhance the palate and enervate the senses of the white Western male.[133]

It is important to recognise, however, that the desire for the other was by no means acceptable to mainstream Victorian culture: as hooks points out, inter-racial relations were commonly conceived of at this time 'as taboo, as secret, as shame'.[134] And yet, 'to make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other', to play with the limits of acceptability, did not necessarily require one to 'relinquish forever

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[131] Quoted in William Dalrymple, <u>White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India</u> (London: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 189 (my emphasis).

[132] Quoted in Dalrymple, <u>White Mughals</u>, p. 35 (my emphasis).

[133] bell hooks, <u>Black Looks: Race and Representation</u> (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), p. 21.

[134] hooks, <u>Black Looks</u>, p. 24.

one's mainstream positionality'.[135] A sort of compromise was reached in nineteenth-century representation: by visually consuming the racial or cultural other, by devouring at a distance, the white subject could at once engage with the enticing otherness that confirmed its superior status, and (metaphorically) obliterate the illicit source of desire that threatened the stability of its subject position. In an apparent reversal of the cannibalism myth, it seems it was actually the white coloniser who desired to 'eat the other' in nineteenth-century culture and, in this way, eliminate the intractable marker of difference that simultaneously seduced and terrorised its self-knowledge.

Eating the Other

As previously noted, images of racial others were not uncommon in pre-nineteenth-century British art; rarely, however, did they appear in anything other than a peripheral role, such as that of servant. Pictured alongside their masters and mistresses, non-white figures featured more as aesthetic foils than as subjects in their own right, functioning as commodities similar to, but discrete from, the exotic foods proffered to the real object of the spectator's gaze, the triumphant white subject. A subtle change occurred in the nineteenth century, when, far from featuring as a mere incidental – something to be overlooked and forgotten – the other was transformed into the focus of the Western world's ravenous gaze. An early-nineteenth-century watercolour illustrates the point: entitled <u>A Meeting of Connoisseurs</u> (1807), it depicts a group of gentlemen, gathered in a grubby artist's studio,

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[135] hooks, <u>Black Looks</u>, p. 23.

appraising the form of a semi-naked black male, who poses before them (Figure 30). The title of the painting is interesting: the word 'connoisseur', meaning an expert judge in matters of taste, carries with it certain culinary connotations and, in this context, implicates the act of eating in that of looking.[136] The artistic gentlemen visually devour the black model in a way that was to become common in the nineteenth century: during that period, images of the other proliferated, specifically in the genre of Orientalist art.

As France and Britain competed to gain political and military ascendancy in the East, artists from the West began, in similar fashion, to turn their attentions to the delights of the Orient, focussing on representations of the female other in particular. Although white males were denied direct access to the zenanas and harems of the Near and Middle East, this did not prevent nineteenth-century artists from fantasising about the illicit pleasures held within. Indeed, as Lynne Thornton suggests, it is precisely because harems were areas 'male strangers could never enter' that the Orientalists 'could give full rein to their imagination' when depicting these spaces.[137] Through their images of naked or semi-clothed women, reclining in poses of luxuriant indolence, artists such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix actively fed the Western desire for the Eastern other, providing a sort of sensory nourishment for the 'worshipping connoisseurs' of nineteenth-century society who are berated by

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[136] On the links between visual and palatal taste, looking and eating, see Chapter 1 of this thesis, pp. 42-61.

[137] Lynne Thornton, Women as Portrayed in Orientalist Painting (Paris: ACR, 1994), p. 20.
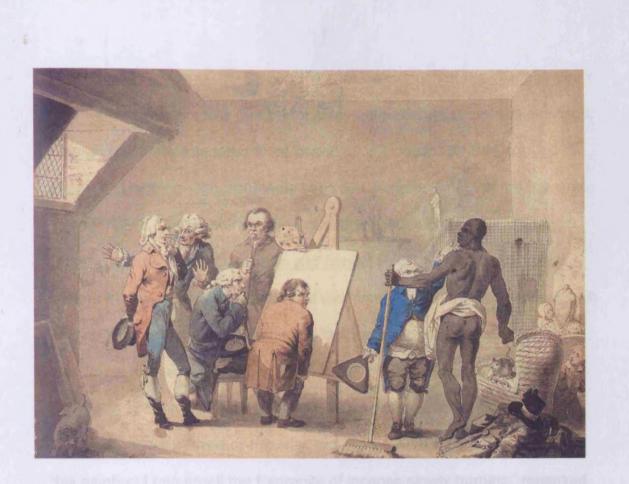
Figure 30: <u>A Meeting of Connoisseurs</u>, John Bourne (1807), Victoria and
Albert Museum, London.

Lucy Snowe in Villette.[138] Significantly, the description of the Cleopatra in

that novel correlates to a number of nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings.

Though generally assumed to be based upon Edouard de Biefve's Une

Almée (A Dancing Girl), reputedly seen by Charlotte Brontë at the Brussels

salon in 1842, Lucy's painting also contains echoes of Ingres' La Grande

Odalisque (1814) and Odalisque and Slave (1839).[139] One can imagine

visitors to the galleries and salons of the nineteenth century consuming such

images with a mixture of disdain and fascination, repugnance and desire,

equivalent to that displayed by Lucy in her invective against the mythical

Cleopatra of Brontë's text. Evidently, these pictures were never simply

looked at, never viewed or experienced in a passive way. 'As I approach

this painting I can smell the fragrance of incense slowly burning,' remarked

Pierre-Auguste Renoir of Delacroix's Women of Algiers in their Room (1834),

evoking the seductive possibility of entering the painting and seizing its

contents, taking hold of its elements in a material way.[140] At stake in

Orientalist art, then, is an act of appropriation, of consumption, a desire to

eat the other and, in doing so, to possess it.

Strongly influenced by Delacroix and his passion for the exotic, Renoir

himself went on to paint a version of an odalisque in his Woman of Algiers

(1870; Figure 31). Again, this picture corresponds in appearance to the

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[138] Brontë, Villette, pp. 249-50.

[139] For a discussion of possible interpretations of the Cleopatra, see Jill L. Matus, 'Looking at Cleopatra: The Exhibition and Expression of Desire in Villette', Victorian Literature and Culture, 21 (1993), 345-67 (pp. 350-55).

[140] Quoted in Adelaide Murgia, The Life and Times of Delacroix, trans. Peter Muccini (London and New York: Hamlyn, 1968), p. 36.

Figure 31: <u>Woman of Algiers</u>, Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1870), National Gallery
of Art, Washington D.C.

fictional painting described by Brontë's Lucy Snowe: swathed in rich, brightly coloured fabric, Renoir's woman reclines against a cushioned background, her open body position implicitly inviting consumption by the painting's hungry (if somewhat disapproving) spectator. Indeed, this example of Orientalist art seems to go further that its predecessors in terms of its solicitation to eat the other. Interestingly, Renoir chooses to fill a space to the left of the Algerian woman's raised knee with a rendition of a bowl of fruit resting upon an embroidered cushion. An innocent enough detail, one might argue, a mere pictorial embellishment designed to fill an awkward blank space on the canvas. It is not even a highlighted feature of the painting: while the urn behind is bathed in light, the fruit bowl itself is swathed in shadow. However, as the introduction to this thesis proposes, it is often the most 'innocent' details of nineteenth-century representation that hold the most pressing, insidious ideological meanings: myths work best by secreting their mechanisms and failing to draw critical attention to their hidden significations.

Contrary to its apparent inconsequentiality, the bowl of fruit in <u>Woman of Algiers</u> fulfils two important significatory functions. First, it helps to exoticise the female subject of the painting. Curiously, the women portrayed in Orientalist art tend to be pale-skinned; although generally supposed to be of North-African or Middle-Eastern origin, they are often perceptibly pallid. The reasons for this are as much practical as aesthetic: European artists touring the East found it virtually impossible to persuade Muslim women to sit for them, and so were obliged to complete their works at home with the aid of white models. Some Orientalist artists never even travelled abroad,

using only culturally-constructed ideas of the East and the powers of their own imaginations to create their images. The fruit bowl in Renoir's image, filled with exotic, ripe oranges, helps to 'other' the pale-skinned <u>Woman of Algiers</u> by affirming her Eastern ethnicity; in doing so, it at once confirms and secures her difference from the 'proper' white women of civilised Western nations, quelling potential fears regarding racial resemblance.[141] Secondly, it invites spectatorial consumption. Significantly, Renoir's odalisque was painted in 1870, at a time when imperial powers were abandoning their previous, protectionist approach to colonialism in favour of a more aggressive policy of overseas expansion.[142] In keeping with this flavour of belligerence, Renoir's painting seems to provoke a certain voracious gaze which threatens to engulf the picture's impassive subject. The inclusion of the bowl of fruit, and implicit equation of the Algerian woman with its contents, suggests that the viewer's spectatorship should involve something more than a simple act of possession, a trifling indulgence in the exoticism of the other. The other, here, as object of both danger and desire, must be <u>eaten up</u>, annihilated, in order to eradicate completely its perceived threat.

A comparable attitude towards racial and cultural difference can be identified in the British Orientalist art of the period, albeit in less obvious form. Thornton suggests that Victorian painters, such as John Frederick Lewis, were less concerned with presenting sensual images of the female

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[141] Oranges often feature as subtle signifiers of otherness in Orientalist art. See, for example, <u>Terrace on the Banks of the Nile</u> by Eugène Giraud (1878), private collection; <u>The Narghile Lighter</u> by Jean-Léon Gérôme (c. 1898), Gallery Keops, Geneva; and <u>White Slave</u> by Jean Lecomte du Nouÿ (1888), Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes.

[142] See Said, <u>Culture and Imperialism</u>, p. 86.

other than with portraying 'Egyptian harems as quietly modest, occupied with

everyday activities'.[143] This emphasis on the domestic, as opposed to the

erotic, did not prevent British audiences from feasting upon such paintings,

however. One of Lewis's best known works, An Intercepted

Correspondence, Cairo (1869), subtly suggests its own status as food

(Figure 32). It depicts a scene in a busy harem: against an ornate and

luxuriant background, one woman accuses another of communicating with

an illicit lover. The 'intercepted correspondence' of the title takes the form of

a colourful bouquet. As Thornton notes,

> it was the custom for women to communicate with their
>
> sweethearts by sending flowers, pomegranates or dried fruit, each
>
> token having its own significance .... The symbolism of each
>
> flower would have been understood by [Lewis's] public, as a
>
> number of popular books on the subject had been published in
>
> mid-Victorian England.[144]

The flowers do not constitute the only coded message in the painting,

however. On a small table in the foreground sit two dishes of fruit

containing, along with the inevitable selection of oranges, a ripe melon with a

section already extracted from its juicy flesh. The presence of these

appetising items serves not only to exoticise the painting but also to signal to

the spectator that the entire scene has been concocted for the express

purpose of his or her delectation. The fruits invite consumption and, in so

doing, motivate a colonialist gaze: significantly, the picture reveals precisely

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[143] Thornton, Women as Portrayed in Orientalist Painting, p. 24.

[144] Thornton, Women as Portrayed in Orientalist Painting, pp. 129-32.

Figure 32: <u>An Intercepted Correspondence, Cairo</u>, John Frederick Lewis

(1869), private collection.

nothing about the reality of everyday life in nineteenth-century Muslim households but everything about British society's <u>idea</u> of the East. In this way, Lewis's exotic fantasy-world offers itself up as an eminently palatable vision of the Orient.

The desire to 'eat the other' continues throughout late-nineteenth-century representation, reaching its culmination in the art of Paul Gauguin, the French painter who famously gave up his life as a Parisian stockbroker in order to fulfil his primitivist dream in the South Seas. Convinced that civilisation was corrupt, and that in tropical lands inhabited by (supposedly) unspoilt people one might live a more meaningful existence, Gauguin moved, first to the Caribbean and then to Tahiti. Here, he produced some of his most famous work, much of it depicting naked island girls juxtaposed with items of fruit. Many critics have identified a profound phallocentrism in these images: Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, for instance, note that, in his depictions of islanders, 'female breasts nestle among fruit, suggesting oral eroticism' and the 'gratification of men's needs and desires'.[145] Yet, these paintings, like the works of Renoir and Lewis before, also betray the essentially equivocal nature of prevailing attitudes towards racial and cultural others. As Charmaine Newton points out, 'the black female subject has a strained relationship to the history of Western visual art': 'she is a site of competing and contradictory sensation, provoking both fear and desire,

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[145] Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, <u>Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology</u> (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 119.

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attraction and repulsion, and thereby registering the experience of anxiety'.[146]

The vacillation which provokes this anxiety is not immediately apparent in Gauguin's work: the Tahitian women who populate his paintings seem, at first, to feature as unproblematic objects of desire, sensual beings who submit passively to the lustful Western gaze. Yet, these silent females also embody a covert threat. In order to rebel effectively against the trappings of the 'civilised' world, Gauguin needed a discernible other with which to align himself. There was a danger, however, that the difference of this other (the 'uncivilised' islander) would not be different enough for him to achieve his goal. In actuality, Europeans were to be found everywhere in the South Seas, and the Tahitians were by no means immune to their cultural influence; the simple, primitive way of life imagined by Gauguin was, in fact, little more than a fantasy. In his Tahitian paintings, then, the black female is the locus of a desire at once sexual and epistemological: the culturally-cultivated difference of otherness is inscribed upon her body in order to emphasise the distinction between civilised self and exotic, unsophisticated other. Yet, as previously argued, this distinction is far from fixed: the categories of self and other are neither immutable nor impermeable. As a result of this insecurity, the mango held in place of the female subject's breast in Woman Holding Fruit (Eü Haere Ia Oe) (1893) suggests not only the desire to consume her sexually, as Parker and Pollock would insist, but also the urge to devour her very existence, to eliminate her

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[146] Charmaine Newton, 'Venus Africaine: Race, Beauty and African-ness', in Black Victorians, pp. 46-56 (pp. 46, 49).

threatening presence before she eats away the stabilising grounds of cultural difference (Figure 33). The female other becomes the fruit she bears, legitimating the spectator's act of consumption.

The desire to eat the other in Gauguin's artwork, then, extends beyond simple sexual longing. Noticeably, in pictures of non-naked Tahitian women the other is still equated with food. The clothed figure in Woman with Mango (Vahine No Te Vi) (1892), for example, incorporates the fruit she holds into her frame; the proximity of mango and body in the painting implicitly invites the consumption of both (Figure 34). The spectator's apparent visual dominance is confirmed by the central female subject's averted eyes: her glance elsewhere defers the terrifying moment of encounter which may disturb the stable identity of the white observer. However, this artistic trick can never really succeed. Even when the other appears to yield to the consuming gaze of the Western world, he or she can never be fully devoured. As Lacan points out, the seemingly autonomous subject cannot control the visual field, for while 'I see only from one point ... in my existence I am looked at from all sides'.[147] The gaze exists outside of the self. No matter how thoroughly one attempts to eat up the image of the other in art, one can never eliminate its unsettling potential to 'look back', its ability to disrupt the security of the spectator's self-knowledge with the power of its own defiant gaze. In the act of eating the other, a profound anxiety remains.

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[147] Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 72. See Chapter 1 of this thesis, pp. 124-28, for a full discussion of Lacan's theory of the gaze.
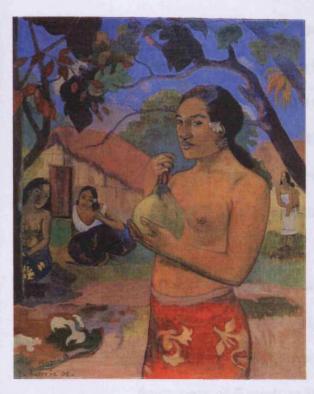
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Figure 33: <u>Woman Holding Fruit (Eü Haere Ia Oe)</u>, Paul Gauguin (1893), The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

Figure 34: <u>Woman with Mango (Vahine No Te Vi)</u>, Paul Gauguin (1892), Baltimore Museum of Art.

This apprehension is also evident in the literature of the nineteenth century. In the fiction of Charlotte Brontë, the female other frequently possesses a physical allure which at once whets the appetite and disturbs the peace of mind of the white British male. When, in The Professor, the plain-speaking manufacturer, Mr Hunsden, discovers that his friend, William Crimsworth, has taken up a teaching position in a Belgian school, he writes to him, averring

> I have no doubt in the world that you are doing well in that greasy Flanders; living probably on the fat of the unctuous land; sitting like a black-haired, tawny-skinned, long-nosed Israelite by the flesh-pots of Egypt; or like a rascally son of Levi near the brass cauldrons of the sanctuary, and every now and then plunging in a consecrated hook and drawing out of the sea of broth the fattest of heave-shoulders and the fleshiest of wave-breasts.[148]

Crimsworth demurs; however, during his time on the continent, the English professor has indeed, as Hunsden rather coarsely surmises, been incessantly tempted by the illicit pleasures of the female other, which are often figured textually in terms of food.

On first entering his lodgings, for instance, Crimsworth discovers that a window looking down into the garden of the adjacent pensionnat de mademoiselles has been boarded up. Tantalised by the prospect of watching the 'demoiselles at their play', he 'scrutinize[s] closely the nailed boards, hoping to find some chink or crevice which [he] might enlarge and so

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[148] Brontë, The Professor, p. 178.

get a peep at the consecrated ground' below.[149] When, in his role as English

master, Crimsworth finally gets to meet the unknown schoolgirls who have

so enticed him, he lingers longingly over their descriptions, feeding off their

(professed) incipient sexuality, while feeding the reader with his

concupiscent observations.[150] The appearance of the school's

headmistress, Zoraïde Reuter, is similarly devoured: her hair, Crimsworth

reports, is a luxuriant 'nut-brown', while 'the colour on her cheek [is] like the

bloom on a good apple, which is as sound at the core as it is red on the

rind'.[151] Her words, as well as her looks, are food to the ever-hungry

Englishman, who recalls that her 'flattery was so piquant, so finely-seasoned

... temptation penetrated to my senses'.[152] However, as the 'apple' image,

with its connotations of Eve, and the references to the 'Eden' below

Crimsworth's window cumulatively suggest, the temptations posed by

continental women may have dangerous consequences for the white British

male.[153] When Mademoiselle Reuter bombards Crimsworth with her 'spicy

... coquetry', he feels 'at once barbarous and sensual as a pasha',

suggesting that something of <u>her</u> cultural otherness may contaminate the

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[149] Brontë, The Professor, pp. 59, 58. Significantly, the description of the <u>demoiselles</u> as

'tantalizing' is suggestive of food and drink. The word derives from the name 'Tantalus', a

figure from Greek mythology who was condemned to stand up to his chin in water which

constantly receded as he stooped to drink, and below branches of fruit which moved away

as he tried to grasp them.

[150] Brontë, The Professor, pp. 76-78.

[151] Brontë, The Professor, p. 71.

[152] Brontë, The Professor, p. 144.

[153] Brontë, The Professor, p. 68.

purity of <u>his</u> English identity during moments of proximity.[154] The female

other, then, functions in nineteenth-century representation as an intrinsically

equivocal object – the focus of desire on the one hand, and on the other,

profound distaste.

Dangerous Desires: Food and Hybridity

A consciousness of the danger inherent in consuming the other, made

evident in the art and literature of the nineteenth century, metamorphosed

into a more general distrust of foreign fare: throughout the period (and,

indeed, beyond) the food of the other was commonly associated with the

potential for sickness and ill health. In representation, this possibility was

often used to comic effect. In <u>Vanity Fair</u>, for example, Becky Sharp suffers

'tortures with the cayenne pepper' in Mrs Sedley's curry, and is left gasping

for water after tasting a chilli, which 'she thought ... was something cool, as

its name imported'.[155] Later in the text, young Georgy suffers a similar fate

from colonial produce: 'surreptitiously' sampling a selection of 'preserves and

pickles' sent from Madras by his godfather, Major Dobbin, the young

gentleman 'half-killed himself with eating' them, believing 'it was a judgment

upon him for stealing, they were so hot'.[156]

The fictional character who betrays most forcefully the endangerment

involved in ingesting the food of the other, however, is Joseph Sedley. The

former Collector of Boggley Wollah, Jos has fully assimilated the tastes of

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[154] Brontë, <u>The Professor</u>, pp. 144, 171.

[155] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 61.

[156] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 464.

Indian cookery, and much of his prodigious appetite is satisfied by dishes

from the subcontinent. He is a connoisseur of curries (of his mother's

attempt to recreate the dish he suggests, 'perhaps there was <u>not</u> enough

citron juice in it – no, there was <u>not</u>'), an expert on pilau, and a consumer of

exotic fruits such as pineapple and mango.[157] Not only does the portly

nabob of <u>Vanity Fair</u> enjoy Indian cuisine, he actually favours it over

conventional British fare. On one occasion, he tells Miss Sharp that, as the

cream in Bengal is 'very bad', Indians 'generally use goats' milk' instead, and

adds, "gad, do you know, I've got to prefer it!'[158] Later in the text, his desire

for authentic Indian food prompts him to instruct his 'native' manservant, Loll

Jewab, to teach his European replacement 'the art of preparing curries,

pilaus, and pipes' before the former departs for Calcutta.[159]

Jos's prodigious appetite for the food of the other is a source of

sustained comedy in <u>Vanity Fair</u>. It also, however, incorporates an implicit

threat: by indulging in foreign food, white British subjects risk the possibility

of bodily transformation. Throughout Thackeray's novel, much emphasis is

placed on Jos's enormous bulk; indeed, he is frequently described as

elephantine by his family and associates. In the build-up to the Battle of

Waterloo, George Osborne quips of his brother-in-law that, 'as there is one

well-known regiment of the army which travels with a goat heading the

column, whilst another is led by a deer', so 'his regiment marched with an

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[157] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 64.

[158] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 62.

[159] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 688.

elephant'.[160] So insistent are these textual references that, by the end of the

novel, when the narrator recounts, with reference to a painting of Jos on

elephant-back in Becky's possession, that 'Becky took down her elephant',

the reader is unsure whether the term refers to the beast or the rider in the

picture.[161] The association of Jos, Indian cooking, and an animal closely

associated with the subcontinent artfully infers that by engaging with the

other and consuming its food the white subject risks degrading the integrity

of its cultural identity to the extent that its very appearance may be

transformed.

Pertinently, the threat of transmutation implicit in the act of eating the

other was not simply a figurative one in Victorian fiction. Mr Sedley's fear

that his son's fascination with the Orient could result in him '[bringing] us

over a black daughter-in-law', along with 'a dozen of mahogany

grandchildren' suggests a concomitant concern with maintaining the purity of

Britain's white racial stock.[162] Even the penniless Miss Sharp would be

preferable as a marriage partner for Jos than a 'black Mrs Sedley', the

anxious parent argues, reasoning 'the girl's a white face at any rate'.[163]

Latent in this fear of miscegenation is a preoccupation with bodily

appearance: what is at stake for Mr Sedley is the possibility of tangible

transformation, of a <u>visible</u> difference emerging in his progeny. By

metaphorically consuming the delights of the female other, Jos risks

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[160] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 326.

[161] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, p. 787.

[162] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, pp. 67, 89.

[163] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, pp. 89, 68.

irrevocably altering not only his own form, but also the physical appearance of his future issue.

Such was the fear of racial hybridity (or 'amalgamation' to use the contemporary term) in nineteenth-century culture, a number of formal and informal measures were introduced to limit its encroachment on British life. From 1786 onwards, a range of legislation was instituted by the Governor General of the East India Company, Lord Cornwallis, to exclude mixed race Anglo-Indians from employment by the Company, while, later in the nineteenth century, textual references to the bibis and harems kept by many Company employees were erased from the various histories and biographies of British India.[164] William Dalrymple notes that, in the early years of the nineteenth century, 'Englishmen who had taken on Indian customs ... began to be objects of surprise – even, on occasions, of derision – in Calcutta', where 'there was growing "ridicule" of men "who allow whiskers to grow and who wear turbans &c in imitation of the Mussulmans"'.[165] In both statute and day-to-day life, it seems, steps were being taken to prohibit dangerous intermixing between races and cultures, in hopes of stabilising the identity of the vulnerable British subject. As Robert Young points out, however, 'fixity of identity is only sought in situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change'.[166] The desire for security implies that the cultural hybridity against which it legislates is already in existence, making its disruptive presence felt. Said argues that, 'far from being unitary or monolithic or

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[164] See Dalrymple, White Mughals, pp. 49-54.

[165] Dalrymple, White Mughals, p. 52.

autonomous things, cultures actually assume more "foreign" elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude', and it was in response to this process of incorporation that nineteenth-century regimes tried (ineffectually) to eradicate the perceived danger posed by encounters with the other.[167]

As previously suggested, the arena of food was a major area of transference between British and other cultures. When British subjects were obliged, in the course of their imperialist adventures, to sample foreign fare, they often found, like Jos Sedley, that they developed a preference for it. The cuisine of India, in particular, seems to have been popular with European colonisers: an officer stationed at the battalion in Hyderabad, for example, expressed a liking for the local dish of biryani – 'rice boiled with quantities of butter, fowls and kids, with all sorts of spicery ... which we found to be very good, and which refreshed us greatly'.[168] Some went further still in adopting the culinary customs of the subcontinent. James Kirkpatrick, British Resident at Hyderabad, took on 'the Eastern habit of belching appreciatively after meals', to the surprise of many visitors at the Residency, while other British subjects, such as John Zephania Holwell, Mayor of Calcutta, and Major General Charles 'Hindoo' Stuart, became vegetarians in imitation of the dietary culture encouraged by Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.[169] On a visit to Delhi, Lady Maria Nugent, the

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[166] Robert J. C. Young, Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 4.

[167] Said, Culture and Imperialism, p. 15.

[168] Quoted in Dalrymple, White Mughals, p. 115.

[169] See Dalrymple, White Mughals, pp. 115, 36.

formidable wife of the British Commander-in-Chief of India, was astounded

to find that two high-ranking British officials had taken to eating 'neither ...

beef or pork, being as much Hindoos as Christians, if not more'. 'Having

come to this country early,' the shocked memsahib surmises in her journal,

these British subjects have come to '[form] opinions and prejudices, that

make them almost natives'.[170] Implicit in this condemnation of cultural and

culinary assimilation is, again, the idea of bodily transformation: by assuming

Indian dietary customs, the assistants in question have become almost

natives, a frightening hybrid of British and Indian identity, which calls into

question the validity and viability of both.

Although, as the nineteenth century progressed, attitudes such as

Lady Nugent's became more prevalent (rebellions such as the Indian Mutiny

(1857) and Morant Bay Insurrection (1865) doing little to promote the case

for racial and cultural amalgamation in the minds of the majority of the British

populace), the deprecation and fear with which instances of transcultural

exchange were generally met in the nineteenth century could not completely

erase the desire to engage with the other. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon

White suggest, 'disgust always bears the imprint of desire': that which a

culture expels as alien often returns as the object of both 'longing and

fascination'.[171] The cuisine of India is a case in point, for while one

disillusioned memsahib describes 'the serving up of stale, sour, and

unwholesome food' as 'a very constant occurrence at Indian tables', such

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[170] Quoted in Dalrymple, White Mughals, p. 53.

[171] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 191.

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disdain for foreign fare did not inhibit the burgeoning popularity of curry as a supper dish in Britain itself.[172] In 1809, Dean Mahomet, a Muslim from Patna, opened a coffee-house in London, which advertised itself as a place where the gentry could 'enjoy the Hooakha, with real Chilm tobacco, and Indian dishes in the highest perfection, and allowed by the greatest epicures to be unequalled to any curries ever made in England'.[173] Home-made curries, too, enjoyed immense popularity. Susan Zlotnick posits that, by the mid-nineteenth century, this dish had become thoroughly domesticated:

> [while] utilitarians like Thomas Babington Macaulay and James Mill were busily trying to assimilate India into the British Empire ... British women undertook an analogous task ... [incorporating] Indian food ... into the national diet.[174]

Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management boasts a number of different curry recipes, along with instructions for the preparation of accompaniments such as rice and a 'delicious' Bengalese mango chutney.[175] Although this tome is directed specifically at a middle-class readership, the appeal of curry seems to have transcended traditional class boundaries. In A Plain Cookery Book for the Working Classes (1861), Charles Elmé Francatelli supplies a simple recipe for fish curry, while, as noted earlier in this thesis, a selection

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[172] Flora Annie Steel, 'The Duties of a Mistress' (1889), in Empire Writing, pp. 126-32 (p. 132).

[173] Dalrymple, White Mughals, p. xlii.

[174] Susan Zlotnick, 'Domesticating Imperialism: Curry and Cookbooks in Victorian England', in The Recipe Reader: Narratives – Contexts – Traditions, eds. Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 72-87 (p. 73).

[175] See Beeton, Book of Household Management, pp. 458-59, 677-78, 190.

of Indian dishes permanently graced Queen Victoria's dining table.[176] The

taste for Indian cuisine, it seems, infiltrated the British palate in the

nineteenth century in spite of continuing cultural fears regarding the danger

of 'eating the other'.

It was not only the food of other races that proved popular at this time.

Food from France, too, was the object of culinary desire, especially among

the fashionable bourgeoisie. John Burnett suggests that this growth in

popularity can be attributed in part to the large number of French chefs who

came to Britain during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,

> some ... as political refugees during the French Revolution when
>
> the great households were broken up, some ... attracted by the
>
> high salaries which the English nobility and moneyed classes
>
> could offer for illustrious ornaments to their establishments.[177]

A French chef was recognised as the ultimate fashion accessory, yet,

according to some, the vogue for foreign culinary customs was little more

than a travesty. Following the Napoleonic wars of the early nineteenth

century, anti-Gallic feeling was running high and the influence of French

cookery, along with the adoption of service à la française in high-class

households, was met with the 'utmost suspicion' by conservative country

squires, parsons, and doctors, who, according to Burnett, preferred a

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[176] Charles Elmé Francatelli, A Plain Cookery Book for the Working Classes (1861;

Whitstable: Pryor, 1993), pp. 48-49. For the reference to Queen Victoria's dinner table, see

Chapter 1 of this thesis, pp. 65-66.

[177] Burnett, Plenty and Want, p. 73.

traditional English dinner 'where all the dishes were placed at once on the table'.[178]

The dinner table, then, became a battleground, the site of a cultural contest between what was perceived as effete epicurism on the one hand, and staunch traditionalism on the other. This culinary conflict is portrayed to comic effect in Vanity Fair, where Becky Sharp relates in a letter to her friend Amelia Sedley the squabblings of her employer, Sir Pitt Crawley, and his socially-ambitious son at dinner. 'Mr Crawley said a long grace,' writes Miss Sharp,

> and Sir Pitt said Amen, and the great silver dish covers were removed.
>
> 'What have we for dinner, Betsy?' said the Baronet.
>
> 'Mutton broth, I believe, Sir Pitt,' answered Lady Crawley.
>
> 'Mouton aux navets,' added the Butler gravely (pronounce, if you please, moutongonavvy); 'and the soup is potage de mouton à l'Ecossaise. The side-dishes contain pommes de terre au naturel, and choufleur à l'eau.'
>
> 'Mutton's mutton,' said the Baronet, 'and a devilish good thing.'
>
> ... 'Will you take some potage, Miss ah – Miss Blunt?' said Mr Crawley.
>
> 'Capital Scotch broth, my dear,' said Sir Pitt, 'though they call it by a French name.'

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[178] Burnett, Plenty and Want, pp. 69-70. For a description of the various courses involved in service à la française, see Chapter 1 of this thesis, pp. 69-70.

'I believe it is the custom, sir, in decent society,' said Mr

Crawley, haughtily, 'to call the dish as I have called it;' and it was

served to us on silver soup-plates by the footmen in the canary

coats, with the <u>mouton aux navets</u>.[179]

The battle between the two Crawleys, taken in conjunction with the butler's

linguistic incompetence, illustrates the contentious nature of French cuisine

at British dinner tables, where an uneasy compromise was in place between

adopted-French and traditional-English customs. Although French cookery

and service were <u>de rigueur</u> in fashionable circles, a certain ambivalence,

born of those twin emotions, fear and desire, remained with regard to eating

the food of the other throughout the nineteenth century.

The uncertain status of foreign food is suggested unconsciously in

British-authored cookery books of the period. In <u>The Cook and Housewife's</u>

<u>Manual</u> (1829), Margaret Dods acknowledges the prevalence of continental

fare at British tables, stating that 'there is already much French cookery

blended with our own, and of late we are taking to the names as well as the

dishes'.[180] This suggestion of amalgamation is undermined, however, by

Dods's sequestering of French recipes in their own, separate chapter of her

text, away from dishes of British cultural origin. Unlike the <u>Housewife's</u>

<u>Manual</u>, Eliza Acton's hugely popular <u>Modern Cookery for Private Families</u>,

first published in 1845, frequently juxtaposes French and English variations

of dishes; in later editions of the book, however, a separate chapter on

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[179] Thackeray, <u>Vanity Fair</u>, pp. 113-14.

[180] Margaret Dods, <u>The Cook and Housewife's Manual</u>, 4th ed. (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1829), p. 328.

'Foreign and Jewish Cookery' is to be found.[181] This uneasy appendage

suggests that, while the food of the other had undoubtedly come to form part

of British culinary life, a certain element of resistance remained with regards

to its full incorporation into Victorian culture. Mrs Beeton's <u>Book of</u>

<u>Household Management</u>, likewise, posits 'foreign' food as an element at

once integral to and separate from British cuisine. Inserted into her

'Introduction to Cookery' is a list of 'French Terms Used in Modern

Household Cookery', from 'aspic' to 'vol-au-vent', with explanations adjoined.

'A vocabulary of these [terms] is ... indispensable in a work of this kind',

Beeton argues, suggesting that although French cookery had effectively

crossed the Channel, it had by no means been accepted or understood by

the majority of the British populace.[182]

Nevertheless, any attempt to expunge the food of the other from the

British diet at this time would have proved futile, for not only had foreign

produce come to grace the tables of the great (and the aspirational) as a

matter of course by the mid-nineteenth century, it also constituted part of a

peculiarly British institution: tea. As John Burnett points out, tea-drinking had

progressed from 'the occasional luxury of the urban rich in the early

eighteenth century to the national beverage of all classes by 1850'.[183]

Consequently, the majority of the population consumed items of foreign

origin on an almost daily basis by the mid-Victorian era, when around

1,000,000 lb. of tea was imported annually from India, along with 11,814

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[181] Eliza Acton, <u>Modern Cookery</u>, pp. 499-512.

[182] Beeton, <u>Book of Household Management</u>, pp. 44-46, 44.

[183] Burnett, <u>Plenty and Want</u>, p. 4.

thousand cwt. of sugar from the West Indies.[184] It seems strange that a drink so essentially foreign in its individual elements should have been adopted so enthusiastically as the epitome of Britishness. However, as Mintz points out, as the English began to drink more and more tea, so the beverage itself became more and more Anglicised, 'by the process of ritualization on the one hand; and by being produced more and more in British colonies ... on the other'.[185]

The act of making and drinking tea occupied a special place in the Victorian British cultural imagination. In The Professor, William Crimsworth takes a peculiar pleasure in watching his future wife, Frances, prepare the beverage, associating this act with memories of home. 'The fire being lit,' he narrates,

> the hearth swept, and a small kettle of a very antique pattern, such as I thought I remembered to have seen in old farm-houses in England, placed over the now ruddy flame, Frances' hands were washed and her apron removed in an instant; then she opened a cupboard and took out a tea-tray, on which she had soon arranged a china tea-equipage whose pattern, shape and size denoted a remote antiquity.[186]

Crimsworth derives a curious satisfaction from observing 'the fair-complexioned English-looking girl presiding at the English meal and speaking the English language'. However, the association formed here

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[184] See Burnett, Plenty and Want, pp. 118-19, 257.

[185] Sidney W. Mintz, Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History (New York: Viking, 1985), p. 110.

between food and cultural identity is merely an 'illusion': like the drink she

prepares, Frances is not authentically British, but rather a hybrid, the

daughter of a Swiss father and English mother.[187] As a result, her identity

within the text is fluid, disturbingly unfixed; while Crimsworth celebrates what

he perceives as her English attributes – 'Perseverance and a Sense of duty'

– he simultaneously fears and desires the implicitly continental 'spark of

spirit' which leads her to 'vex, tease' and 'pique' him.[188]

Typically, like so many 'other' women in Victorian fiction, Frances is

characterised in the text in terms of food: Crimsworth describes her as 'an

unique fruit' and his 'little wild strawberry', compounding the impression that

the cultural other represents something to be devoured by the all-conquering

English subject.[189] In keeping with this model, it is hardly surprising to find

that Crimsworth tries to eradicate the residual traces of otherness from

Frances' character, while savouring her more Anglicised traits: tellingly, one

of his first tasks following their marriage is to '[instruct] her how to make a

cup of tea in rational English style'. Yet, while it may be possible to teach

Frances to administer 'a proper British repast',[190] the final identity she

acquires within the text remains replete with what Firdous Azim terms 'the

ambiguities and dualities associated with colonial subjects and cultures'.[191]

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[186] Brontë, The Professor, p. 160.

[187] Brontë, The Professor, p. 161.

[188] Brontë, The Professor, pp. 120, 224, 233.

[189] Brontë, The Professor, pp. 191, 214.

[190] Brontë, The Professor, p. 227.

[191] Firdous Azim, The Colonial Rise of the Novel (London and New York: Routledge, 1993),

p. 169.

Crimsworth finds it impossible to fully Anglicise his spouse, admitting that 'so different was she under different circumstances I seemed to possess two wives'.[192] Frances remains an unsettling amalgam of different cultural identities and thus deconstructs the boundary between self and other which Crimsworth, the epitome of traditional 'Englishness', tries so desperately to sustain. In this way, her character parallels the nineteenth-century British diet, which comprised – often, ironically, in its most 'British' forms – a curious hybrid of home and colonial produce, a troubling composite of self and other.

The Myth of Cannibalism Reversed

The frequency with which 'foreign' dishes found their way into British culinary culture is, perhaps, unsurprising when one considers the extensive history of British colonial adventure. As Robert Young points out, the task of appropriating land and organising territory was not simply a military or managerial one. Nineteenth-century colonialism 'was not only a machine of war and administration', but also 'a desiring machine,' with an 'unlimited appetite' for the process of intermixture and exchange it ostensibly railed against.[193] While the agents of colonisation attempted to maintain a proper distance between themselves and the subject peoples under their jurisdiction, they also betrayed an insistent desire for both the food of the other and the other-as-food, which inevitably resulted in some degree of cultural assimilation. This was, of course, a two-way process: while European imperialists became accustomed to the foods and practices of

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[192] Brontë, The Professor, p. 230.

[193] Young, Colonial Desire, p. 98.

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consumption exhibited in the lands they colonised, they also introduced (and sometimes imposed) their own fare and eating habits onto native populations. As Thackeray, himself an Englishman born in India, notes in Vanity Fair, 'those who know the English colonies abroad know that we carry with us our pride, pills, prejudices, Harvey-sauces, cayenne-peppers, and other Lares, making a little Britain wherever we settle down'.[194]

The degree to which foreign food and practices of consumption influenced British culinary life in the nineteenth century was rarely acknowledged in contemporary material, in spite of what may appear to the modern reader as its manifest proliferation. Yet, so immersed was the food of the other in Victorian culture that, in a reversal of the cannibalism myth discussed earlier in this chapter, it seems it was actually the colonisers of the West who threatened to feed off the racial and cultural others encountered in the course of their empire-building adventures, as opposed to vice versa. Interestingly, at the turn of the nineteenth-century, the image of the bourgeois British subject as cannibal was seized upon by ardent abolitionists in order to promote their cause. According to broadsides and pamphlets circulated at the time, every person who consumed produce raised by slaves in British colonies was guilty of an act equivalent to murder. The abolitionists reasoned that

> so necessarily connected are our consumption of the commodity, and the misery resulting from it, that in every pound of sugar used

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[194] Thackeray, Vanity Fair, p. 744.

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(the product of the slaves imported from Africa) we may be

considered as consuming two ounces of human blood.[195]

In 'Spectres of Sugar', Kate Flint suggests that this motif, which turned

'sugar consumption into a grotesque parody of transubstantiation', was a

common one, used by writers such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna to convince

British readers 'of the evils of slavery, and to make them realise that they

ingest, into their own very corporeal selves, the traces of other beings'.[196] If

the abolitionists' argument appears somewhat extreme, it nevertheless

demonstrates a radical awareness that, within the British imagination, other

races and cultures were inextricably linked to the foods they ate or produced

and that, by consuming these foods, British subjects engaged in the act of

eating the other itself. The Victorian reliance upon commodities such as tea,

coffee and sugar, along with the adoption of practices such as service à la

française, resulted in the internalisation of foreign foods and alien eating

habits, inducing in the British populace a kind of metaphorical cannibalism.

Yet this process of 'eating the other' went further than the

consumption of food from the colonies, or even the physical desire for the

'exotic' female form. In the nineteenth century, European subjects fed off the

other not only to fortify the body, but also to sustain the imagination, to fulfil

their cultural appetite for art and literature. This chapter has already

analysed the way in which colonisers' cravings for cultural difference

spawned an entire artistic sub-genre (that of Orientalist painting); it now

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[195] Quoted in Mintz, Tasting Food, pp. 72-73.

turns its attention to the ways in which this desire influenced another important nineteenth-century cultural form: the novel. As Said notes, 'nearly everywhere in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British and French culture we find allusions to the facts of empire, but perhaps nowhere with more regularity and frequency than in the British novel'.[197] Empire supports and sustains the Victorian novel, often providing the very reason for its being. The Professor, for example, is introduced through the device of a letter written to an absent friend who has lately 'accepted a government appointment in one of the colonies': empire thus predicates the very existence of the story, furnishing it with its raison d'être.[198]

For Said, one of the most pertinent examples of empire feeding the novel is to be found in Jane Austen's Mansfield Park (1814), where 'references to Sir Thomas Bertram's overseas possessions are threaded through' the narrative in a subtle, yet insistent, manner. These references explain Sir Thomas's wealth, 'occasion his absences, fix his social status at home and abroad, and make possible his values, to which Fanny Price', the novel's heroine, 'finally subscribes'.[199] Although Austen does not specify what is grown on the family's Antiguan estate, Said reasons that 'Sir Thomas's property in the Caribbean would have had to be a sugar plantation

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[196] Kate Flint, 'Spectres of Sugar', in White and Deadly: Sugar and Colonialism, eds. Pal Ahluwalia, Bill Ashcroft and Roger Knight (New York: Nora Science, 1999), pp. 83-93 (p. 84).

[197] Said, Culture and Imperialism, p. 73.

[198] Brontë, The Professor, p. 11.

[199] Said, Culture and Imperialism, p. 73.

maintained by slave labour'.[200] In this way, a connection emerges between the sumptuous lifestyle enjoyed by the Bertrams at home and the production of sugar cane abroad. The food of the other enables the domestic tranquillity of Mansfield Park. It also sustains Sir Thomas on a more literal level: on his return from Antigua, the plantation owner 'resolutely [declines] all dinner,' asserting, 'I would rather have nothing but tea', a drink intimately associated with the sweetener produced on his estate.[201]

As the novel progresses, Sir Thomas's niece, Fanny, also comes to be affiliated with sugar, though, as Said points out, when she first arrives at Mansfield, it is more in the role of 'indentured servant' or 'transported commodity' than wealthy coloniser.[202] As the story unfolds, however, and Fanny begins to integrate herself with the Bertram family, she comes to be aligned less with the slaves on Sir Thomas's estate and more with the master himself, taking on his cultural values and becoming a surrogate for his views during his absence. On her return to her old home in Portsmouth, Fanny's response to her mother's offer of tea echoes that of her uncle earlier in the text: '[she] should prefer it to anything'.[203] Significantly, in the light of this duplication, Fanny is described more and more in terms of her 'sweetness' as the novel develops, suggesting an association with sugar indicative of her synchronisation with the colonial values displayed at

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[200] Said, Culture and Imperialism, p. 107.

[201] Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (1814; London: Penguin, 1996), p. 151.

[202] Said, Culture and Imperialism, p. 106.

[203] Austen, Mansfield Park, p. 314.

Mansfield Park.[204] By indirectly feeding off the travails of the other in the Caribbean, Fanny is able to augment her social position at home; notably, by the end of the novel, she has been installed as the virtual mistress of Mansfield.

It is not only Fanny Price who engages in the act of eating the other, however; by 'consuming' her story, the reader, too, is implicated in this gluttonous deed. Just as the sugar from Sir Thomas's plantations sustains the social order in <u>Mansfield Park</u>, so novels founded upon empire, such as Austen's, fed (and continue to feed) the British cultural imagination. Although the presence of racial and cultural others in Victorian fiction tends to be marginal, these profoundly unsettling figures are nonetheless integral to the stories of romance and social development found in novels such as <u>Jane Eyre</u>, <u>The Professor</u>, <u>Villette</u>, and <u>Vanity Fair</u>. The fact that the other is so often overlooked in nineteenth-century representation, in spite of its manifest presence, goes only to confirm its status as a tantalising, but troubling comestible – something, in the words of bell hooks, to 'be eaten, consumed, and forgotten' by the connoisseurs of Victorian culture.[205]

Food and Freedom

A somewhat depressing conclusion: the racial and cultural others who populate nineteenth-century representation function either as passive producers, dutiful servants, or as food itself – a kind of cultural stimulation for

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[204] Prior to Chapter 24, Fanny is described as 'sweet' only twice (<u>Mansfield Park</u>, pp. 12, 24); following this point in the text, however, references to her 'sweetness' proliferate. See, for example, pp. 192, 222, 241, 242, 250, 284, 327, 343, 386, 389.

the palates of the Victorian populace. Like the character of Sambo in <u>Vanity Fair</u>, or the silent Tahitians who haunt the paintings of Gauguin, these others are denied any kind of contrapuntal voice, any agency with which to resist the wholesale consumption to which they are subjected. Instead, as the bearers of racial and cultural difference, they are trapped within the pincers of a dual-pronged ideology: condemned for exhibiting an appetite so excessive it slips into a proclivity for cannibalism, they also risk being devoured by the avaricious patrons of Victorian culture. The fate of the other in nineteenth-century representation, it seems, is to submit to the process of being eaten, consumed and forgotten.

Or is it? Though the images of racial and cultural difference found in Victorian art and literature certainly support such a reading, it is important to recognise that, while the creators of that culture found it acceptable to make reference to foreign lands with little concern for the possible responses of native residents, twenty-first-century readers are not bound to do the same. As Said suggests:

> References to Australia in <u>David Copperfield</u> or India in <u>Jane Eyre</u> are made because they <u>can be</u>, because British power (and not just the novelist's fancy) made passing references to these massive appropriations possible; but the further lessons are no less true: that these colonies were subsequently liberated from direct and indirect rule, a process that began and unfolded while the [colonisers] were still there .... The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism

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[205] hooks, <u>Black Looks</u>, p. 39.

and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded.[206] If the canonical texts of nineteenth century Britain remain resolutely silent on the relationship between food and the other from the perspective of the other, then readers can nevertheless reconstruct these hidden narratives by paying attention to the silences in Victorian novels, and by examining less conventional cultural forms.

In his analysis of the links between food and freedom, Mintz argues that, although Caribbean slaves in the early nineteenth century were notoriously malnourished, the very hardship of life on the plantations helped to bring about a specifically slave-authored cuisine. 'Nearly all of the slaves had something to do with food, with its production or processing or distribution', he writes:

> Slaves not only had taste and canons of taste, but also ... their taste in food influenced the tastes of the masters. Many of the foods the masters would come to eat and prize in so-called slave societies they would learn about from the slaves. Those who caught or grew the food, who prepared and cooked it, who contributed most of all to the creation of the cuisine, were the slaves themselves.[207]

Food offered a degree of autonomy to otherwise enslaved peoples, along with the opportunity to exercise a kind of creative power. By combining traditional African recipes and cooking techniques with the acculturated

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[206] Said, Culture and Imperialism, pp. 78-79.

[207] Mintz, Tasting Food, pp. 37, 36.

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tastes and ingredients of the colonies, transported slaves invented, out of necessity as much as imagination, a new, hybridised cuisine for themselves and their masters.

In time, these dishes (commonly collected today under such labels as 'Creole' or 'Cajun') came to be incorporated into the coloniser's national culinary identity. As Marvalene Hughes points out, in a move which cleverly deconstructs the 'natural' association of food and nation,

> forced to leave their native land, their home, family, and African tribes, many slaves brought seeds with them. The watermelon seed, for example, now a symbol of the American South, was introduced to this country by enslaved Africans. Similarly, slaves brought okra, which later became a key ingredient for the preparation of gumbo, a New Orleans, French-related dish.[208]

Without the cultural clash occasioned by colonialism and its enforced thrusting together of miscellaneous peoples with diverse culinary tastes, some of the most popular dishes on the modern Western menu may never have been invented. The capacity to create new fare was by no means restricted to the plantation workers of the Caribbean, however: black and Indian servants working in Britain and its colonies, along with the many continental chefs who came to England in the early nineteenth century, all contributed to this productive process, shifting and modifying the diet of their employers in a way that would forever alter the idea of what constitutes a 'national' cuisine.

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[208] Marvalene H. Hughes, 'Soul, Black Women, and Food', in Food and Culture: A Reader, pp. 272-80 (p. 272).

It is important to recognise, therefore, that although colonising regimes positioned the nineteenth-century other in a passive relation to food, resistance to this imposition of meaning could, and did, occur. If food functions like a language, then the opportunity existed (albeit in limited scope) for the other to author its <u>own</u> meanings in relation to this substance, to find new ways of making it signify. One of the most fascinating stories associated with the Indian Mutiny, as told by Sir John Kaye in his epic history of the rebellion and later analysed by Bhabha, is the myth of the chapatis – flat, unleavened breads – 'that were rapidly circulated across the rural heartlands of the Mutiny, just after the introduction into the Native Infantries of the Enfield rifle and its notorious "greased" cartridge'.[209] According to Kaye, these mysterious tokens were passed 'from village to village, brought by one messenger and sent onward by another' in a gesture that bewildered 'even the most experienced' British observers:

> Some saw in it much meaning; some saw none. Time has thrown no new light upon it. Opinions still differ. And all that History can record with any certainty is, that the bearers of these strange missives went from place to place, and as ever as they went new excitements were engendered, and vague expectations were raised.[210]

At once objects of 'too much meaning and a certain meaninglessness',[211] as Bhabha suggests, the importance of the mythical chapatis inheres in their

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[209] Bhabha, <u>Location of Culture</u>, p. 200.

[210] Quoted in Bhabha, <u>Location of Culture</u>, pp. 201-02.

[211] Bhabha, <u>Location of Culture</u>, p. 202.

very indeterminacy. The 'true' meaning of their circulation (if such a meaning exists) can never be known; this, however, is not important. By utilising a familiar foodstuff in an unfamiliar manner, the participants in this strange ritual were able to make it signify in such a way as to resist the imposition of meaning by both contemporary colonisers and the determining weight of Western History. Food, as the chapati myth eloquently shows, offered a certain freedom of expression to colonised subjects.

The role of the racial and cultural other in relation to food was not simply subservient, therefore. As Mintz points out, 'dealing in food was dealing in freedom at many levels', however minute that freedom may have been.[212] By the late nineteenth century, former black slaves in the American South were beginning to publish cookery books and recipe collections (with the assistance of white transcribers), detailing their own, hybrid culinary traditions.[213] Yet, it is in the cultural memory, as opposed to the material texts of the nineteenth century, that the creative relationship between food and freedom is primarily to be found. By delving into the history of dishes invented by slaves and servants, and later appropriated by Western cultures as part of their everyday fare, it is possible to learn something about the protean nature of cultural identity. One finds, for example, that the British palate, traditionally associated with reticence and conservatism, has long held a taste for the 'exotic', adopting alien ingredients and eating habits with a readiness that disturbs the neat boundary between 'self' and 'other',

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[212] Mintz, Tasting Food, p. 47.

[213] See Andrew Warnes, '"Talking" Recipes: What Mrs Fisher Knows and the African-American Cookbook Tradition', in The Recipe Reader, pp. 52-71.

'British' and 'foreign' food. The apparent surprise with which certain sections of the modern media greeted news of chicken tikka masala's status as Britain's favourite dish masks the fact that fusion, or hybridisation, is an inevitable feature of any national cuisine.[214] Ultimately, owing to its deconstruction of inflexible racial and cultural stereotypes, and its concomitant troubling of conventional power relations, food proves a strangely fluid symbolic medium by which to author oneself and assert one's identity.

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[214] In April 2001, the British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, made a controversial speech in which he hailed chicken tikka masala Britain's 'most popular' national dish. Ironically, chicken tikka is not authentically Indian; rather, it is a curry designed specifically to cater to the demands of the British palate. It is thought to have been invented in the mid-twentieth century when a diner at a Glasgow curry house requested gravy on his tandoori chicken. A bemused chef responded by adding a tin of tomato soup and a pinch of spice to the dish, thus creating a new culinary pièce de résistance.

Conclusion – Food, Culture, Meaning

It seems that, in keeping with Brillat-Savarin's earlier-cited solicitation, nineteenth-century subjects were constantly telling one another how, and what, they ate. In cultural materials produced by and for the bourgeoisie, in particular, references to food and practices of consumption abound, although 'innocently', in such a way as to detract attention from their manifest presence and mask their ideological content.

This reticence is both curious and surprising. Food was a matter of great contention in the Victorian era, being implicated in many of the major political issues of the time, both at home and abroad. From 1860 onwards, a series of legislation (The Adulteration of Foods Act, 1860; The Adulteration of Food, Drink, and Drugs Act, 1872; The Sale of Food and Drugs Act, 1875; The Sale of Food and Drugs Act, 1899) was introduced to regulate food purity, revealing a (somewhat belated) governmental concern with the health of the British nation and a desire to control what the public ingested. This concern was politically motivated: in the latter part of the century, fears regarding the physical 'degeneracy' of society's lower classes were rife, compounded by the finding that 37.6 per cent of army volunteers for the Boer War were unfit for service. Such pervasive malnourishment was unacceptable: as John Burnett points out, Britain had industry, armed forces and, above all, an empire to maintain.[1]

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[1] John Burnett, Plenty and Want: A Social History of Food in England from 1815 to the Present Day, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 187.

Yet the problem of under-nourishment was not a new one: the issue of food provision had plagued successive nineteenth-century administrations, instigating widespread hunger and anger among the poor, as well as periodic outbreaks of public disorder. The agricultural riots which took place at various sites across Britain during the 1830s, for example, were directed primarily at the exorbitant price of bread. In Ireland, too, hunger begat misery and violence; the effects of the Great Famine were devastating and wide-ranging, and its consequences haunted British politics for generations to come. Food was also implicated in the outbreak of violence in India in 1857. Subsequently interpreted as the culmination of long-standing discontent engendered by British rule, the Mutiny's immediate cause related to the dietary concerns of its protagonists. Patrick Brantlinger explains:

> The sepoys of the Bengal Army suspected that the cartridges [for their new Enfield rifles] had been greased with cow and pig fat. The paper ends had to be bitten off before use, and because cow fat was taboo for Hindus and pork fat for Muslims, the British seemed to be forcing both groups of sepoys to commit sacrilege.[2]

Although Disraeli, speaking in parliament, later contended that 'the rise and fall of empires are not affairs of greased cartridges', it seems that food was invariably caught up, either directly or indirectly, in the domestic and imperial problems of nineteenth-century Britain.[3]

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[2] Patrick Brantlinger, Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 200.

[3] Quoted in Brantlinger, Rule of Darkness, p. 200.

Politicised references to food find their way into the representation of the period. Publications such as Punch commented frequently on the wretched situation of Britain's poor, while journalists such as George Augustus Sala highlighted the plight of the 'Houseless and Hungry' in their essays and articles.[4] In the fiction of Charles Dickens, food – or the lack of it – forms an integral part of the author's social critique. In Bleak House (1853), the kindness of Allan Woodcourt is too little to save Jo, the destitute crossing-sweep who is constantly 'moved on' by an uncaring society. So 'sick and miserable' is Jo, even his 'hunger has abandoned him'; he cannot eat the breakfast purchased for him by Allan, but only look at it, 'wonderingly'.[5] Here, food signifies relatively straightforwardly: it is a human necessity, the simple difference between life, on the one hand, and death, on the other.

Overtly politicised references to food feature less frequently in nineteenth-century representation, however, than the 'ordinary' incidences of eating and drinking which this thesis has made the focus of its study. These supposedly 'invisible' references to food and consumption function in a more complex way than their ideologically-explicit counterparts: appearing as mere textual details, subjugated to the requirements of character and plot development, they seem to tell readers precisely nothing, while actually expounding eloquently upon not only nineteenth-century food and eating

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[4] George Augustus Sala, Gaslight and Daylight, with some London Scenes they Shine Upon (London: Chapman and Hall, 1859), pp. 145-56.

[5] Charles Dickens, Bleak House, ed. Stephen Gill (1853; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 665.

habits but also nineteenth-century culture itself. As the close readings of dining rooms, picnics and dinner parties undertaken in the preceding chapters cumulatively suggest, representations of food are intricately tied up in cultural constructions of gender, race and class. They are also implicated in relations of power. Much nineteenth-century art and literature was created by and for the middle-classes; in representing themselves to themselves in the superficially mundane act of eating, this social group reproduced, whether consciously or unconsciously, a specifically bourgeois set of values and ideals, hopes and fears, aspirations and desires.

Representations of food in nineteenth-century culture, then, are caught up in a predominantly middle-class-authored mythology, which reflects, and consequently renders natural, an appositely bourgeois worldview. Endemic in this mode of representation is a desire for fixity. As Roland Barthes suggests, 'the very end of myths is to immobilize the world: they must suggest and mimic a universal order'.[6] In keeping with the middle-class longing for stability and security, it seems apt that the culinary and alimentary myths discussed in this thesis formulate themselves in binary terms: eating/seeing, good taste/bad taste, inside/outside, self/other. This system of classification and differentiation is typical of the way in which Victorian culture conceived of and organised itself: order defines limits, cements social relations, suspends uncertainty and thereby enables self-knowledge. The power and privilege of the bourgeoisie inhered in its ability to naturalise the culinary oppositions that permeate its representational

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[6] Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (1972; London: Vintage, 2000), p. 155.

practice for, significantly, the compass of these binaries was not simply epistemic. They also had a material effect on nineteenth-century culture, constructing, supporting and upholding various social inequalities and exclusions. The pictorial and literary equation of outdoor consumption with disorder, for instance, worked insidiously to confirm bourgeois ideas about the working classes: outdoor spaces were disorderly because the working classes ate there, while the working classes ate outdoors because they were disorderly.

Crucially, however, food in its signifying capacity is far from fixed: like language itself, it cannot guarantee unity, coherence or truth, owing to its plurality and mutability. Indeed, part of its power as a system of meaning resides in its flexibility, its adaptability, its potential for change. In The Pickwick Papers (1837), Sam Weller comments on the 'wery remarkable circumstance' of 'poverty and oysters always [seeming] to go together'. Travelling through Whitechapel with Mr Pickwick, he explicates:

> The poorer a place is, the greater call there seems to be for oysters. Look here, sir; here's a oyster stall to every half-dozen houses. The street's lined vith 'em. Blessed if I don't think that ven a man's wery poor, he rushes out of his lodgings, and eats oysters in reg'lar desperation.[7]

Just over a decade later, however, oysters were considered a commodity too expensive for the poor. A female oyster-seller interviewed by Henry Mayhew testifies to the varied makeup of her clientele – gentlemen, ladies, 'working

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[7] Charles Dickens, The Pickwick Papers, ed. Bernard Darwin (1837; London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 301.

people and tradespeople' – but is adamant that 'the very poor never buy' of her. 'A penny buys a loaf, you see', she goes on to explain, 'or a ha'porth of bread and a ha'porth of cheese, or a half-pint of beer, with a farthing out'.[8] Oysters, by implication, represent an unaffordable extravagance. By the end of the century, they were even less obtainable by the poor: scarcity pushed up prices, as Annette Hope points out, transforming oysters into a luxury foodstuff, the preserve of the lavish and wealthy.[9]

The shifting meanings attached to oysters in nineteenth-century culture attest to the instability of food as a signifying system. As the boundary separating those foods eaten by the rich from those consumed by the poor begins to break down, the conceptual binaries which order the bourgeois world reveal themselves to be untenable. Representations of food expose the limits of nineteenth-century mythology, its internal inconsistencies and incompleteness. Yet they also open up spaces for reading. In order to render manifest the ideological workings of references to food in bourgeois art and literature and, more importantly, to challenge their claim to present the world unproblematically, readers must undertake an active analysis, locating the internal contradictions and omissions that undermine claims to cohesion and authority, while persistently questioning that which 'goes without saying'. For, though undoubtedly necessary to the state of being, food and eating are not 'natural' but rather conditioned by

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[8] Henry Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor (1851; London: Frank Cass, 1967), Vol. 1, pp. 75-76.

[9] Annette Hope, Londoners' Larder: English Cuisine from Chaucer to the Present (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1990), p. 116.

history, society, culture. Loaded with ideological content, nineteenth-century depictions of food do not simply offer knowledge about historical eating habits or modes of consumption but also about signifying practice itself. In their fluidity and indeterminacy, references to food reveal the workings of language and culture, showing how meanings construct subjects, but also how subjects can resist their imposition. Ultimately, food, in its representation, tells much more than who or what we are.

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