FOOD AND EATING IN FICTION SINCE 1950
with particular reference to the writing of
Angela Carter, Doris Lessing, Michèle Roberts
and Alice Thomas Ellis.

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD
Queen Mary and Westfield College
University of London

1996
ABSTRACT

Eating is a fundamental activity. What people eat, how and with whom, what they feel about food, what they do or do not want to eat and why - even who they eat - are of crucial significance in any reading of human behaviour.

In this thesis, I consider the diverse and complex uses of food and eating in fiction since 1950, especially that written by women. I argue both that food and eating carry much of the meaning of a novel or story and that the acts of cooking, feeding and eating depicted are inseparable from issues of power and control: individually, interpersonally, culturally, politically.

My discussion centres on the writing of Angela Carter, Doris Lessing, Michèle Roberts and Alice Thomas Ellis. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, sociology, anthropology, Foucault, Bakhtin and others, the thesis aims to construct an interdisciplinary perspective which both resists reductive interpretations and emphasises the centrality, complexity and diversity of food and eating in literature in our culture.

I begin with an examination of the ambiguities of maternal feeding and nurturing, moving on to explore the links between appetite, eating and sexuality. I explore cannibalism and vampirism as manifestations of oppression, but also as indicating insatiable emptiness and transgressive appetite. The body itself is crucial, and my argument considers the paradox of not eating as control/enslavement, also tracing self-starvation as a positive route towards wholeness and connection. The last part of my argument focuses on social eating, examining conventions, rituals and food itself in connection with power relations, and finally considers how we might truly speak of food and eating in the context of society as a whole.
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If psychology has not made of [the] conjuring power of food as much as it might, literature on the other hand has been its diligent observer.

Kim Chernin, *The Hungry Self*

Food is very important because it's about destruction, it's about creation and preserving; you destroy the world by eating it - it's dead, you've killed it, and yet you've created something. It seems to me it's one of the great mysteries of life.

Michèle Roberts (interviewed by Georgina Brown, 1993)

A researcher asked women what three words they like most to hear. Instead of the expected answer - 'I love you' - the consensus was 'You've lost weight'.

Jenefer Shute, *Life-Size*

The other most important thing to remember in life was the total inadvisability of insulting the cook.

Alice Thomas Ellis, *The 27th Kingdom*

Flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh.

Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*

I cook a lot.

Doris Lessing (interviewed by Michael Thorpe, 1980)
INTRODUCTION

'Dis-moi ce que tu manges,' wrote Brillat-Savarin in 1825, '(et) je te dirai ce que tu es'.... The potent suggestiveness of food is one of a writer's richest resources, and has been drawn upon and exploited ever since Homer. Literary food and eating, often enticingly (or revoltingly) evocative, are of manifest mimetic power; it is intriguing and revealing to read about what people eat, who they cook for, how dinner - if it is - is served. Whether a meal consists of strong tea and oysters, seven courses of meats and sweets or assorted dried fruits and seeds is highly significant, as is whether it is taken seated, standing or lying down. Ferocious appetite, dainty restraint or the patient feeding of others are nothing if not revealing. Eating practices are in effect a currency, something 'understood', broadly accepted, interpretable indeed, as Brillat-Savarin suggests.

Encoded in appetite, taste, rituals and eating behaviours are all manner of givens by which people are categorised and judged within specific cultural contexts and which reveal these contexts, disclosing much about - to take a fairly random selection - class, deprivation, generosity, rigidity, power.

The use of food and eating in fiction is highly complex and to some extent assumes an ability in the reader to decode subtext and meaning on the basis of cultural and linguistic compressions and assumptions. This is less arcane than it sounds; the language of food and eating permeates many areas of

1 'Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you what you are,' Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, The Physiology of Taste or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy, (New York: Dover, 1960), 3 (Physiologie du Goût, 1825). Note: footnotes will give brief details of texts cited. For full details, including names of translators and original publication dates, see Bibliography.
activity and, in this culture at least, is thoroughly embedded in everyday speech. The prevalence of food or eating metaphors gives an indication of how comprehensively this is the case: to have a lot on your plate, bite off more than you can chew, cook up something, make a meal of something; to take a cup of kindness, swallow your pride, eat humble pie; to relish a ‘tasty’ man or woman, a dish or a bit of crumpet; to handle a hot potato, get egg on your face, act like a Spam-head and so on.

The oral connection between food and language, itself remarkable (though curiously enough only quite rarely or obliquely the focus of literary attention) equally finds its way into common expressions. Words may be rolled around the tongue or given a certain flavour; ideas or gossip may be chewed over. Since the mouth - that organ of exploration and discrimination - processes both food and language, there is an interesting reciprocity; parallels, inversions and ironies occur through their connection, though conventional upper- and middle-class British manners hold that eating and speaking must not occur simultaneously. Food is taken into the mouth, absorbed, made part of oneself, turned, as it were, into something private, part of the self. Language, conversely, is given out, projected from the mouth, made public, other-directed. The comparison can be taken further: food is slowly masticated, broken down, deconstructed and homogenised in the mouth, whereas language is put together, articulated, given form and simultaneously released onto the air. The

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2 It is worth noting, perhaps, that a subsidiary ‘somewhat humorous’ meaning to the word ‘discuss’ is to consume, eat or drink with enthusiasm, ‘make away with’ (fourteenth century from the Latin discutere (dis + quater), to dash or shake to pieces, agitate, dispense, dispel, drive away). Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

3 See however my discussion of Jenefer Shute’s Life-Size in Chapter IV.

4 They do of course, but must be managed so as not to appear to; hence the repeated injunctions to children of the middle and upper classes: ‘Don’t speak with your mouth full’ and ‘Don’t chew with your mouth open’.
processes, it seems, mirror and complement each other, as does their transgressive or repressive reversal: food regurgitated, spat out, vomited: words swallowed, choked upon, reabsorbed or withheld in a private and unsharable domain.\(^5\) The implications are equally opposed; to bite your tongue when eating is a misfortune, to do so when about to speak may be a virtue.

This link between food and language might seem too obvious to merit much attention, but its very familiarity means that it effectively underpins my thesis. Feeding, eating, cooking and food images are legion for good reason, and we generally understand much from them. If eating is a parallel to speaking, then feeding and eating activities comprise a sort of conversation, alternative and eloquent means of communication. Perhaps this is what underlies those prevalent eating metaphors. Add in the freight of culturally encoded meanings and injunctions, and the complexity of acts of eating begins to become apparent.

There are further layers. The revelatory use of eating in fiction may involve elegant or witty linguistic play and a scattering of cultural signifiers, but nourishment lies inescapably at our core, crucial in terms of survival, psychic development and primary social activities. For this reason, perhaps, novels without any mention of food or eating are comparatively few, and tend to be novels of ideas or to focus largely on textual surface.\(^6\) The essential and necessary qualities of eating invest its surrounding activities with value, whether psychological, moral or affective, in connection with relationships, social

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\(^5\) Maud Ellmann goes so far as to suggest speech and eating as polar opposites, positing a rivalry, a developmental supersession, for speech, she claims, replaces food in mouth. See Maud Ellmann, The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment (London: Virago, 1993).

\(^6\) I have in mind particularly the postmodern metafictional novel, or texts which do not much concern themselves with humanity.
interactions, public and/or political activity.

My original intention was to examine the ways in which writers use food and eating to illustrate and explore aspects of human psychology, spirituality and social organisation. However, as my researches progressed, it soon became apparent that the subject is broader, more complex and more subtle than I had anticipated, both in theoretical terms and in its use by the writers who form the subject of my study. There are, for example, epistemological and ontological aspects concerning, in particular, the boundaries between the self and the world, boundaries that are the very centre ground of food and eating. Uneaten food is clearly 'other', part of the world outside, but what happens as the food is tasted, taken in to the mouth, chewed, swallowed, digested? How much is the self affected, changed, nourished or poisoned by what is taken in of the world, and how? How much is the self defined by what is eaten and with whom, how affected by the provider and cook of the food?

Historical and cultural contexts are equally important. When, in The Sadeian Woman, Carter writes, 'flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh', her referent is sexuality, but her remarks are equally relevant to food. Beyond its obvious biological necessity, food's function is psychologically, socially and politically constructed, and food and eating, as much as sexuality, are indicators and results of cultural conditioning. Appetite, like desire, is enmeshed in a nexus of conditions and influences that press from both inside and out. The connection with Carter's Sadeian argument is most evident in relation to questions of weight and diet; women in contemporary Western culture are socially stigmatised if overweight, a bias conspicuous in the inflation of symbolic

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meanings attached to fat women (blowsy, sexually intemperate, loud, imprudent, stupid) and a dearth of neutral descriptive terms such as those used to portray heavy men: stocky, thickset, portly.  

The writers considered in this study demonstrate an awareness of historical and cultural context, and \( \) write against a background of mid-to-late twentieth century confusion and upheaval. Their concern with what it means to be part of this particular culture at this particular point, and as women, is, along with their writing of food and eating, the major reason for my choosing these particular writers. The realisation manifests itself very differently in each writer, of course. Doris Lessing is the writer who most overtly - and in terms of time extensively - confronts the matter of twentieth century life, most evidently in her realist novels, such as the 'Children of Violence' sequence or The Golden Notebook. Her scope is comprehensive. Her novels (realist and fabular alike) are solidly grounded in contemporary history and culture, focusing among other things on: difficulties of self-identity in the modern world; the problematic relationship between language and meaning; dangers inherent in excessive mentalism and the concomitant importance of psycho-physical integration; and, perhaps most importantly, how individuals relate to the greater social body.

Food and eating in Lessing’s writing act as central vehicles for the expression and working through of problems and questions of value in all these areas.

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9 It is worth noting that Lessing is not generally admired as a stylist. See, for example Kate Fullbrook’s criticism of her ‘clumsiness’ in an otherwise laudatory chapter, ‘Doris Lessing: The Limits of Liberty’, in Free Women: Ethics and Aesthetics in Twentieth-Century Women’s Fiction (London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990) 141-69, or Natasha Walter’s comments in a review of Lessing’s most recent novel, Love, Again, that Lessing has a ‘brusque, sometimes brutal, sometimes ugly style…’ The Guardian (29 March 1996), G2 16.
Unable, so she claimed, to write about 'battles with the DHSS' (social realism), Angela Carter in her novels and short stories nevertheless addresses 'the social fictions that regulate our lives', and her interviews and reflexive articles stress her interest and involvement in contemporary social and political matters. She describes the novel as 'part of social practice in a way the fine arts are not', and herself as being aware that the sense of limitless freedom that I, as a woman, sometimes feel is that of a new kind of being. Because I simply could not have existed, as I am, in any other preceding time or place. I am the pure product of an advanced, industrialised, post-imperialist country in decline.

Her fiction, spun out of European culture, mixing fables, fairy tales, fantasy and realism in the most extraordinarily powerful and vivid prose, addresses fundamental philosophical and political questions about being alive, and most particularly about being a woman, in the late Western world. While her writing on food generally is lively and typically acerbic (she reviewed a number of food and cookery books), my main focus here is on her use of food and eating in relation to power and the politics of appetite, which while apparently remote from 'ordinary' life is, I believe, quite specifically about Carter's perception of the modern world and its people.


11 ‘Angela Carter interviewed by Lorna Sage’, 193 and ‘Notes from the Front Line’, 73.

12 ‘I would like, I would really like, to have had the guts and the energy and so on to be able to write about, you know, people having battles with the DHSS. But I haven’t. I’ve done other things. I mean I’m an arty person. O.K., I write overblown purple, self-indulgent prose. So fucking what!’ ‘Angela Carter’s Curious Room’, Omnibus.
Alice Thomas Ellis's writing, by contrast, faces very much away from contemporary society and towards spiritual or religious contemplation. One of the major reasons for this, however, is that her characters are in and of the contemporary world, grappling with what Ellis herself portrays as its baseness and folly. Her wickedly appealing protagonists, and indeed the general impetus of her novels, are often frankly contemptuous of fashionable liberalism (including feminism), though feminist issues abound in the complicated interactions and power games that centre, largely, on women, and specifically around cooking and eating. Power is thoroughly encoded in these activities, visible or perceptible only to the initiate and the reader informed in the complicated dances of the English class system. Ellis's heroines are frequently dandyesque and laconic and her narration deceptively cool and casual, a smooth icing over a cake filled with chillis.

Like Lessing and Carter, Michèle Roberts writes in a mixture of modes, addressing contemporary issues only obliquely or historically, and like Alice Thomas Ellis she writes directly and evocatively on food and eating. She is much concerned with ontological anxiety and the relation of this to both gender and religion. Her novels combine an acute sense of physical being with exploration of the historical and cultural (and therefore present) definition and regulation of femininity. This embraces questions of language, mythology and religion as well as sexual politics, elements that she variously weaves together or juxtaposes within a highly poetic and often lyrical prose style. Her writing on food is that of a cook and aficionado, but perhaps even more important for my purposes is that her characters are so often hungry, sometimes literally so, and

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13 'Ms Thomas Ellis says she wrote her first book out of anger at the state of the world.' Sue Fox, 'Starting is the hardest word', The Times (12 November 1991), 3.
often psychologically, affectively, spiritually.

She is not alone here. There seems to me to be an overwhelming human yearning for oneness, manifesting itself in sexual desire, religious desire, physical hunger, the 'back to the womb' complex, even in the death wish. Without oversimplifying I think it would be fair to say that each of the writers I examine portrays or discusses this yearning in one way or another: Carter in the play of appetites of Eros and Thanatos, Roberts in general, and specifically in relation to breastfeeding and unacknowledged desire for the mother, Ellis largely in a metaphysical longing that contrasts to the prevalence of food and sex (and their entanglement with power) in the novels. In Doris Lessing's novels the longing is both manifest and underlined in the shape of political ideals and disillusion, in community punctured by individual isolation, in the paradoxical interplay of breakdown and wholeness, in realism itself and the desire for and limitations of a unifying vision.

Such a hunger is the stuff of psychoanalytic theory, and it will hardly come as a surprise that I refer to Freud, Klein and others during the course of my argument. The thesis is not, however, solely devoted to psychoanalytic accounts of food and eating in literature, and my approach draws instead on a number of areas of theory. There are several reasons for this. To begin with, I want to resist the practice of using a literary texts as an exemplar, exposition or illustration of a particular theory. I find this reductive, in some cases to the point of absurdity. 14 Whatever the theory, such an approach risks 'packaging' the literary text, so that it becomes contained by the particular theoretical process, its literary complexity disallowed.

14 An example of the limitations of this approach is a recent public lecture in which Macbeth was interpreted as the case study of man struggling with deep-seated desires and frustrations in relation to the production of a son and heir.
My aim is to draw on theory as it appears relevant to the discussion in hand, making, as it were, a path from a series of stepping stones, each one of which offers a perspective on a text or texts in relation to my overall argument, but is not exclusive, for there are almost always many possible readings. This is not to suggest that the thesis is illuminated by a pot-pourri of theoretical approaches, nor that it consists of the comparative examination of critical theories with instances of cooking and eating. My project is neither so dispersed nor so ambitious. I seek rather to suggest some ways of looking at the texts in the light of particular theories, and to ground my ideas about the uses and the subtext of food and eating within a framework of ideas considerably larger than my own. In other words, my argument attempts a reasonably comprehensive and wide-ranging view without taking up fixed, monocural positions or sacrificing texts to theories, for, I believe, there would be no gain in constructing even a powerful argument about food and eating on the basis of theory if this is at the cost of the integrity of the literary texts themselves.

The question then to be addressed is why use the particular theories I draw upon? This was, initially at least, more difficult to answer. Why does one warm to a certain critic, become interested in particular movement or draw on specific theory? I can offer three possible explanations. The first is a question of personal predilection. I am, in the main, attracted by two areas of explanatory theory, that which examines political and social pressures and influences, and that which gives attention to what pushes from within. This explanation needs to be taken further. Even before looking to ‘bodies of theory’, the personal explanatory narratives I construct, and have always constructed, have to do with motivation, behaviour, understanding, both individual and social.
In short, I refer to a popular Freudianism of the kind that is widely employed in conversation. This brings me to the second explanation, for such popular Freudianism is surely not at all my own, but something culturally sanctioned, absorbed into every-day discourses, propagated by chat shows and agony columns. Debased, yes, but there.\(^{15}\)

The third explanation is more scholarly: the choice of theory relates directly to the subject matter of the thesis. I would use psychoanalytic theory, for example, to illuminate a discussion focusing on a driving desire to consume that might suggest an inner compulsion. Discussion of carnival, by the same token, demands reference to Bakhtin. One of the underlying hypotheses of my research, that it is impossible to disentangle the behaviour surrounding food and eating from acts of power and control, relates not only to psychoanalytic theory but leads quite directly to Foucault. Where power is clearly and overtly exerted from an external source, an analysis drawing on Foucault's notion of the discourses of power seems highly appropriate; when the interactions themselves involve a struggle for verbal, culinary or gustatory ascendancy, his theory of micropowers and the play of power relations is clearly relevant.\(^{16}\)

The mention of underlying hypotheses brings me, finally, to the thesis as a whole. Strictly speaking, the claim that acts of cooking, feeding and eating relate to power is a secondary hypothesis, a progeny that has in some measure

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\(^{15}\) This connects with my use of Foucault. By 'reading across' from Freud to Foucault, it may be seen that the discourses of psychoanalysis have become culturally embedded in much the same way as those of sexuality and madness. This connection was not, I have to admit, part of my original intention, but a happy accident, a realisation resulting from thinking about the widespread use of psychoanalytic theory.

\(^{16}\) It is worth noting that there are quite specific discourses (of varying degrees of disciplinary force) relating to food and eating. These might include recipes, mothers' advice, 'foodie' literature, advertising, reports on diet and health, religious and cultural customs - or rules and regulations that we lay down ourselves, such as forbidding children to eat sweets, always eating fruit after a meal or refusing to consume animal products.
outgrown its parent. Struggles for power and control bubble up through almost every novel in relation to food, and much of my discussion is thus drawn to focus on power in the broadest sense: personal, social, political. My initial hypothesis concerned the centrality of food and eating in fiction, especially that written by women, and it is evident throughout the thesis that food and eating convey much of the meaning of a novel, functioning as something like a universal signifier. The complexity of function also provides a further reason for my using a variety of theorists. The research leading to this thesis has from the beginning been important because it identifies and opens up an area not previously acknowledged as of particular importance in literary terms. My discussion is intentionally interdisciplinary, drawing on theory from a number of different disciplines. This approach reflects the complexity and widely acknowledged significance of the subject, allows a productive overview and mirrors the contradictory, integrative and associative functions of eating itself.

The first chapter concerns the powerful connections between food and love across the range of my four writers. The chapter begins with maternal and pseudo-maternal nurturing, examining its responsibilities and failures, and the satisfactions and (dis)empowerment of the mothering role, before going on to consider the giving of food in more general terms as a symbolic act of love. Maternal feeding or nurturing is effectively offered as a model for the expression of love, and this is reflected and developed in the Agape of Christian communion and the giving of food to express friendship, duty and sisterhood. The chapter concludes with an examination of how the connection of food with sexual love,

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17 It has to be said that during the period of my research work in this area has begun to burgeon, though largely from the perspectives of cultural studies, sociology and psychology. Interest is now beginning to grow in literary studies also, as some of the titles in my bibliography confirm.
or with sexuality itself, is different from that in the maternal model, and here I focus particularly on Angela Carter’s writing and on Freud’s ‘Three Essays on Sexuality’.

The connection of food with sex, in Carter’s fiction at least, assumes an insatiable and sometimes malignant eroticism, and both the predatory quality and the unappeasable nature of the appetite are evident in manifestations or figures of cannibalism and vampirism. My second chapter is devoted to cannibalistic desire. It considers both the ‘positive’ desire for union with another, expressed through cannibalism, and the more usual brutal and predatory cannibalism of myth and monster. The greater part of the chapter concerns Carter’s use of cannibal motifs, considering these in the light of ideas of cannibalism as oppression and colonialism, but concentrating largely on psychoanalytic theory. Drawing especially on theory of the oral stage, I suggest that cannibalism in Carter’s fiction is generally indicative of interior emptiness - either monstrous appetite and fantasies of omnipotence or unfulfillable yearning for an impossible state of oneness/wholeness - and that this may be seen as an expression of Thanatos in the modern sensibility.

The following short chapter, ‘Postscript to Cannibalism’, follows this argument through in relation to vampirism. The vampire’s appetite is as insatiable as that of the cannibal, but goes further inasmuch as ‘eating’ and sexual activity are conjoined, though Eros here is deathly. My argument stresses the essential ambiguity of vampiric appetite, that rapaciousness and a desperate nostalgic dependence coexist, that vampirism represents a return of the repressed, and that vampires in fiction and film are used to figure all manner of threats emanating from ‘otherness’. The chapter considers similarities between late nineteenth century and late twentieth century fascinations with
vampirism and the more explicit, more ambivalent and at even at times celebratory attitude currently manifested towards the transgressive qualities of the vampire appetite.

Despite their differences of focus and content, the perspective of all three chapters so far is generally personal or individual, drawing as they do largely upon psychoanalytic theory. The fourth chapter provides a hinge between this and the more thoroughly social focus of the final two chapters, encompassing personal, social and broadly political perspectives in an examination of food and eating - or not eating - in relation to the body. Beginning with a brief and generalised consideration of conceptions of the body in Western culture, the chapter examines eating and not eating in response to a culturally constructed 'ideal' body image and in relation to questions of control, empowerment and possible enlightenment. Much of the chapter focuses on novels by Doris Lessing in which the dangers or inadequacy of mentalism are contrasted to an integrity that encompasses all bodily processes. Not eating here is contrasted with that in Jenefer Shute's Life-Size, a novel stressing the desire for control and paradoxical enslavement associated with eating disorders; Lessing's heroines may gain ultimate wholeness and connection through breakdown brought about, in part at least, by self-starvation.

Control, autonomy and the exertion of personal power play an important part in attempts to regulate - or even to care for - the body, and this subtext forms part of the concerns of this chapter. Some of Lessing's characters make connections through caring for the body, or more precisely through caring for others' bodies, and here, as in the kitchen, power struggles are evident. Social strictures against fatness, similarly, are seen to be a matter of control as much as anything else. The chapter draws, as it must, on Foucault, on some
sociology of the body and on some of the considerable quantity of academic and semi-popular literature on eating disorders.

The last two chapters discuss social eating. The first of these is concerned with signifiers, concentrating on the ways in which both food itself and the conventions surrounding it are used to convey a wealth of subsidiary meanings, both in relation to the action of a novel - questions of motivation, communication, manipulation - and as a means of supplying layers of meaning concerning class, gender, religious affiliation, family relationships and so on. The first part of the chapter consists of an extended analysis of the socially constructed, culturally influenced and artistically contrived significances of various foods in the writing of Michèle Roberts. These are considered in the light of both sociological and anthropological research, as well as by comparisons within the body of Roberts’ own work. The chapter moves on to examine rituals, customs and manners and their significance, and I suggest how these operate in relation to Foucault’s theory of ‘micro powers’. The final part of the chapter is devoted to decoding the play of power relations through the rituals and manners surrounding cooking and eating in the novels of Alice Thomas Ellis.

My final chapter is an attempt to formulate how we might truly speak of social eating, how the activities surrounding food might relate to some idea or sense of community. To put it more grandly, I consider how public and private might in some way be seen to be brought together - or least to connect - through food and eating, and here the focus is on fiction by Doris Lessing and Angela Carter. Factors examined at length in earlier chapters - cannibalism, the body, self-starvation, the play of power relations and the power of manners - are in evidence, as are the complexity and difficulties of human interaction. Indeed,
the difficulties of any kind of community or communion are probably more
clearly established through my argument than any ideal of collectivity. What I
do claim is that Lessing emphasises not just difficulty but responsibility; her
fiction inveighs against the stifling of (especially metaphorical) omnivorousness
and the closing of minds and borders. My argument stresses her novels’
repeated examination of what it means to be a social being, and that this is not
necessarily a given. The final part of this last chapter examines how Carter,
too, emphasises what might be seen as socially problematic, through the
celebration of illegitimacy, subversive solidarity and the (re)appropriation of
power in relation to acts of eating, while acknowledging both the energy and
exuberance and the essentially conservative tendency of carnival, and thus of
sanctioned and patronised ‘revolutionary’ eating.

My conclusion I will leave to speak for itself in due course, for it
summarises and speculates about an implicit assumption of the entire thesis.
First, however, comes the food, together with the feeding, the cooking and the
eating. Bon appetit.
Food is a currency of love and desire, a means of expression and communication. It is no coincidence that the centrepiece of Christian worship is a simulated meal - the giving of symbolic bread and wine as a token of love and trust - and most religions involve ritual eating of some sort. From small children’s giving of sweets to lovers’ boxes of chocolates, from sharing school sandwiches to treating a friend to lunch, giving food is a way of announcing affection, friendship, love. For friends, given or shared food may be an expression of support or an invitation to celebrate; for lovers there is generally a more intimate and often sexual subtext, and appetite and eating may even be incorporated, in some way, into sexuality. Where mothering is concerned, food-giving is largely routine, the norm rather than the exception; nurturing (or its lack) depends rather on repeated and routine care and feeding than the occasional spontaneous act, and is, in theory at least, an essentially altruistic form of behaviour.

For many people the association of food with love is through their mother, or arises from feeding their own children. A mother is more often than not the most important figure in an infant’s world, able to give or withhold everything that sustains, nourishes, fulfils, completes. It is this person who shapes or socialises a child’s appetite and expectations of the world, by feeding a baby when it cries, for example, or adhering to a rigid schedule of four-hourly feeds, by the cultivation of ‘table manners’ and through the provision of fish
fingers or porridge, raw fish or curry. Along with nutrition the mother feeds her child love, resentment, encouragement or fear. She seems a figure of limitless authority, as irresistible as the monstrous and multi-nippled Mother in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (who recalls the Ephesus statue of a breast-covered Artemis as birth goddess). Yet the role of mother in our society is ambiguous, if not ambivalent; mothers are both immensely powerful and yet at the same time socially and domestically disempowered by their nurturing, serving role.

This opening chapter will focus on how writers may convey such ambiguity, how mothers and mother figures are shown as both enslaved and powerful providers of food, and how the giving or sharing of food is so often equated with the giving of love. This is true not only of mothers, of course, and my discussion will also touch on the sharing of food as an expression of love by friends or relatives, before going on to consider food in relation to the complexities of desire. Whether there is an essential connection between appetites, what food, eating and sexuality signify in relation to each other and how writers convey or manipulate an interplay between food and sex are central questions. Implicit in both parts of this chapter - the discussion of mothers and mothering and the exploration of food and sex - is an examination of the representation of women’s roles and their degree of power in relation to food.

The first thing to be noted is the frequent absence of actual mothers in fiction. Maternal deprivation has a long and honourable literary history - in Dickens, Austen, Eliot and the Brontës, for example - and is almost a

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requirement of the *Bildungsroman*, a prerequisite for the protagonist's achievement of autonomy. *Mothering*, on the other hand, features largely in a great deal of literature, both as an indicator of love and nurturing, and to suggest burdens and disempowerment.

Even where nurturing mothers are featured, the experience evoked is frequently that of the child, the grateful or resentful receiver, rather than that of the nourishing provider.² Michèle Roberts' first two novels, for example, both retrace a young woman's almost ecstatic (and unsatisfied) hunger for her mother, which is only in the end pacified by some sort of revisiting of the attachment to the mother. In *A Piece of the Night* Julie rehearses in memory her sense of loss at being separated from her mother and distanced by her ('The child is joined to the mother, the woman is joined to the man. That is what being a woman means'), at the same time as trying to create an adult bond with her, and with her women friends and lover. In *The Visitation* Helen, with the help of her closest friend Beth, accomplishes a symbolic revisiting of the pre-oedipal, through which she achieves release.⁴ In this novel, the quality of Helen's hunger almost leaps out of the following passage, drowning the

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² This is partially accounted for, no doubt, by the fact that we have all been children with wants and hungers, but that even women writers have not all been mothers. But it is not just a question of gender, for the feminist novels and autobiographies concerning mother-daughter relationships which burgeoned in the 1970s are almost invariably written from the daughters' perspectives. Perhaps it has something to do with selfishness, a failure of altruism and a contemporary tendency to re-examine our pasts rather than look to the future. There are, of course, exceptions.


⁴ The term pre-oedipal appears late in Freud's work, to distinguish the period of psychosexual development before the Oedipus complex, and specifically to characterise the primary relationship between little girls and their mothers, which is longer, more important and more complex than that of boys. See "Female Sexuality", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol. XXI (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis 1961), 226 (1931). (Further references to the works of Freud throughout this thesis will be abbreviated to *SE* followed by the Volume number and date, with the original publication date of the piece given in brackets.)
mother's own difficulties:

The first word that she utters is *more*. It's a demand, a despairing plea, a shout of rage and frustration. Her mother has twin babies to feed. It's a lot of work, having two. Helen is all mouth, a gaping hole crying out to be filled. Her mother consults the words of doctors on the printed page. Fifteen minutes per baby, per breast, at specific intervals. No demand feeding in between. They'll have to learn, just like their mother does. If only I'd been able, she shyly tells Helen years later: to trust my own feeling rather than the books, I'd have fed you at night when you cried. I used to walk with you up and down the room, and I knew you were hungry and I didn't dare to feed you, because the doctor in the book said it was wrong. Instead, her own daughter later vilifies her. Helen's all impatience, hunger turning to a greed that's never known satisfaction, the pleasure of lying back, full and content. She strains for the forbidden breast, crying and red-faced, she gulps eagerly, too fast, and chokes. She distrusts this food, this thin, short-lived love given too abruptly and taken away too soon. She knows pleasure only by its absence. Instead of sweet milk, she is full of bilious hate: wind and emptiness. Oh, she's a bad, a bad baby, there's no doubt of that. The baby book cracks like a whip.⁵

The narrative here encompasses both maternal and filial experiences, but the primary focus is inescapably with the daughter, because the descriptions of her are so vivid, so urgent, and because the crying baby's emotions are named and written in a partially internal mode. The upshot of mother's and daughter's mutual frustration is a prickly and unsatisfying relationship. It falls, indeed, to the significantly named grandmother, Mrs Home, to provide the nurturing (by means of both food and endorsement) that Helen craves, and it is only with her death - indeed, just after the funeral - that a reconciliation can begin between Helen and her mother, aptly enough encoded in food:

Catherine has ransacked her larder and kitchen, now that her daughter proves willing to accept her gifts; they are suddenly pleased with one another, the items of food expressing all that remains unsaid. (119)

Though relations may be difficult between particular mothers and daughters, Roberts seems to endorse the idea, or the reality, of women-as-mothers-as-nurturers. This is expressed in its most general form in *The Wild Girl*, which moves to endorse a female principle that would complete an almost Blakean unity (following a dream-like or mythical marriage of heaven and hell), invoking the name of 'the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit who is Sophia but also the name of the Mother who is earth, matter and soul married and indivisible'. More specifically, the idea of female nurturing is also evident in various instances of displaced mothering, by grandmothers (Mrs Home), by nuns, such as those who teach Hattie to cook in *In the Red Kitchen*, by friends (Beth in *The Visitation*, the group of women in *A Piece of the Night*) or simply by women in the grip of maternal impulses, such as when Hattie finds and comforts the ghostly Flora Milk shut in the kitchen cupboard for not eating her porridge.

The transposing of the nurturing, feeding aspects of motherhood onto substitute figures is one way of avoiding a biological essentialism. Angela Carter's two most nurturing women are probably Aunt Margaret in *The Magic Toyshop* and Grandma Chance in *Wise Children*, though Fevvers' mentor and companion Lizzie in *Nights at the Circus* would come a close third. Actual mothers, as Nicole Ward Jouve points out, are given pretty short shrift in

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7. Hattie is, as a psychotherapist might put it, mothering herself here, and recognises 'the little girl I'd been frightened of giving space to because of what she had made me remember' (119). She in turn is 'mothered' by her partner who decides she needs 'some looking after' in the form of 'pistachios, takeaway pizzas, a pineapple, two bottles of red wine', though the mothering care transmutes into that of the lover. Although it operates figuratively, the time-leaping mothering or nurturing connection between Hattie and the ghost-child Flora is rendered literally persuasive by its attention to detail: the remnants of bread, cheese and cold porridge, the child's crusted snot and smell of urine, her tears and shuddering. Michèle Roberts, *In The Red Kitchen* (London: Minerva 1991).
Carter’s resolute stance against essentialism, (and even grandmothers tend to get eaten by wolves or blown up). Non-biological mothers are, however, allowed to behave (and be constricted) maternally. Aunt Margaret, economically dependent, enslaved, rendered mute and controlled by patriarchy in the person of Uncle Philip, is given eloquent means of expression through her cooking and caring. Although she is required to cater for her husband, her cooking is directed towards her brothers, and benignly embraces Melanie and her siblings, for whose arrival she produces a magically welcoming meal with a steaming savory pie:

The food was abundant and delicious. There was both white bread and brown bread, yellow curls of the best butter, two kinds of jam (strawberry and apricot) on the table and currant cake on the sideboard ready for when they had dealt with the pie.

Aunt Margaret poured fresh tea from a brown earthenware, Sunday-school treat pot that was so heavy she had to lift it with both hands. They drank their tea very dark and all put much sugar into it. Aunt Margaret presided over the table with placid contentment, urging them to eat with eloquent movements of the eyes and hands.

The bright picture painted here, with its Beatrix Potter rhythms and wide-eyed vocabulary, goes some way to suggesting a maternal archetype. Food and love are almost inseparable in this scene, followed, when the girls go to bed, by Aunt Margaret’s gazing broodily at Victoria ‘with a naked, maternal expression on her face’ (48) and writing on her notepad, ‘What a fine, plump little girl!’ - a distinctly Hansel and Gretel touch, reminding readers that mothers may indeed be devouring.

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8 See Nicole Ward Jouve, ‘Mother is a Figure of Speech...’ in Lorna Sage, ed., Flesh and the Mirror (London: Virago, 1994), 136-170.

Grandma Chance in *Wise Children*, on the other hand, though thoroughly nurturing and fiercely protective, never smothers her twin charges. Her strict vegetarianism provides the girls with vitamins, love and a code of empathetically moral behaviour (she will not even allow cut flowers, claiming to hear them scream) and sets her in polar opposition to the predatory, carnivorous Saskia. Her attitude to food, though strict, is not joyless, and she embraces treats, from theatre trips with cucumber sandwiches to lavish birthday cake and her own Guinness and crème de menthe. Not only does Grandma provide the twins with physical, emotional, political and spiritual nourishment, she also tactfully exits, with the aid of a flying bomb, so as to allow them, as they reach maturity, to achieve proper separation and autonomous development without having to move house.¹⁰

The necessity of good mothering to both individual and social function is an important subtext in an enormous amount of fiction. Doris Lessing makes the responsibilities of mothering an explicit theme in more than one novel. *Memoirs of a Survivor*, in particular, contains an examination of nurturing and its lack in both 'personal' and public contexts.¹¹ The (unnamed) narrator accepts what is in effect a maternal responsibility for the young girl Emily who is left with her (thereby becoming another surrogate mother figure), and attempts to provide both care and guidance. Her care is quietly expressed through food: she goes out to find food for a 'welcoming meal' for both Emily and her cat-dog Hugo; provides for them both and encourages Emily when she wants to cook and then when she goes out foraging; she watches and interprets Emily's

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¹⁰ Failure to achieve a proper separation between mother (or mother figure?) and daughter is cited as one of the major factors in the production of eating disorders (see discussion in Chapter IV).

¹¹ Doris Lessing, *Memoirs of a Survivor* (London: Flamingo, 1995). For discussion of the 'public' or social aspects of eating, including nurturing, see my final chapter.
adolescent eating phase and subsequent starving phase; she provides a refuge (with food) to which Emily can return from the stresses of living with Gerald and his household. Like any mother, she becomes anxious for her charge:

...how dark a foreboding it was, how I had come to watch and grieve over her, how sharp was my anxiety when she was out in empty buildings and waste lots... (47)

Such anxiety has partly to do with issues of control: how can a person exercise a duty of care over an absent charge? The parental dilemma of when and how to let go is clearly signalled, as is concern, not only about personal safety, but about influence, for once a child goes out into the world, the parental power to mould and influence becomes severely diluted; as the narrator recognises, ‘...in fact people develop for good or bad by swallowing whole other people, atmospheres, events, places’ (50).

As the narrator’s understanding progresses in the outer world, so her visits to the ‘personal’ realm behind the wall reflect, illuminate and expand upon her perceptions. The composite early childhood (suggesting the narrator’s, Emily’s and her mother’s childhoods) is, because shared, indicative of general truths. The narrator witnesses scenes such as the frenzied baby desperate for food and attention (every bit as frantic as Michèle Roberts’ babies):

The baby was desperate with hunger. Need clawed in her belly, she was being eaten alive by the need for food. She yelled inside the thick smothering warmth; sweat scattered off her scarlet face; she twisted her

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12 I am not concerned with the visionary scenes here, but with what are dubbed ‘personal’: the stifling scenes of neglect, repression and precocious sexualisation verging on abuse (tickling).

head to find a breast, a bottle, anything: she wanted liquid, warmth, food, comfort. (129)

She observes the uncomfortable hot child or baby, confined in a cot or beneath tight covers, in a white nursery with no visual stimulation or affectionate attention; she sees a sick child yearning to be cuddled by her mother; she watches helplessly while a little girl is ‘tickled’ remorselessly by her uncomfortable father; she sees the child listening to her mother complain endlessly about the burden of caring for her. Of all the scenes of deprivation and repression, perhaps the most shocking is the disgusted mother’s reaction to this infant’s naturally curious exploration and tasting of her own excrement, the physical cruelty of the child’s subsequent cleaning, and the long lingering of her desolate sobs.

What these scenes add up to is a representation of feeding without nurturing. The combination of scenes provides a psychological aetiology for Emily’s (and the narrator’s) sense of duty and her desire for fulfilment by Gerald, and also outlines some of the grounds for the disintegration of society. Though the reader’s sympathy is initially engaged by the narrator’s intense feeling for the child, the infant’s transmutation from Emily into her mother makes it clear that this woman too is helpless, doomed to repeat patterns of mothering within a socially-constructed role of motherhood. All too often, as with the child’s-eye view I began by discussing, the maternal view of children tends to discount the child’s alternative perspective, not allow that the child possesses, in that wonderful phrase of George Eliot, an ‘equivalent centre of

14 The disintegration of society, its causes and what might be done about it lie at the core of the novel, but are peripheral to my discussion here, which centres on the role of mothers and their substitutes. For fuller discussion of the social import of the scenes behind the wall, see my final chapter.
Here we see the scenes, of course, through the narrator’s eyes, and although she too is fulfilling a mother’s role, the necessary distance involved in her observation allows a perception that the mother is just one player in the scene, and that the daughter is a being also, and one of burgeoning autonomy. Thus, with a mixture of narratorial voice and authorial judgement, she concludes:

Now I judge myself to have been stupid: the elderly tend not to see - they have forgotten! - that hidden person in the young creature, the strongest and most powerful member among the cast of characters inhabiting an adolescent body, the self which instructs, chooses experience - and protects. (52)

With responsibilities, clearly, go difficulties. Lessing takes this further in the ‘Children of Violence’ novels, in Martha Quest’s problematic relationships with both her mother and her daughter. What is suggested by the composite childhood of Memoirs is in these novels given the specific label, the ‘nightmare of repetition’, as Martha struggles not to repeat her mother’s pattern. Both May Quest, who cannot let go of the daughter she nevertheless fails to nurture, and Martha, who finds herself engaged in the most debilitating and frustrating feeding battles with her little girl, find themselves failing to provide the mothering that they feel they should. 16

It is no coincidence that my discussion of failures of mothering should


16 Martha extricates herself from the situation in time to avoid the danger of repeating May Quest’s failure to ‘mirror’ her child, to see her as separate and then reflect her back to herself as independent being - an essential developmental stage for both mother and child. The cost of Martha’s escape is to deprive her daughter of herself, and so another fictional infant is brought up by a surrogate mother. For a discussion of the failure of maternal separation as a contributory factor in eating disorders, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease (Cambridge Ma and London: Harvard University Press, 1988).
return to examples of biological mothers, for actual mothers seem always to be open to attack for failure to nurture. As I suggested earlier, this probably has to do with the portrayal of mothers from the perspective of the indignant infant (of whatever age). Even Martha Quest manages to pass on to her mother much of the blame for her own difficulties. Maternal failures are variously attributed to intrusiveness or excessive distance, force-feeding or denial, smothering or neglect. Repressed or repressive, distant or un-nurturing mothers are a particular feature of the literature of upper-middle class English life; consider Evelyn Waugh's A Handful of Dust, or May Sinclair's The Life and Death of Harriett Frean, for example. The mother in Good Behaviour (discussed further in Chapter IV) is particularly heinous; treating her children with a vague and chilly disregard, for she prefers her painting, her gardening and her husband (in about that order), she neither supervises the nursery food nor intervenes in times of illness or unhappiness, and her relief at being spared their company is almost palpable.

Often, failures of nurturing reflect a mother's own insecurities and inadequacies. Alice Thomas Ellis portrays a number of mothers whose nurturing is problematic. Rose, in The Sin Eater, is too busy playing power games to perceive and head off the danger to her beloved twins. Mrs Marsh, in The Birds of the Air, is hopelessly unable to reconcile her regard for conventions and appearances with affection for her troubled family. She is frightened of one depressed and grieving daughter and vacillates between saccharine nurturing and exasperation with her, while failing to provide guidance and support for her other more approved daughter, whose family life is falling to pieces. The novels collected as the 'Summerhouse Trilogy', which centre on the projected marriage of Margaret and Syl, portray three separate mothers who fail, one way or
another, to nurture.\textsuperscript{17} The elderly Mrs Munro is distanced from her unspeakable middle-aged son by her own aging, and by the fact that she does not in any case much care for him. Margaret's estranged father's new wife is condemned on the grounds that she feeds her children pickled red cabbage (hard, strongly coloured and bitter) and because she exists in a miasma of maternal fuss and incompetence. And Monica, Margaret's mother, is like a Mrs Marsh without the affection. She bears some resemblance to Lessing's complaining maternal figure in the 'personal' realm behind the wall in \textit{Memoirs of a Survivor}, inasmuch as she sees only her daughter's failure to conform to what she desires her to be. Crushed and disappointed, and traumatised by her husband's sexual abuse of their daughter, Monica attempts to mould Margaret into the (perfectly bourgeois) wife she feels she could have been. Her cooking is both dull and fussy, and her caring likewise unimaginative and intrusive. The message of her mothering is finally self-contradictory as she tries at once to hustle Margaret into middle age, by a marriage to one of her own contemporaries, and to hold her back in childhood without autonomy, a control expressed in a weak attempt to deny her alcohol by routinely and repeatedly commenting that one so young should not drink so much.

Apart from failures of nurturing, what these women share is a feeling of being embattled, as indeed they are, for their failures are at least in part attributable to the ambiguities inherent in their roles as mothers. In a child's eyes, the mother is almost limitlessly powerful, yet, especially before the child is 'socialised' into co-operativeness or obedience, the mother may, like Martha Quest with Caroline, find herself confronted by a small being with a powerful

will. Any mother, or anyone who has had charge of a baby or toddler, will recognise the frustration occasioned by clamped-shut lips or spat-out food. The experience of combined omnipotence, responsibility and powerlessness is deeply disturbing. It is difficult, to say the least, to handle concurrent tyranny and disempowerment.

The role of mother is ambiguous both in terms of ambivalent power relations with her children and because motherhood is generally associated in Western culture with social, economic and especially political powerlessness, despite the existence of strong matriarchal archetypes. Angela Carter places Aunt Margaret in a maternal role precisely to emphasise her disempowerment. But, as the passage quoted earlier demonstrates, the situation is neither straightforward nor static, and relative status can shift about during a meal. The nurturing aspects of mothering and the pleasures to be gained from feeding people are apparent in Aunt Margaret's 'placid contentment' over the meal table, and are echoed in the lip-smacking pleasure she takes in Victoria, though this power and satisfaction are undermined by Aunt Margaret's own barren desolation. She 'presides' at the table, and the food she cooks soothes and delights, which renders her emotionally powerful. Yet she serves the food, a word and function that suggest submission, fully realised when, in Uncle Philip's presence, her manner becomes entirely propitiatory. Patriarchy, Carter suggests, likes its mother figures benign, but impotent.

The fact that Aunt Margaret is not a real mother, that she complies with

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18 I am thinking here of overt, legitimate and recognised power, rather than the manipulative and covert influence traditionally associated, in our culture, with women. For further discussion of power relations and of the covert power of cooks, see chapter V on social manners. Matriarchs tend to be rather thin on the ground in contemporary fiction, but Angela Carter provides two contrasting maternal archetypes: the all-powerful Mother, in The Passion of New Eve, and the homely old wifely sources of platitudes, such as Mrs Green and various wolf-besieged grandmothers in the stories.
Uncle Philip's demands only for the sake of her brothers and that she secretly and silently rebels - most notably by way of her sexual relationship with her brother Francie - suggests the social and emotional inadequacy of the maternal role for its inhabitant. The function of motherhood may be necessary but it is not sufficient, as is discovered by Claudia in Alice Thomas Ellis's *The Other Side of the Fire*, when she no longer has to care for her children, and finds she loses her meaning. Claudia's friend Sylvia, by contrast, abdicates her maternal function along with her sexuality, and becomes powerful in her own, witchy, right. (It is fortunate for Sylvia's daughter Ellie that Claudia remains maternal and cooks for her; mothering may not be sufficient but it is necessary.)

Surprisingly enough, comparatively few novels seem to dwell on the difficulties - or delights - of combining motherhood with something else, though those that do have tended to become literary landmarks, such as Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* or Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*. Michèle Roberts' *The Book of Mrs Noah* touches on the rewards and stresses of motherhood in its explorations of women's subjectivity, and her *A Piece of the Night* suggests an emotional juggling act for its protagonist Julie, if she is to nurture, love and feed both her child and the relationship with her lover Jenny. Roberts opposes a model of relaxed communal mothering (of several children by several mothers) to the pressure cooker of the nuclear family of Julie's own background, but she does not gloss over the difficulties, injecting Julie with a sudden irrational jealousy that her daughter should be happy with other carers. This particular mother-daughter relationship is on the whole quite lyrically depicted, however; when Julie returns home from France she receives three weeks' worth of embraces from her child and when they picnic in the garden she acknowledges a sense of wholeness, relishing the 'small pleasures...the taste of egg sandwiches...
in the sun, sharp shadows on grass, time snatched, a half-hour demanded for pleasure, or more'.

Implicit in scenes of positive maternal nurturing, and perhaps particularly when seen from the mother's perspective, is the congruence of food and love. At the initial stages of an infant's life, indeed, they are almost inseparable, especially for mothers who breastfeed, and women almost invariably express love for their children through food. In a rather fulsomely hortatory article exploring some of the physical, emotional and spiritual resonances of breastfeeding, Stephanie Demetrakopoulos suggests that the danger of overfeeding flows directly from this congruence:

Women who force their children to eat, who stuff them with food/love, may be extending their lactation powers and own fulfilment, forcing the child to act as the replete and filled vessel of her gift of nourishment.

The satisfactions are clearly as great for the giver of nourishment as for the passive recipient. This is not, of course, solely the case where children are concerned, and the expression 'the way to a man's heart is through his stomach' clearly, and rather cynically, suggests both the potency of food and how it may be manipulated. Women do indeed infantalise their husbands by

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19 Michèle Roberts, *A Piece of the Night*, 179. Egg sandwiches seem to be particularly potent in recalling the past for novelists of a certain class and culture (the English madeleine, perhaps?), featuring conspicuously, for example, in Mrs Munro's memory in Alice Thomas Ellis's *The Skeleton in the Cupboard*, 13-18, 23: 'The smell of newly made egg sandwiches is not to be denied...' (16).

20 For a literary example, see the magical fairy-green stew Rose prepares for her twins at the end of Alice Thomas Ellis's *The Sin Eater* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

21 Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, 'The Nursing Mother and Feminine Metaphysics: An Essay on Embodiment' in *Soundings: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, 65 4 (1982), 430-443, 432-3. Demetrakopoulos also relates how she herself nursed a needy infant (not her own), likening this to Demeter, 'the nurse who gives to the needy infant and then passes on her way', p.442. Interestingly, Demeter's combination of personal and impersonal nurturing is also invoked by Michèle Roberts in *The Wild Girl*, 125.
replicating childhood experiences of being indulgently fed (loved) by their mothers; indeed, women may, like Martha Quest, be resented for refusing to do so. The reference to childhood experiences is one of the sources of women’s power as cooks or providers; not only do they have control over the food (and thus its associations), but through something like the ‘nightmare of repetition’ are able to take advantage of men’s subordination to the powerful maternal figures of their childhoods.²²

It is difficult to write about the giving of food as an expression of love without becoming entangled with the power relations of maternity or the gender politics of sexual entanglement. I will move on to consider food and sex shortly, but it is worth noting first that the work each of the four major writers I have referred to and will be considering in the course of this thesis does have examples of disinterested or loving food provision which is neither maternal nor sexual. In *Unexplained Laughter*, for example, Alice Thomas Ellis provides her wicked wit Lydia with a holiday guest in the form of a domesticated sidekick called Betty who takes over the cooking; not only is Betty a creative and caring vegetarian, she is also kinder and more decent than Lydia (though by the same token both somewhat humourless and uninteresting). Initially repelled by Betty’s ‘spinstersh’, unduly ‘intimate’ and ‘repellent’ plans for a ‘special’ salad, Lydia comes to feel less threatened and to appreciate Betty’s capabilities, and her value as a foil.²³ When Betty has food-poisoning, Lydia takes her a remorseful breakfast: ‘thin crispy toast with a scraping of butter and golden clear jasmine tea, and an egg-cupful of harebells to remind her of the sky’ (105),

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²² The power of cooks is explored further in Chapter V. As mentioned earlier, the phrase ‘nightmare of repetition’ comes from Martha Quest in the ‘Children of Violence’ novels.

recognising how unfair it is that her kind acts, because unusual, are met with appreciation and approbation whereas Betty’s, being habitual, are taken for granted.

In her alternative Mary Magdalene narrative, *The Wild Girl*, Michèle Roberts both draws upon historical facts and uses her own invention in sketching the food and shelter offered to the travelling Lord and his disciples, and in the depiction of the feeding of the five thousand as a public expression of generosity and housewifely management. She encapsulates Agape in her deliberately mundane version of the Last Supper and again, repeatedly, in Mary’s (thwarted) wish to ‘offer the supper of bread and wine as he bade us do’.24 On a more intimate, though hardly more realist, level, the suppers which the Sibyls of the ark cook for each other in *The Book of Mrs Noah* are, like their narratives, gifts of pieces of themselves.

Food and eating in Angela Carter’s writing are rather more difficult to disentangle from either sex or power, for these twin subjects are at the core of her writing. As seen in the case of Aunt Margaret, however, caring and love are by no means absent, whether in small incidents or, as in the case of Dora’s and Nora’s inseparable love and unstinted sharing in *Wise Children*, running like a musical continuo throughout the story. In Carter’s second novel, *Several Perceptions*, for example, the custard brought by Anne Blossom (the young woman from the flat below) for post-suicidal Joseph may be a displaced maternal act - for she has lost her baby - but, made ‘specially’ with eggs and milk ‘for building you up’, it does represent care and is an effective invitation to life.25

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There is a subtext of responsibility in any act of food giving, but some acts are clearly more dutiful than others, as my discussion of mothering suggests. Whether the duty is entered upon with idealistic intent, as in Emily's and Gerald's feeding of the children in *Memoirs of a Survivor*, or because it comes with the territory of motherhood ('behind the wall' in Memoirs, or Martha Quest's situation) or because it seems unthinkable not to succour the needy, such as when the narrator of *Memoirs* takes on responsibility for Emily, the fact of embracing duty and responsibility does not rule out the motivation of love. In Lessing's writing the love is very often understated, or even unstated. The narrator in *Memoirs*, for example, prefers to recall her hopes and sympathies and anxieties for Emily rather than risk the demands or self-exposure inherent in the speaking of love. In *The Diaries of Jane Somers* the eponymous narrator professes the greatest intimacy in calling herself Maudie Fowler's 'friend' and it is this, coupled with the food-giving, conversation and intimate physical help that both creates and expresses the bond.

Friendship, sisterhood, disinterested responsibility, motherlove: all make use of the vehicle of food-as-love. So also does romantic or sexual love, and fiction - like life - is filled with occasions on which courting or seduction or even the simple affirmation of love is accompanied by food (or drink) of one sort or another. From the simple point of view of mimetic content, a few random examples from my four major writers will give an idea of the prevalence and variety of such episodes. In Angela Carter's first novel, *Shadowdance*, Emily

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26 My final chapter, on social eating, takes the discussion of disinterested eating or food-sharing further.

27 It also does not necessarily create it, as indicated by the edgy, unsuccessful relationship between Jane Somers and her young niece Kate, whom she tries to feed and care for in *If the Old Could...* See *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (London: Michael Joseph, 1984).
cooks for Honeybuzzard, feeding Morris too, but ablaze with love only when Honeybuzzard is her object. In Carter’s last novel, *Wise Children*, Nora mixes sex, love and learning to cook with her Italian husband-to-be, graduating from passionate lovemaking and the besotted making of cannoli, cannelloni and ravioli to the wedding-day debacle in which Tony’s mother intervenes with a shower of marinara sauce. Michele Roberts’ heroines have a tendency to meet or negotiate with their lovers over food: Julie and Ben, Julie and Jenny (and friends) in *A Piece of the Night*; Helen and George (negatively) and then Helen and Robert (nourishingly) in *The Visitation*; Hattie and her lover who so much enjoys her appetite and brings pizzas, pistachios, wine and pineapple to cheer her up and then makes love to her in front of the fire (*In The Red Kitchen*).

Alice Thomas Ellis’s novels are full of food, including love-food and food fantasies. In *The Birds of the Air*, for example, Barbara concocts a seduction fantasy around Hunter (highly misguided, given his homosexuality), focused on the cooking of a surprise hotpot for him, and in *The Other Side of the Fire*, Claudia buys a game pie from Harrods, and spends the train journey back to Oxford ‘planning what should accompany it on its last journey down Philip’s throat’, though in the event Philip has gone out to dinner and Claudia feels like sitting on the pie. Having her subsequent plans for a seductive meal of ‘Swiss eggs or a soufflé omelette with asparagus’ (59) punctured by Edith the cleaning lady, she offers Philip sausages and mash, which the wicked young man beguiles welcomes. Doris Lessing, similarly, includes the food/love/sex nexus in the realist detail of her fiction, in the sundowner culture of drinking, dancing and eating that surrounds the sexual relationships and marriage of

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Martha Quest, or the meals Anna Wulf lovingly and sensuously prepares for her lovers in *The Golden Notebook*, or the meals and drinks that Richard and Janna share in place of sexual consummation in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*.

The giving or sharing of food as an act of love follows from a model of maternal nurturing. The connection of food with sex, however, is more overt and more complicated, for there is an intertwining of two drives or appetites which are not easy to disentangle or identify as distinct. The remainder of this chapter will attempt to explore something of the nature and significance of the link, with particular reference to Angela Carter's writing and its emphasis on appetite. The combination of food with sex is not unique to Carter, of course, for such a link is constantly made in Western culture, and contemporary instances can be found in conversation, advertising, film and fiction, from the suggested fellatio of a chocolate bar to the casual comparison of breasts with apples, oranges or melons, from the reputedly aphrodisiac qualities of oysters to sexual dialogue focusing on the mouth, eating and various suggestive foodstuffs. Even the term sexual *appetite* makes the connection, somehow conflating food and sex.

The link is commonly made linguistically, so that what might originally be subject-specific language moves freely between the two areas of food and sexuality. In everyday speech, for example, images of food or eating are used in relation to sexual desire, someone being described as 'tasty' or 'a dish', a woman as 'juicy', 'a bit of crumpet' or 'a tart', a person being said to 'feast his eyes' on the object of his desire, or to be 'hungry for love'. Though less frequently, the cross-over works in the other direction too, food being described in vocabulary generally associated with sex: 'sinful' puddings or cream cakes
which are 'naughty but nice'.

In both fiction and film, food and sex are often brought together quite literally, and the two appetites in some way stimulate, mirror, feed or satisfy each other. The young Alexander Portnoy mistakes a piece of liver for a sexual object, for example, and Flora and her husband George feast in bed on cold chicken, gherkins, champagne and each other in In the Red Kitchen (140). Food and eating may function as a sort of sexual metonymy or metaphor, a cued way of portraying intercourse, or may be incorporated into foreplay, or used for deliberate erotic stimulation. Often, an image or mode of description reveals the assumed link. The celebrated scene in the film adaptation of Tom Jones uses a lusty, hungry, even greedy enjoyment of eating to suggest eroticism and presage lusty, enjoyable sexual romping, so demonstrating a congruence between the two in terms of uncomplicated appetite for life. Eating here suggests general indulgent satisfactions of the flesh.

The casual evocation of food and sex, not necessarily for the portrayal of either eating or sexual play, illustrates the degree to which the link is simply assumed. Here is Lydia, in Alice Thomas Ellis's Unexplained Laughter:

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30 The latter alludes to a 1983 slogan advertising fresh cream cakes.

31 I refer to the incident in which Alexander Portnoy masturbates into a piece of liver that is subsequently cooked for the family's supper. See Philip Roth, Portnoy's Complaint (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969).

32 A particularly clear example of the latter is in Japanese films, of which two examples include games with cream and honey, the tickling of a lover's belly with a live crayfish and the ultimately orgasmic passing back and forth of an egg yoke between the mouths of the lovers (Tampopo, writer/director, Juzo Itami, Itami Productions/New Century Producers, 1988), or a man's insertion of an egg into his lover's vagina (Al No Corrida, writer/director, Nagisa Oshima, Argos/Oshima/Shibata, 1976).

33 Tom Jones, United Artists/Woodfall, screenplay from Fielding's novel by John Osborne, dir. Tony Richardson, 1963.
'I was wondering why they talk of possessing women,' said Lydia. 'Do we say that the penny possesses the piggy bank? Or the sausage the roll? Or the jam the sandwich? It seems to me that the foot is in the other boot, so to speak.'

Not only does the content here make the food/sex link (men's sexual possession of women being compared with food) but the items of food themselves connote genitals, copulation and perhaps, at a stretch, menstrual blood. Novelists frequently make the connection too through extended metaphors. The writing of J. G. Farrell (that master of the literalised metaphor) yields excellent examples: in *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the hunger of a pariah dog is depicted as sexual desire for the young romantic, Fleury; in *Troubles*, when the hapless Major finds himself in bed with the amoral twins, he is portrayed as lying in the middle of a 'heavenly' sandwich, and in the same novel Captain Bolton demonstrates his machismo by deliberately and challengingly eating a rose. Farrell frequently enlarges and extends his metaphors, giving them literal form to the point of surrealism; for example, the sexually disturbed young man in *Troubles*, whom one of the twins tries to seduce, is tormented by memories of a near-encounter with a prostitute, and these memories almost tangibly manifest themselves during the attempted seduction, in visions of fat closing in on him around the room.

However, even if these examples convincingly suggest that the most direct link between food and sexuality is through language and imagery, such an explanation is not sufficient, for it simply begs the question of why language should perform this function. In other words, what underlying connection may

34 Alice Thomas Ellis, *Unexplained Laughter*, 132.

there be? Is there, actually, a concurrence or dissonance between sexual appetite and a hunger for food? Does desire necessarily manifest itself through one appetite rather than the other? Are the wellsprings of sexual desire entrammeled with the origins of hunger? Or is the connection perhaps not so much between food and sex as between food and language, or sex and language, of which the food/sex connection is merely an incidental manifestation?

Appealing though the latter may be as a theory (because all three focus to a large extent on the mouth), it comes under considerable pressure from what it seems to leave out of account, namely physicality. At a material (biological or evolutionary) level, the connection must surely be explained by the necessity to sustain life (in the broadest sense): both food and sexual congress are sought in response to the sharpness of appetite; both are primarily concerned with the body's needs, acting upon the body and affecting attitudes towards it. Through the connecting medium of the body, food and sex certainly interweave. From the point of view of survival, it could be argued, it is important that both appetites be stimulated and satisfied. But this deterministic explanation in turn hardly accounts for what is a cultural phenomenon and in any case does not justify a linking of the two appetites, since they might just as easily be satisfied in parallel.

Is there, then, a more direct link? Does the psyche provide a more convincing provenance than the body for the interconnection of food and sex? In his 'Three Essays on Sexuality' Freud puts forward the thesis that the sexual instinct is generated out of the infant's earliest experiences of eating. From

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36 Maud Ellmann, who deals with much of this material from a rather different perspective, claims somewhat polemically that, 'Freud, in spite of his ostensible concern with sex, is fundamentally preoccupied with food, because the act of eating represents the primal violation of
taking nourishment at the mother's breast, the infant graduates to a proto-
sexual satisfaction in sucking (as Melanie Klein so forcefully conveys in her
conception of the breast as a love object). The activity of sucking and the
flow of milk stimulate the mucous membrane of the mouth, giving a sexual
pleasure, so that, in Freud's view, the lips 'behave like an erotogenic zone':

The satisfaction of the erotogenic zone is associated, in the first instance,
with the satisfaction of the need for nourishment. To begin with, sexual
activity attaches itself to functions serving the purpose of self-
preservation and does not become independent of them until later. No
one who has seen a baby sinking back satiated from the breast and
falling asleep with flushed cheeks and a blissful smile can escape the
reflection that this picture persists as a prototype of the expression of
sexual satisfaction in later life. The need for repeating the sexual
satisfaction now becomes detached from the need for taking
nourishment. 38

Psychically speaking, sexual desire, it seems, has its roots in, grows directly out
of, the satisfaction of hunger for food.

But there is a further complication. At the end of the essay on infantile
sexuality, Freud proposes to drop the figurative description of the 'sources' of
sexual excitation, asserting that the connecting pathways between sexuality and
other functions are traversable in both directions. 39

37 See my discussion of Klein in chapter II.
39 There is increasing debate about some of the translation in the Standard Edition, especially
the doubtful rendering of unheimlich as 'uncanny'. Laplanche and Pontalis offer a gloss on the word
'source' as used by Freud, making a distinction between the 'organic source' (Organquelle) or
'somatic source' (somatische Quelle) and the psychical process. Not only is the figurative use of the
If, for instance, the common possession of the labial zone by the two functions is the reason why sexual satisfaction arises during the taking of nourishment, then the same factor also enables us to understand why there should be disorders of nutrition if the erotogenic functions of the common zone are disturbed. (205-6)

The claim that, ‘sexual satisfaction arises during the taking of nourishment’ thus suggests a cross-over that is entirely normal, routine and non-pathological (the reference to nutritional disorders and disturbance to erotogenic functions suggesting a disruption that manifests itself through the cross-over rather than as a result of it). Here, it seems, theoretical analysis and ‘commonsense’ view coincide.

I suggested earlier (page 36 above) that food and eating in Angela Carter’s writing were difficult to disentangle from sex and power. Her writing suggests the inevitability of cross-over between food and sex because of an inextricable if ambiguous connection; indeed, in a 1985 book review she approvingly quotes Levi-Strauss as claiming that ‘to eat is to fuck’. In this review, Carter uses the term ‘gastroporn’ to describe the ‘awesome voluptuousness’ of some colour food illustrations. The term refers most literally to a lascivious description or presentation of food, intended to stimulate appetite in the same sort of way pornography stimulates sexual desire, but it is a useful word to borrow for this discussion inasmuch as it suggests a slippage between appetites. Desire thus becomes laden with ambiguity. Hunger for

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40 Eating disorders are discussed in Chapter IV.


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something to fill the stomach, or more appositely the mouth, is represented as a sexual urge; sexual desire is sublimated into gourmandism, sexual appetite reappearing as a lust for food. Carnality here is all-embracing.

How then does Carter's fiction manifest this ambiguity of appetite, how engage with 'gastroporn'? In its literal, magazine-plate sense 'gastroporn' is clearly not on the menu. What the word also suggests, however, is a kind of oral pornography, a lasciviousness of the gut perhaps, eating as erotic activity. This is not quite the same as the eating-as-foreplay or eating as metonymy I referred to earlier, where suggestive interaction between food and mouth either stands for or generates arousal which leads to sexual congress. It is rather a question of food itself being presented as the focus of desire, and eating as the central act. In this way the preparation, presentation, offering, sharing of food, or the activity of eating may involve or allude to arousal, excitement, satiety, and elements of narcissistic self-contemplation, exhibitionism, degradation, bestiality, sado-masochism and so on. The transposition of sexual behaviour onto food does not often happen completely or overtly, but it is frequently hinted at in seduction meals, or where there is no likelihood of imminent sexual congress. The 'half-witted', and therefore socially uninhibited, son of Dr

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42 When oral desire becomes insatiable it begins to suggest some fundamental emptiness; manifestations of this are discussed further in the next chapter.

43 As with sexual perversions there is frequently an aggressive approach to food or a violence of eating, and sometimes suggestion of sexual inadequacy. This is not only clearly evident in Carter's writing - viz the Count in Dr Hoffman and Zero in New Eve - but can be found in other novels such as Iris Murdoch's The Sea, the Sea or Candia McWilliam's, A Case of Knives, or in films such as Peter Greenaway's The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover. (This film is discussed in chapter 11.)

44 Helen Simpson plays on food and sex in her portrayal of a middle-aged gourmet seducer who deliberately confounds the two, salivating 'wolfishly' over both 'some delicate noisette of milk-fed lamb' and his prospective conquest, and narcissistically viewing himself beating egg whites in a wholly sexual light: 'The expressionless face, slight breathlessness and controlled energy of the rhythmically moving arm is nothing short of an erotic spectacle'. Helen Simpson, 'Sugar and Spice' in Joan Smith, ed., Femmes de Siècle (Stories from the '90s: women writing at the end of two centuries) (London: Chatto & Windus 1992), 26-32.
Donally in *Heroes and Villains*, for example, falls on his food with 'grunts of pleasure' and, when he asks for wedding cake and is told there will be none, sighs 'gustily' and begins to masturbate.

More often, perhaps, food and sex are mutually saturated in a way that is more difficult to disentangle. The 'normality' of an interpenetration of food with sex, gastronomy with eroticism, is typified in Angela Carter's charming short story 'The Kitchen Child'. This tells the tale of a Yorkshire cook in the house of a very wealthy upper class couple, who is in despair at being restricted to providing only minimal food for her employers and endless sandwiches for the guests on the yearly Great Grouse Shoot. When, to her delight, a visiting French duc requests lobster soufflé, her painstaking preparations are interrupted by an amorous valet; surprised, she shakes too much cayenne pepper into the mixture, pushing the soufflé quickly into the oven the more readily to succumb to her seduction. (The spiteful housekeeper later relates to her with glee that the duc complained about the excess of cayenne, much to the cook's chagrin.) A child is duly born, and becomes a kitchen prodigy, witnessing for some fifteen years the sad anniversary cooking of a lobster soufflé that no-one eats, until he is sixteen and the duc arrives once more. The boy goes to see him and relates the tale; it transpires that the valet is now dead, but that the duc remembers relishing the soufflé (though with the slightest reservation about the cayenne) and he determines to visit the cook. All is set for a reprise, but this time the cook, clear about her priorities, hits her would-be seducer with a wooden spoon, so that the soufflé will not be spoiled. Her concentration is rewarded, and as she takes the soufflé from the oven it 'spreads its archangelic wings over the entire kitchen as it leaps upwards from the dish in which the force of gravity

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alone confines it' (99). Here we have a metaphor of social rise (she marries the duc), of female triumph, swelling sexuality, ecstasy, optimism and culinary perfection.

I relate this story at length since its detail best illustrates my point. Food and sexuality both form the manifest content of the story, and it would therefore be ridiculous to suggest that it is either the cook or the food alone that is titillating. The cook bending over the range to stir flour into the butter is herself enticing, and the pair of hands that appear and clasp themselves around her waist make her more so; the combination of the twitch she gives to her 'ample hips', the sliding of egg yolks into the roux, and the mixing in of the lobster meat ('diced up, all nice') tickles both salacious and gastronomic appetites. The post-coital soufflé is itself rampant, going up 'like a montgolfier' and knocking its 'golden head imperiously against the oven door' (92), and the second soufflé transcends this almost to the point of blasphemy. The food's lusciousness is presented in sexual terms; the cook's sex appeal is inseparable from her gastronomic function, her bulk and humour bearing mute testimony to the quality of her cooking and approach to life. What is interesting, and distinctive here is, I think, that it is not possible to disentangle the food from the sexuality; they are presented jointly. Unusually, perhaps, the one does not in some way stand for the other.

The model outlined earlier for a psychically healthy interconnection between eating and sexuality, 'sanctioned', as it were, by Freud, is here illustrated by 'The Kitchen Child'. But this is not the end of the story. For Freud classes (completed) sexual satisfaction other than that achieved through the penetration of a vagina by a penis as aberrant or perverse; a sexual satisfaction associated with food that takes the place of intercourse might indeed be
coloured by this judgement. 48 It should be emphasised that Freud ascribes perversion descriptively, not judgementally, but nevertheless, it does seem that deviations from or arrests on the path towards what he sees as normal (i.e. heterosexual, genitally penetrative) intercourse are, by definition in his view, some sort of malfunction. Interestingly, however, he again invokes eating:

The normal sexual aim is regarded as being the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation, which leads to a release of the sexual tension of a temporary extinction of the sexual instinct - a satisfaction analogous to the sating of hunger. But even in the most normal sexual process we may detect rudiments which, if they had developed, would have led to the deviations described as 'perversions'. For there are certain intermediate relations to the sexual object, such as touching and looking at it, which lie on the road towards copulation and are recognised as being preliminary sexual aims. On the one hand these activities are themselves accompanied by pleasure, and on the other hand they intensify the excitation, which should persist until the final sexual aim is attained. Moreover, the kiss, one particular contact of this kind, between the mucous membrane of the lips of the two people concerned, is held in high sexual esteem among many nations (including the most highly civilized ones), in spite of the fact that the parts of the body involved do not form part of the sexual apparatus but constitute the entrance to the digestive tract.47 (my emphases, for identification)

In the first italicised passage Freud's evocation of the sating of hunger as analogous to the release of sexual tension resulting from intercourse recalls the passage about the baby at the breast.48 The comparison is not accidental, since in both cases appetite is being satisfied, and indeed stimulated, if we liken 'touching and looking' to smelling and tasting. However, it is only a comparison: 'a satisfaction analogous to the sating of hunger'. In the second

46 Freud's categorisation of clitoral orgasm in women as immature and therefore perverse has, of course, been one of the main targets of feminist criticism of his theories.


48 See page 43 above.
piece I have italicised, Freud specifically considers the mouth, and the curious coincidence here of digestive and sexual pleasure. When Freud describes deviations or perversions as either the extension of areas of interest to inappropriate areas of the body, or the arrest of interest at some point which 'should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim' (150), oral and anal sexuality (at the two ends of the digestive tract) are clearly in focus.  

For the very young, Freud acknowledges, the anal part of the digestive tract normally affords great sexual pleasure:

The contents of the bowels, which act as a stimulating mass upon a sexually sensitive portion of mucous membrane, behave like forerunners of another organ, which is destined to come into action after the phase of childhood. (186)

There is an extraordinarily vivid evocation of such pleasure in Michèle Roberts' *Daughters of the House*, in a passage which suggests that anal pleasure is far from being confined to the infantile. It is a highly sensual, indeed sexual pleasure, as the pre-pubescent Léonie ruminates:

Pissing was a tremendous pleasure. Voluptuously abandoning control. Relief as the bursting bladder emptied itself, easing discomfort. Shitting was an equal delight. It was, to begin with, so varied. Some days knobs of shit as hard and beadlike as rabbit droppings fell away from her. Some days slugs or pellets. On others she watched a thick brown snake dive down between her legs. Letting it out felt so good. Shiver as the shit took over, nudged her open, swelled, dropped softly out.  

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49 It is worth noting that Freud suggests that the condemnation of such practises as perversions arises from conventional or hysterical disgust, and is quite irrational.

This childish delight is part of a generalised receptivity to sexual pleasure which Freud refers to as 'polymorphous perversity', an innate aptitude for 'sexual irregularities' before 'the mental dams against sexual excesses - shame, disgust and morality' are constructed. At the time of her speculation (above) Léonie is pre-pubescent, her pleasures focusing intensely on her body, the satisfactions of eating and of digestive processes and sexual explorations with her cousin, Thérèse. Though the adult Léonie does not manifest such all-body pleasures, her genitally-focused sexuality being relegated to her relationship (and later marriage) with Baptiste, she is throughout the novel characterised by an active, sensuous enjoyment of her body, and of food and eating in particular. The physical, sensuous, sensual pleasures of eating continue to be indulged, but never so easily and directly sexually; the 'mental dams', it seems, slide into place almost unnoticed, only breached by a rare and involuntary physical memory such as the fleeting sensation of having been suckled by Rose Taillé.

The foundations of an easy transfer between pleasures, between sexual and alimentary appetites, seem to sit happily in their temporary identity during infancy and childhood. It is when it comes to adult connections between the two that there is either a gulf, or obstacles suggesting perversion. Some writers are, of course, drawn to focus precisely on the gulfs and obstacles, on the 'mental dams' themselves; the proliferation of 'sexual excesses' and 'irregularities' in Angela Carter's writing suggests that polymorphous perversity is not merely innate, not confined to childhood, but widely manifest. Dr

51 Freud also paints the picture of an 'uncultivated woman' in whom such a disposition persists and who will respond to 'a clever seducer' in finding perversions 'to her taste'. He goes on to say, '...considering the immense number of women who are prostitutes or who must be supposed to have an aptitude for prostitution without becoming engaged in it, it becomes impossible not to recognize that this same disposition to perversions of every kind is a general and fundamental human characteristic'. Thus what may be a deviance from 'normal' (reproductive) sexuality is nevertheless recognised by Freud as innate in us all. 'Three Essays' SE, Vol VII, 191.
Hoffman, for example, deals in all manner of ‘perversions’, but even if we look only at examples which focus on the digestive tract, there are numerous suggested instances of polymorphous desire in Carter’s work. In Nights at the Circus, for example, the combination of champagne, sweet tea, the prospect of bacon sandwiches and Fevvers’ vast and energetic yawn produces in Walser a ‘seismic erotic disturbance’ (52); Mignon’s response to chocolates suggests an ‘infantine voluptuousness’ (128); as Fevvers identifies Walser’s face as ‘the face of desire’ she bites absentmindedly into a chunk of bread so that he feels her ‘hungry’ eyes on him (204); and when he is lost she goes off her food altogether.

At the other end of the digestive tract Carter includes occasional buggery, from the throwaway ‘sharp dose’ experienced by Jack Walser in a Bedouin tent to the ritual humiliations of Eve by Zero in The Passion of New Eve.52 The nine deconstructing acrobats of desire in Dr Hoffman seem to enjoy themselves, but the narrator, Desiderio, complains of feeling as though he had been penetrated by an arsenal (!) of swords. The incident is framed by the drinking of Turkish coffee, the post-coital cup accompanied by arak. Since Desiderio goes on almost to boast of ‘the most comprehensive anatomy lesson a man ever suffered, in which I learned every possible modulation of the male apparatus and some I would have thought impossible’ (117), it is possible that the whole incident - like many in this novel - may be a projection of Desiderio’s own desires.

52 In Nights at the Circus Walser’s pre-experience includes a ‘sharp dose of buggery in a bedouin tent beside the Damascus road (10). In The Passion of New Eve, by contrast, buggery is used as a tool of humiliation and degradation against the unnaturally perfect Eve by the self-styled Nietzschean superman, Zero - who also enjoys making his wives miss their breakfast. Angela Carter, Nights at the Circus (London: Pan Books 1985) and The Passion of New Eve (London: Virago 1982).
In a novel so concerned with the release and sublimation of desire, it is hardly surprising that the protagonist’s sexual, gustatory and alimentary appetites should be so intertwined, that his sexuality should be associated with and stimulated (as it is with Mama, for example) through his palate. One possible reading of the novel, emphasising psychoanalytic parallels, would be to see Desiderio as passing through particular psychic stages, including the exploration of polymorphous perversity. There is certainly a sense of goals deferred. In his life with the river people, Desiderio never achieves intercourse with his child bride, despite a good deal of manipulation and fellatio and plenty of kitchen dalliance with Mama the grandmother. At the castle of desire, Desiderio describes the exquisite meal he eats with the Doctor and Albertina as disappointingly un-marvellous, and wonders whether congress with her will prove to be the ultimate disillusionment. Hunger, it seems, is preferable to consummation, and the greatest satisfactions are somehow only obtained for this polymorph, ‘on the road towards copulation’. David Punter even associates Desiderio’s holding back with a failure of political copulation, reading the text as ‘a series of figures for the defeat of the political aspirations of the 1960s, and in particular of the father-figures of liberation, Reich and Marcuse’. Notwithstanding the defeat of Dr Hoffman, however, desire is ultimately victorious in this novel, for Desiderio, having awakened desire, continues to yearn for Albertina for fifty years after her death.

Desire and sexuality are fundamental concerns in Carter’s writing, but so

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53 Infinite deferral is also a narrative device of the romance, of course.

54 See quotation from Freud on page 48 above.

is power, and especially sexual power. This is, I think, one of the reasons for her attraction to de Sade; in *The Sadeian Woman* she writes that Sade ‘urges women to fuck as actively as they are able, so that powered by their enormous and hitherto untapped sexual energy they will then be able to fuck their way into history and, in doing so, change it’.\textsuperscript{56} Whereas maternal archetypes may wield fearful power (Mother in *The Passion of New Eve*), motherhood itself is all too often a social construct of patriarchal systems (Aunt Margaret in *The Magic Toyshop*). Really powerful women are sexual women, women of appetite, and the stronger the appetite the more they prevail. Fevvers, in *Nights at the Circus* is perhaps the prime example of largeness of appetite, suited in more ways than one for the ‘woman on top’ position. But it is in *Wise Children* that appetite is most robustly celebrated and the life instincts taken to Rabelaisian extreme. The Chance twins retain their libido and appetite (and even - by proxy - their fertility) into their seventies; significantly, it is as they grow and discover themselves that they begin to reject Grandma Chance’s naturism and somewhat uninspired vegetarianism, indulging themselves with secret, phallically-suggestive sausage rolls. But it is in the figure of Saskia, their half-sister rival and the focus of their disapproval, that food and sex are combined to confound and reject the maternal and nurturing role in favour of a naked and powerful manipulation of (notably male) appetite and greed.

Saskia begins her career early; her childhood pleasures include putting frogspawn in the porridge - a forerunner, perhaps, of oral sex. When the great party at Lynde Court ends in fire, she is to be found sitting beneath a rose bush amidst the generally orgiastic reaction to the fire, greedily feasting herself on the carcase of a stuffed swan which she has dragged outside, along with a bowl of

\textsuperscript{56} Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 27.
salad. She cooks a suspect lunch ('very bitter' nettle soup, duck vampirically 'swimming in blood' and a 'disgusting syllabub') for the twenty-first birthday of herself and her twin, Imogen, prompting Dora to speculate: "Has she done it on purpose?" A poison meat!". While Dora is 'racked with hunger and heartburn' the two putative fathers engage in an unspoken competition to 'eat most and praise her best'. The sexuality may be Oedipal and it may be subliminal but it is unmistakably intestinal.

Saskia manipulates people, witch-like, through both her cooking and her sexuality. Her power is evident both in the food that upsets people's stomachs, and in her incestuous hold over Tristram, who is weakly unable to break their sexual tie even when he is in love with Tiffany. Dora suggests that Saskia 'put something in young Tristram's food' (183) and relates how Tiffany had been stricken with an upset stomach during their stay at Saskia's villa in Tuscany, 'as though Saskia had slipped a little something extra into the *trippa fiorentina* '(185), but admits that Saskia is dramatically good-looking and sexually provocative:

She had a lovely nape, on which that knot of scarlet hair sat like a Rhode Island red on a clutch and her nape was on display in all she did, intimate, exposed and sexy as she bent over the stove to poke around with a spoon suggestively in a pot or stick a prong into a drumstick with quite sadistic glee. (180)

The combination of exposed neck (passive, sacrificial) and poking with spoon or 'prong' (about as phallic as you can get) suggest a comprehensively sado-masochistic sexuality.

Her particular exploitation of food, sexuality and cruelty is vividly

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encapsulated in the description of a television cooking programme in which she jugs a hare. I quote the whole passage, to convey its full flavour:

She cut the thing up with slow, voluptuous strokes. ‘Make sure your blade is up to it!’ she husked, running her finger up and down the edge, although the spectacle of Saskia with a cleaver couldn’t help but remind me and Nora of how she’d run amok with the cake knife on her twenty-first. Next, she lovingly prepared a bath for the hare, she minced up shallots, garlic, onions, added a bouquet garni and a pint of claret and sat the poor dismembered beast in that for a day and a half. Then she condescended to sauté the parts briskly in a hot pan over a high flame until they singed. Then it all went into the oven for the best part of another day. She sealed the lid of the pot with a flour-and-water paste. ‘Don’t be a naughty thing and peek!’ she warned with a teasing wink. Time to decant at last! The hare had been half-rotted, then cremated, then consumed. If there is a god and she is of the rabbit family, then Saskia will be in deep doodoo on Judgment Day. ‘Delicious,’ she moaned, dipping her finger in the juice and sucking. She licked her lips, letting her pink tongue-tip linger. ‘Mmmm...’ (181)

From the first ‘slow, voluptuous strokes’ through to the moaning and lip-licking, the whole scene suggests a displaced copulation, to which the teasing winks and coy exclamations are invitations. Reminders of Saskia’s sadistic potential are included, in the (also sexual) running of her finger up and down the knife, in the recalling of her ‘run[ning] amok’ with the cake-knife at her twenty-first birthday lunch and in the singeing of the hare flesh. But the overwhelming impression is of the sensuality of cooking, and Saskia’s tasting of the resulting juice recalls the satisfactions of breastfeeding as well as promising both mouth-watering tastes and the brute pleasures of sexual satisfaction.

Saskia promises gratification of the combined lusts for food and sex. She wields a power that may not be denied but is by no means benign: she ‘jugged a hare for Tristram, once,’ we are reminded by Dora, and ‘that cooked his goose’ (181), and she tries three times to poison Melchior. What complicates her
apparently powerful amalgamation of food and sex is that she is motivated primarily by revenge: against her (assumed) father, against the schoolfriend who becomes his third wife, against anyone who arouses her jealousy. These negative aspects might, perhaps, be seen as the complementary energies of Eros, the dark powerhouse of its blazing appetite. But, not only is Saskia's sexuality (in its objects) illegitimate and devouring, it is associated repeatedly with toxic intention, and her business (as the 'half-rotted' hare suggests) is that of greed and corruption. In some respects, indeed, it would be fair to see her as a meeting place - or battleground - between the ebullient appetites of the libido and the controlling, vengeful and destructive impulses of the death instincts. These powerful, negative and sometimes deathly appetites are at the centre of my discussion in the following chapter.
The connotations of ‘cannibalism’ imply a cultural archetype. Cannibalism suggests the irredeemably savage, a practice of the most primitive and distant tribes, or the manifestation of a pathology relating to the disintegration of personality or of social order. Such a view is illustrated, teased and tested in the publicity surrounding macabre prosecutions that hit the headlines, and it accounts for something of people’s horrified fascination with the subject, popularised as it is in novels and films such as *The Silence of the Lambs*, *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and her Lover* and *Delicatessen*. Even in such cases, however, cannibalism remains, as Amanda Mitchison put it in *The Independent*, ‘the unbunkable taboo’.¹ No matter that sexual taboos are increasingly eroded - sado-masochism, anal sex, bestiality, paedophilia and incest becoming admissible, if not approved - cannibalism remains firmly outside the pale. It may be joked about, rendered harmless by humorous packaging, or speculated about in the most abstract way (‘If you were stranded in the Andes after a plane crash, would you...’) but it is not permissible. Eating people, it seems, is simply and absolutely wrong.

Yet cannibalism is close to being a primary image: the suckling child indicates consumption by the flesh of our flesh, the devouring of a bodily substance emanating from the breast that psychoanalytic theory tells us is not yet known to be separate from the self. The simple urge to consume is an unknowing beginning point, from which we develop to a condition of more or

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¹ *The Independent* (11 April 1992), Magazine section, 16.
less discrimination in our appetites, as we meet, eat and incorporate the world, both literally and metaphorically. And images of cannibalistic consumption are everywhere: children eat jelly babies and bake gingerbread men; ethnic groups are 'assimilated' or swallowed up by host societies; sharp business practice is described as 'dog eat dog' in a competitive world of 'eat or be eaten'; lovers are invited to oral congress: 'Eat me'.

As a metaphor, it seems, cannibalism is acceptable. The Collins English Dictionary gives the secondary definition as, 'savage and inhuman cruelty' which perhaps lies behind its colloquial use as an insult.² It has, too, associations of dismemberment in the use of the verb 'to cannibalise'. Most potent, though, are the images of swallowing up that the word evokes; it suggests an extreme desire to devour a person, to incorporate someone into oneself, whether from longing or fury, a desire for total possession or a rage for obliteration and supremacy, the suggestions of rapacious dealings and profound yearning for union implying the conflicting motivations of power and love. It is part of my argument to suggest that these conflicting feelings are not necessarily opposed, that cannibalism, whether actual, fantasised or metaphorical, is a self-contradictory, complex phenomenon, explicable in terms of psychoanalytic theory, as well as available for manipulation in social or political contexts.

There are essentially two ways in which cannibalism figures in literature: in the depiction of the literal eating of human flesh, and through the use of cannibalism or cannibalistic desire as a metaphor. Many texts involve literal or

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figurative cannibalism; indeed it may be argued that any writing about eating (or assimilation and possession) is at some level dealing with impulses which are broadly cannibalistic. When looked at in relation to psychoanalytic theory, cannibalism can be seen to relate to almost every aspect of eating other than that of merely feeding the body in order to stay alive.³ And in extremis that too.

It is important here to distinguish between literal, survival cannibalism, such as that detailed in Piers Paul Read’s *Alive!* (chronicling the events following a plane crash in the Andes), and the kind of cannibalistic desire appropriated by the psychoanalysts.⁴ There is any amount of difference between an unconscious yearning to consume one’s loved one in nostalgic pursuit of a mythical state of oneness and the swallowing of strips of frozen or rotting corpse to postpone the hour of death. For in cases other than that of pure survival, cannibalism manifests a peculiar quality of appetite: insatiability. More than the recurrence of a regular hunger, this insatiable appetite suggests a psychological drive. Unappeasable appetite arises almost by definition from satisfactions that cannot be had, or cannot be completed, such as the desire to be in a state of total union with another. Cannibalism, it may be argued, expresses a desire to swallow, to incorporate and subsume what cannot in some way be dealt with, and in doing so to regain a (mythical) state of unity with the source of nourishment, pleasure, comfort and security.⁵

³ The theory I refer to in this chapter is largely based on the work of Freud, particularly as developed by Melanie Klein. Angela Carter herself uses a Kleinian analysis in *The Sadeian Woman*.


⁵ Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, in a paper called ‘Introjection-Incorporation, Mourning or Melancholia’ in Serge Lebovici and D. Widlocher, eds., *Psychoanalysis in France* (New York: International Universities Press, 1980), suggest that the fantasy incorporation of an object is used to avoid the introjection or acceptance of loss. Since loss is an inevitable and perpetual part of human life, such avoidance suggests a dysfunctional or arrested psychic condition.
It would be useful at this point to outline briefly the psychoanalytic theory on which my analysis in this chapter is based. I draw broadly on Freud's identification of particular stages in the growth of the psyche, particularly his final instinct theory concerning the opposition of life and death instincts (Eros and Thanatos), and the fusion of libido and aggressiveness. His theory of psychic development was elaborated by Abraham and then by Klein into the theory of the 'oral-sadistic' (Abraham) or 'oral' stage (Klein). The oral stage is the first stage of libidinal development, when nutrition is inseparable from the love relationship with the mother, and this love relationship is saturated with the resonances of eating and being eaten.

According to the theory, during the earliest stage, the infant is unaware of anything outside itself; indeed it takes everything it experiences to be itself, and the breast is something taken in as part of itself (this coincides with the image of auto-cannibalism I referred to above, when it seems that the eater is the eaten). Once the infant discovers difference, he or she may be said to have entered the 'oral-sadistic', or 'cannibalistic' stage, which is characterised by ambivalence; the infant experiences a conflict of love and aggression towards the love object (or part object, e.g. the breast) which is now perceived as external and unfamiliar, and a potential source of fear. According to Klein, as a defence against anxiety the object becomes split into 'good' and 'bad'

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8 The 'object' in this context (stated baldly) is the person, part person or thing upon which the ego is focused.
according to whether it gratifies or frustrates (the 'good breast' gratifying desire and the 'bad breast' causing frustration by its withdrawal); the subject also projects libidinal or destructive instincts onto the object, through, for example, the desire to incorporate it (but thereby destroy it) or the destructive aim of sucking the breast dry. The subject's ambivalence is further complicated by a fear that these destructive impulses will be reciprocated by the parent, a fantasy of being eaten that is a projection of, and reaction against the infant's own desire to assimilate and possess what is external to the self.  

An adult urge for incorporation reflects nostalgia for a (mythical) state of complete union. Such a union, like the incorporation featured in the oral stage theory outlined above (and which provides the model for more mature introjection and identification), might provide pleasure through the penetration of the self by the object, give satisfaction by the destruction of the object, or keep the object within specifically in order to appropriate its qualities. (The parallel with the satisfactions of literal cannibalism is quite startling here: eating someone through love, as the ultimate act of union or possession; eating through hate, to destroy someone by superimposing oneself; or eating a brave enemy as a token of respect and to achieve bravery.) To (re)achieve such a union would involve ingesting what has now become separate, 'other', both loved and threatening. This 'other' might be the 'part object' (for example the breast) or the complete love object or person - or indeed something much less.

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10 Introjection is the process whereby a person, in fantasy, transposes objects and their qualities from outside him- or herself. See Leplanche & Pontalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis, 229-30.
differentiated, some representative of the whole world.

The process outlined here is not limited to individual psyches. In her account of Western culture, *From Communion to Cannibalism*, Maggie Kilgour suggests that almost the entire Western tradition is marked by "nostalgia for a state of total incorporation...which [tries] to construct a transcendental system or imagine a single body that could contain all meaning", and which generally moves to resolve differences by assimilation or incorporation. In whatever sphere this urge is manifested - in personal desires for amorous union, or in xenophobia and acts of cultural or religious imperialism - the model of bodily experience is applicable and thus the psychology seems fundamental. So, lovers yearning for total possession of the love object are fuelled by the same basic drive as societies which invent accusations against minority groups resisting assimilation (such as Jews in the Middle Ages being accused - ironically enough - of cannibalism).

Nostalgia for union, the desire to incorporate and its psychophysical underpinning are, according to this explanation, common to literal and metaphorical acts of cannibalism. Taking Kilgour's comment as a caveat, however, it should be borne in mind that such an analysis itself bears the dangers of a nostalgic return to unity, by offering a reductive analysis of all human activity in terms of cannibalistic desire. This is a seductively easy 'key to all mythologies' analysis to apply, but such an explanation, it hardly needs to be said, would not be particularly illuminating.12

Always bearing this in mind, 'cannibalistic' behaviour and metaphoric

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12 The allusion is, of course, to Casaubon's sterile life's work in *Middlemarch*. 
incorporation in literature are substantially revealed in the light of this
psychoanalytic model. Before looking at specific texts, however, I want very
briefly to consider the effect of the eaten on the eater. At first view cannibalism
would seem to suggest the absolute supremacy of the consumer, and is
presumably experienced as pretty well absolute by the victim; the dinner is, after
all, hardly on equal terms with the diner. Yet whatever is taken into the body
(or the mind, or the psyche) will have an effect, whether of nourishment or
poisoning; the cannibal’s victim may have some sense of power or satisfaction
at the prospect of his or her effect on, or rather in, the cannibal. Before the
cannibalistic act takes place, whether it be literal or metaphorical, there is a
clear distinction between the consumer and what is to be consumed. Once
consumption has begun the situation is much less clear; what is consumed
begins at once to become part of the consumer, as is suggested by the adage
‘you are what you eat’. Suppose the one to be eaten is - again literally or
metaphorically - poisonous? This is of account where mental absorption is
concerned, since we may fear undue influence, or infiltration by unhealthy ideas,
or simply an attack on our autonomy, but with eating too the threat is evident; if
indeed you are what you eat then you become a different person once you eat
someone. Cannibalism thus threatens personal identity, and the nostalgia for
union must be tempered by a fear of transformation. We are simultaneously
compelled and repelled.

Threat and fear are predominant elements in popular conceptions of
cannibalism (especially in film), but it is worth mentioning that neither is a
necessary characteristic, and Italo Calvino, for example, in his novella Under the

13 This phrase is much quoted by Kilgour, who makes the point extensively. It is also used by
Angela Carter in relation to the influence of reading matter: ‘It is to a degree true that, as we used to
say in the sixties, you are what you eat...’ John Haffenden, Novelists in Interview, 80.
Jaguar Sun, emphasises various elements of ‘cannibalistic’ desire: a sense of separation, of disunited self and other; a hopeless desire for unity; an inability to achieve oneness through physical love.\(^{14}\) This story of a middle-aged tourist couple suggests that the void might be filled through spiritual love or through ingestion - communion or cannibalism - as the man and wife, visiting the ancient sites of human sacrifice in Mexico, achieve a paradoxical communion through a highly self-conscious, sensuous, metaphorically but explicitly cannibalistic experience of eating, in full awareness at the same time of being themselves swallowed by a ‘universal cannibalism’ that consumes the world. The image stresses reciprocity; in a fantasy of cannibalism the two can take turns, indeed must do so if there is to be any equality. Ultimately, Calvino suggests, we are all subject to a universal principle that is more or less cannibalistic.

This story is unusual inasmuch as it embraces cannibalism as a positive and honest impulse, and because it is exceptionally balanced, both in the play of its narrative elements and in offering some sort of resolution to the dilemma posed by the impossibility of achieving an ideal and complete union. It could be said to provide a paradigm of positive cannibalism, which because it is mutually fantasised is reciprocal and non-exploitative - though its balance depends entirely upon the reciprocity and the fantasy. In its emphasis on mutuality the story is a comparative rarity, for most texts featuring cannibalism tend on the whole to emphasise its predatory and colonising aspects.

In its extreme form, predatory or colonising cannibalism reduces to a formula of ‘eat or be eaten’. Rapacious eating provides an economic and

\(^{14}\) Italo Calvino, Under the Jaguar Sun (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) (Soto il Sole Giaguaro, Milan: Garzanti Editore s.p.a., 1986). According to Freud, because sexual intercourse is a non permanent and less than absolute form of incorporation, it is ultimately unsatisfying compared to the idea of cannibalism. This disappointment, when sublimated, leads to culture and civilization. See Civilisation and its Discontents, SE Vol. XXI, 1961 (1929), 59-145.
wonderfully vivid illustration of the attitude such a predatory formula engenders; Evelyn Waugh offers a chilling example, for example, in the person of Reggie St Cloud in *A Handful of Dust*.\(^\text{15}\) This character eats with an extraordinary ruthlessness, absent-mindedly consuming fish heads, chicken bones, peach stones and all sorts of discarded things from other people's plates, behaviour which mirrors exactly his archaeological, financial and personal dealings.

More brutal, because more self-aware, is the cannibalism in the film, *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and her Lover*.\(^\text{16}\) This demonstrates, through the aggressive gourmandism of Albert Spica (the thief of the title), a violent, predatory philosophy, vividly illustrated in the scene in which he stabs a fork into the cheek of one of his henchmen's girlfriends. On a personal level, both his pathological drive to control and his tyrannical insecurity strongly suggest a person stuck in a child state, at the oral-sadistic stage. The fact that he is violently orally and anally obsessed (and unable to engage in sexual union) makes Georgina's act of revenge particularly appropriate, though her accusation, 'Cannibal!', refers not so much to the individual act when she forces him to eat her cooked lover, as to his entire behaviour.\(^\text{17}\) Spica is a monster in the fairy tale and gangster traditions, whose behaviour is rendered all the more shocking - and given a distinctly 80s' context - by the mixture of theatricality, painterly images, gorgeous sensuousness, extended tracking shots with little depth of field and repeated images of force-feeding, food-spoiling and corruption. In its

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\(^{17}\) Greenaway has spoken of the film as representing his response to Thatcherism and its espousal of philistinism, vulgarity and greed. See, for example, Gavin Smith, 'Food for Thought', *Film Comment* 28 (3), (May/June 1990), 54-61 or Michael Walsh, 'Allegories of Thatcherism: The Films of Peter Greenaway' in Lester Friedman, ed., *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires were started* (London: UCL Press, 1993), 255-277.
deliberate offensiveness, crudity and despotism, Albert’s only relation to the world - whether food, friends, business or his wife - is that of a voracious and thwarted infant.

In this respect he is not unlike at least one character portrayed by Angela Carter, whose novels abound with cannibalistic behaviour, though her apprehension of the complexities of appetite and revelation of cannibalistic motivation is more subtle and complicated than the dynamic suggested in Greenaway’s film. The character in question is the puppet-maker Uncle Philip in *The Magic Toyshop*, to whose strange, bleak domain Melanie and her two siblings are transplanted from rural middle-class comfort. Here they find themselves in a place of contradictory appetites. From their arrival they eat well, though under strain, and drink copious quantities of comforting tea; Francie’s strange grace, ‘flesh to flesh’ suggests a simple recognition of the literal process - but its overtones of rank carnivorousness or even cannibalism prefigure a more sinister suggestion, which is gradually revealed.

Any appetite for life, whether expressed by Aunt Margaret and her brothers or by the children, is snuffed out by the presence of Uncle Philip, because of his tyrannical restrictions and their economic dependence. The slippage between the desire to eat and sexual desire, characteristic of Carter’s writing, is important in relation to cannibalistic behaviour in this novel, and suggests very different kinds of relationship to that portrayed by Calvino. The satisfaction of sexual appetite is by no means mutual here. Uncle Philip’s own conjugal appetite is satisfied, but not, it is implied, shared. Aunt Margaret and her brothers, Francie and Finn, nevertheless embody a spirit of anarchic zest.

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18 Economic dependence is an important factor in Carter’s analysis of gender roles and sexuality, since the financially disempowered have little in the way of choice.
evinced in wild blazing hair) which manifests itself only in Uncle Philip's absence. Part of their appetite for life is apparent in Aunt Margaret's and Francie's incestuous hunger for each other, which adds a Romantic dimension to the insatiability of nostalgic desire for union. Finn, too, has an erotic appetite, though it proves temporarily too much for Melanie's nascent sexuality; she has first to escape from the devouring patriarch, Uncle Philip, whom she experiences as a kind of Bluebeard (hallucinating a severed hand in the knife and fork drawer) and who enacts a symbolic rape upon her through the medium of his puppet theatre in which she must play Leda to his lovingly created man-size swan.

What is particularly pertinent to my present argument is the relationship of Uncle Philip to food and its provision. He is a domestic tyrant, who beats Finn for being three minutes late for breakfast and generally abuses members of the household. He controls the family budget, not just meanly, but in order to be in control; all food is bought on credit and he pays the bills monthly, so that nobody should have any money to spend for themselves. His very presence is described as drawing the savour from the good food; he 'renders(s) the dining-room as cold and cheerless as a room in a commercial traveller's guesthouse' (124). Yet he enjoys his food, dominating the table and eating hugely. Melanie can barely recognise him as the same man she saw in the photograph of her parents' wedding, so enormous has he grown, from eating and (we may conclude) feeding off his wife and her brothers.

The satisfaction Uncle Philip takes in food is not merely from eating it, however. On Sunday afternoons, he obliges Aunt Margaret to wear her 'best'

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19 This degree of control is paralleled, perhaps, in The Cook, the Thief, in Albert Spica's attempts to control his wife, Georgina, focusing on her diet, her table manners, her body, her conversation, even her excretory habits, with reminders to wash her hands and a warning that she must not 'play with herself' for her genitals too, are his property.
(threadbare grey) dress and to don his wedding present: a silver choker which prevents her eating and restricts her very breathing. She takes on a tragic beauty, wearing this, and at teatime is able just to sip at a cup of tea and nibble a few stalks of mustard and cress. Uncle Philip meanwhile:

broke the armour off a pink battalion of shrimps and ate them steadily, chewed through a loaf of bread spread with half a pound of butter and helped himself to the lion’s share of the cake while gazing at her with expressionless satisfaction, apparently deriving a certain pleasure from her discomfort, or even finding that the sight of it improved his appetite (113).

It is on Sunday nights, after this tea, that they ‘make love’, as Finn sarcastically puts it. The implication is that both of Uncle Philip’s appetites are well sharpened by this particular exhibition of his wife’s imprisonment.

Degradation is a major tool of Uncle Philip’s tyranny (as it is of Albert Spica) and his war against, or fear of exuberant life outside his control. Significantly the one person immune from his wrath is Melanie’s younger brother Jonathon, who eats with a polite but absent-minded enthusiasm but spends most of his time, like Uncle Philip, in a fantasy world of crafted models. The cheeky and defiant Finn in particular attracts blows and abuse, and this, together with the denial of physical comforts in the house, creates an atmosphere of fear and resentment. In addition to brute force, Uncle Philip attempts to manipulate the defloration and hence degradation of Melanie, telling Finn to rehearse the rape of Leda with her before the performance. Brutality is his hallmark, except where his puppets are concerned; to these he exhibits the most sentimental tenderness, unthreatening and controllable as they are. Uncle Philip is indeed capable of murder, the culminating act of control and brutality.
his capacity for this, too, being revealed in the context of eating. The possibility of Uncle Philip progressing, in extremis, to this last resort hangs heavily over the Christmas dinner table when he carves the goose:

He attacked the defenceless goose so savagely he seemed to want to kill it all over again, perhaps feeling the butcher had been incompetent in the first place....The reeking knife in his hand, he gazed reflectively at Finn...(160)

though he does not at this stage attempt to translate his thoughts into action, merely serving Finn a 'mean portion of skin and bone' while himself giving a hearty imitation of Henry VIII. It is not until he finally sets fire to the house that he attempts to kill; in seeking to burn them all to death it is the kitchen he first smashes up, adding even the table, with its tablecloth and the remains of their meal, to the barricade at the foot of the stairs.

What, then, motivates this monster? His meanness is clearly not simple cupidity. He is neither a mere miser, nor, despite his posturing, is he a self-satisfied puritan such as Carter portrays in the Andrew Borden of 'The Fall River Axe Murders'. Uncle Philip is in every respect a greedy man. He eats heartily for the same reason he bullies and controls the household: his appetite is omnivorous; he wants to eat the world. It is significant that Melanie describes him as 'heavy as Saturn' (168), Saturn being the god who castrated his father and ate his children for fear they would supplant him, so becoming a symbol of antagonism between the generations. Just such a conflict might be said to be played out in The Magic Toyshop, Uncle Philip representing patriarchy and the

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rest of the family a younger, more anarchic - and perhaps feminine -
principle.\(^{21}\)

There is, it seems to me, a clear contradiction between the apparent and
external power of an Uncle Philip and the driving emptiness that lies inside,
whether this is seen as psychic or political lack of substance. The seemingly
irresistible external force is subverted both by the insatiability of the monster/
cannibal’s hunger and in wholly self-referential attempts at resolution; Uncle
Philip’s love for his puppets suggests both the emptiness and the solipsism. An
impulse towards incorporation underlies and accounts for the insatiability.\(^{22}\)
Incorporation, as I indicated earlier, relates closely to the oral stage as
propounded by Melanie Klein; it provides pleasure, for only what is pleasurable is
incorporated, but also relates to destructive impulses, since the object is
destroyed by being incorporated.\(^{23}\) Laplanche and Pontalis describe
incorporation as providing ‘the corporal model for introjection and identification’;
the failure to develop this model for the transposition of love objects or qualities
inside oneself, and instead reverting to a desire to consume an undifferentiated
‘other’, suggests at least regression.\(^{24}\)

It also involves a kind of colonialism; if the object is taken and kept
within, then everything about it may be appropriated. Like a society or state that
seeks to destroy opposition by the assimilation of its minority groups, Uncle

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\(^{21}\) In Freud’s cultural narrative it is the primal sons who eat the father, then realising they have
internalised his power against them (ego and superego) - but in both myths the result is a complexity
of conflict, an intestine war rather than the desired subsuming through incorporation. See ‘Totem
and Taboo,’ \textit{SE} Vol. XIII, 1953 (1912-13) and ‘Moses and Monotheism,’ \textit{SE} Vol. XXIII, 1964
(1939).

\(^{22}\) See footnote 5 above.

\(^{23}\) ‘The original pleasure-ego tries to introject into itself everything that is good and to reject

\(^{24}\) Laplanche & Pontalis, 211-212.
Philip moves to bring the children into the same condition as the rest of the household: dirty, ill-clothed, uncomfortable, totally dependent and wholly in the service of the puppet theatre, itself a metaphor for vested control and manipulation.\textsuperscript{25} Foucault writes of ‘the limitless presumption of the appetite’; as manifested by Uncle Philip appetite may be seen as a \textit{reductio ad absurdum} of patriarchal licence and capitalist greed, or as a correlative of the imperious desire of the youngest of children which, unchecked, can indeed give rise to monsters.\textsuperscript{26}

This idea of a monstrous appetite for absolute power is something Carter returns to several times. Doctor Donally in \textit{Heroes and Villains} is a similarly brutal and skilful man, a cross between shaman and mad scientist, whose rationality, taken to excess, will end in the logical conclusion of apocalypse, and who uses every means at his disposal, from snake religion to poison, to subdue the people. In \textit{The Sadeian Woman} Carter suggests that it is Sade, via the Romantics, who is responsible for, ‘shaping aspects of the modern sensibility; its paranoia, its despair, its sexual terrors, its \textit{omnivorous egocentricity}, its tolerance of massacre, holocaust, annihilation’.\textsuperscript{27} Clearly, Carter is not interested in simply portraying two isolated megalomaniac individuals; she is shaping her narratives to comment upon precisely this ‘modern sensibility’, a sensibility distinctly cannibalistic in its indications.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{25} If Uncle Philip is taken as a figure for patriarchy, then destruction by assimilation (and degradation) may be seen as one of its main weapons in exerting power over women, young people, the Irish - and spontaneity of all kinds.
  
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Michel Foucault, \textit{Madness & Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason} (London: Tavistock Publications, 1965), 210.
  
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Angela Carter, \textit{The Sadeian Woman}, 32, (my emphasis).
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the insatiability of the appetite itself being the product of a relentless and unsupported ego. Framed slightly differently, self-perpetuating appetite (consumer desire for goods and services perhaps) and a potentially monstrous self-serving or self-interested group (or corporation or market) easily become a metaphor for political cannibalism, the unsupported ego representing an absence of worth or value. It is not, I think, straining Carter too far to infer that her use of the cannibal suggests attempts in the latter half of the twentieth century to cut loose from the restraints of the superego, attempts which, while exhilarating, breed a sense of separation from what is or was sustaining. With a rejected parent there is no primary love object, no breast, good or bad, and therefore no conceivable sense of union, wholeness and satisfaction; the self has to be recreated in a psychic vacuum, with, it seems, variously cannibalistic results. The novel Love deals with a trio of just such narcissistic, alienated and dependent egos: Annabel, her husband Lee and his brother Buzz, all of whom engage in a complicated dance of mutual and self damage.28 As Lorna Sage puts it, 'They construct their selves, cannibalistically, out of each other, and inscribe their meanings on each other's flesh' 29, quite literally inscribe in one instance, when Annabel makes Lee have her name tattooed on his breast.

Ordinary appetite for food is not much in evidence in this novel, except, tellingly, when Lee first wakes up after a party and finds Annabel lying with him for warmth, with a hunger in her face that touches him so deeply that he takes her home and gives her breakfast, thereby establishing a pattern of a kind of caring. Her hunger, however, is not for food, and is suspiciously predatory:


Annabel ate a little, drank her tea and covered her face with her hands so he could not watch her any more. Her movements were spiky, angular and graceful; how was he to know, since he was so young, that he would become a Spartan boy and she the fox under his jacket, eating his heart out. (15)

These characters are part of the ‘love generation’ of the late 1960s, Carter herself describing them as ‘pure perfect products of those days of social mobility and sexual licence’. Sexual appetite is virtually definitive. Yet their hunger for sexual adventure and fulfilment is highly suspect. Lee has an affair (premarital) with the wife of his philosophy tutor and another when married, with a girl called Carolyn, both of whom mean little to him other than as food for his narcissism. After Annabel’s first suicide attempt, breakdown, relationship with Buzz - and in fact while she is killing herself - Lee, ‘ravenous for the commonplace’, takes refuge in the bed of a pupil, Joanne, who is astonished by his drowning desperation. Annabel and Buzz become alarmingly close, dangerously blurring boundaries in their fantasies, but their attempt at sexual union is disastrous. Buzz is tormented with fears about women’s sexuality and can only bring himself to enter her from behind, having first inspected her for fear of a vagina dentata, and handling her ‘as unceremoniously as a fish on a slab, reduced only to anonymous flesh’ (94). They try to behave like libertines, but Carter punctures their style in tellingly carnivorous (even cannibalistic) terms: ‘connoisseurs of unreality as they were, they could not bear the crude weight, the rank smell and the ripe taste of real flesh’ (95).

Annabel’s sexual hunger is the most self-deceptive; with Buzz she effectively seeks union with herself. If all three characters are profoundly narcissistic (and the novel contains a good deal of play about the cult of

appearances), Annabel is the most thoroughly solipsistic: 'she had the capacity for changing the appearance of the real world which is the price paid by those who take too subjective a view of it' (3). She sees Lee in terms of certain paradoxical images - a herbivorous lion, a flesh-eating unicorn, ultimately a unicorn castrated of its horn - but has no sense of him as a real and separate person. Indeed, when she sees him on the balcony with Carolyn, she can barely bring herself to absorb 'this manifestation of his absolute otherness' (44) and understands the act only in symbolic terms. Her puzzlement is that of the all-devouring infant, her jealousy the barely formed manifestation of a further developmental stage.31 Her idea of having Lee's children relates 'not to fantasies of motherhood but to certain explicit fantasies she had of totally engulfing him' (35) - a cannibalistic image - and, touchingly, her most pleasurable experience in their sexual relationship is the sensation of intimacy she experiences in bed with him: 'she had often read about such intimacy' (25). She is a desolate child. When she returns from the disastrous encounter with Buzz, determined to seduce her husband, she is in a state of desperation and attacks him with vampiric fervour. Although this confirms a sexual connection between all three characters, it is not a completion, but a 'mutual rape'. Lee can only experience Annabel as a diablesse or succubus (a sexually predatory image), and he wearily wishes her dead so that he can be released from caring.

In the mental hospital, Annabel tells the psychiatrist that she has eaten her wedding ring; Lee tells the Fool in the park that she also tried to eat him alive. Sexual desire in much of Carter's writing masks a struggle analogous to

31 This idea builds on the Kleinian theory outlined earlier, of 'good' and 'bad' breast. Envy and greed are primary emotions, relating to the 'good' or gratifying breast and the 'bad' or depriving breast as outlined on 60-1 of this chapter; jealousy can only begin to function when the subject becomes aware of something else in the world beyond the self and the breast (mother). Jealousy must therefore imply a degree of maturing beyond the solipsistic bond of child with mother.
that of the colonising cannibalism, which I described above as 'eat or be eaten'.

This is explicit, though quite without the cruelty evident in Love, in a dream sequence in the slightly earlier novel, Several Perceptions. In this novel the distinction between food and sex is jokily elided in the anonymous figure of a client of the high-class prostitute Mrs Boulder, who sits with her in the cafe, 'buttering his crumpet with the air of a man of the world' (76). The fact that he will eat the crumpet does not necessarily indicate the balance of power in this particular relationship. Mrs Boulder is a woman who will not be exploited sexually, since she puts a price on her body, a role that allows her both sexual licence and power, though Carter acknowledges the social reality of her situation and its problems by turning her to alcohol. The mother of his friend Viv, Mrs Boulder becomes the focus of Joseph's fantasies, and features in a dream whose importance is underlined by being recalled several times through the narrative.

Joseph, who like the characters in Love is also an alienated and self-regarding protagonist, teases Viv about his prostitute mother, but when they all go out together for a drink, he sinks with utter content into the security of their banal conversation and her motherly care, speculating momentarily about Viv suckling at her once splendid breasts. At the same time, he is startlingly aware of her 'terrifying naked eyes' whose expression is some thirty years younger than she is. When he sees her in the café he has the sensation of falling through her eyes into the country of an uncomprehending virgin. It is

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32 'The whore has made of herself her own capital investment....In an area of human relations where fraud is regular practice between the sexes, her honesty is regarded with a mocking wonder. She sells herself; but she is a fair tradesman and her explicit acceptance of contractual obligation implicit in all sexual relations mocks the fraud of the "honest" woman who will give nothing at all in return for goods and money except the intangible and hence unassessable perfume of her presence.' The Sadeian Woman, 58.
immediately after this that he dreams of her as an ice cream, the first indication of his ambivalent, cannibalistic desire for her.\footnote{Cf. The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman, in which one of the scenes depicted in the peep-show is of two portions of vanilla ice-cream, each topped with a cherry 'so that the resemblance to a pair of female breasts was almost perfect'. It is entitled, in what seems to be a favourite quotation from Freud (for she uses it both here and in The Sadeian Woman): 'The meeting place of love and hunger', 45.}

She is, unsurprisingly, delicious, and he tucks in with gusto. No problem so far: suckling at her breast and eating her as ice cream are not, perhaps, so very different. Joseph can indulge, fantastically, in both sexual and oral appetite, be actor and recipient at the same time. However, the bowl and its contents begin to grow, increasing in proportion as he eats. He can, it seems, incorporate her without destroying her. He sets to with a will, but the more he eats the larger she grows, his eating efforts are inadequate and soon he jettisons his spoon and climbs into the bowl, scooping Mrs Boulder into his mouth by the handful. Eventually, however, Joseph is submerged by an untimely avalanche and he is 'gone for good, dead and buried all at once in the polar night of Mrs Boulder's belly'; it is she who in the end engulfs or incorporates him (80).

The dream functions as a wish-fulfilment, an explanation and obliquely as a prefiguring. Joseph is excited by the idea of penetrating Mrs Boulder at the same time as he wants to be mothered by her; he is, however, fearful of being overwhelmed and suspicious of her neediness. He wants to be mothered and fears being smothered. Carter draws on an archetypal fear of women that complements the \textit{vagina dentata} fantasy of which Buzz in \textit{Love} is victim, and which Dr Donally uses to manipulate the fears of the Barbarians in \textit{Heroes and Villains}. The fear of being eaten also relates to the oral stage; Joseph's ambivalence, his coexisting fear and desire correspond precisely with the loving and destructive responses to the breast in Klein's theory. The apprehension
here is purely Joseph's; when later, after an initial failure, he does achieve a quite ecstatic sexual union with Mrs Boulder and tells her about his dream, she is merely touched that he should dream about her at all. It is the reality of her ageing (and maternal) body which reconnects him with life (like Annabel, he had been an attempted suicide) and fills him with tenderness; in moving towards orgasm his desire is described in terms that suggest a yearning to regress even further, to return to an incorporated condition inside the womb:

the uncreated country of fountain and forest deep inside her, deep as the serene Beulah Land where Viv once slept fleecily clad in Laguno down, under blue trees shedding fruit of light. (119) 34

In The Sadeian Woman, Carter identifies Sade's refusal in Philosophy in the Boudoir to allow the mother of Eugenie to reach orgasm 'and so to come alive' (128) as his sticking point, and she considers that this results in the failure of his woman to fully subvert her society. She suggests, in Freudian terms, that no matter the size of the phallus, Sade cannot satisfy his mother, for that is the father's function. The mother remains guardian of 'a dark, secret place of which he was so afraid that he had hastily to seal it up before it engulfed him', a place for which he feels 'greed, envy...jealousy [and] a helpless rage.' (130). Carter, with no such patriarchal hang-ups, claims, in accordance with Klein, that the 'body of the mother is the great, good place, the concretisation of the earthly paradise' (134), enriched by infant fantasies of the good breast, 'the place where love and hunger meet' (134, quoting Freud). Carter portrays the

34 Beulah is used by Blake to refer to a land of retreat, restfulness and sensual pleasures. As David Punter points out, Carter uses the myth to very different effect in The Passion of New Eve where the extremes of magic and technology are seen to meet. David Punter, 'Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine', 219.
enrichment of the primal object through Joseph, whose symbolic or fantasised return to the paradisal mother’s body allows a symbolic rebirth into ‘trust, hope and a belief in the existence of good’ (SW 134). The mutual satisfaction of Joseph and his substitute mother, Mrs Boulder, represents a release, a kind of rebirth, following which Mrs Boulder is able to find again her wonderful black lover from the war, and Joseph is freed to a normally healthy hunger for tea and boiled eggs. The narrative is resolved with a Christmas Eve party, the novel ending on an upbeat, optimistic note, the town a clean page covered with snow and the cat producing six pure white kittens.

If Several Perceptions does much to confound ‘love and hunger’, sex and maternity, Heroes and Villains, with its post-catastrophe emphasis on chaos, pushes cannibalism right back to its predatory, vampiric paradigm. The ‘heroine’ Marianne escapes from her white steel and concrete tower, to run away with the Barbarians. The novel suggests a dystopian pastoral, with at least a passing resemblance to the hippy movement. The principle of ‘eat or be eaten’ is central to this novel, both literally, in terms of survival, and figuratively, in the sexual struggle between Marianne and Jewel (the ‘barbarian’ she runs away with), in the power struggle with Donally (the patriarchal shaman figure) and in the general strife amongst Jewel’s family and tribe.

The primitive conditions which Carter creates provide an opportunity to suggest human nature at a fairly elemental level. Ignorance and superstition are sketched in, though despite this and the setting the characters are in many ways not unlike those in any other Carter novel; their superstitions are simply more literal. The imagery suggests a reversionary Wuthering Heights, dark and foul, full of fire, meat, animals and brooding passions. Cannibalism is outlined as a plausible and realistic fear, and is used as a threat or bogey by the villagers;
Marianne’s nurse, for example, warns her, ‘If you’re not a good little girl, the Barbarians will eat you....They wrap little girls in clay just like they do with hedgehogs, wrap them in clay, bake them in the fire and gobble them up with salt. They relish tender little girls’ - a story which itself is told with only too much relish.\(^{35}\) In a well-signalled parallel, the Barbarian child Jen tells Marianne about her father’s disappearance: ‘He dressed up and went away and he didn’t come back and the Professors had killed him and baked him and eaten him with salt’ (35). In this setting, cannibalism is a vivid emblem of the primitive, always lurking in Marianne’s imagination, so that it leaps to mind as a possibility during the semiotic wedding ceremony she is forced to undergo: ‘I thought he was going to kill me,’ she says of Donally’s blood-mixing ritual, ‘cut me up, fry me and distribute me in ritual gobbets to the tribe’ (76).

A more figurative, cultural or colonial cannibalism (comparable to Uncle Philip’s in *The Magic Toyshop*) is invoked in the purpose of the marriage, as Jewel explains to Marianne after he has raped her: ‘I’ve got to marry you, haven’t I?....Swallow you up and incorporate you, see. Dr Donally says. Social psychology.’ (56) Marianne must be incorporated so that she will cease to be an outsider, and thus no longer be perceived as a threat.\(^{36}\) Just to make sure, and to preserve his patriarchal and shamanistic power, Donally tries (though rather casually, it must be admitted) to poison the couple, but they are protected by the good housekeeper Mrs Green in an emblematic act of womanly nurturing.

The dilemma faced by Marianne is how to interact with the Barbarians - and specifically Jewel - without being completely subsumed. To begin with, she


\(^{36}\) The same mechanism is invoked in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman*, when the centaurs keep Desiderio and Albertina separate, ‘for fear we might propagate other as yet indigestible marvels before they could find a means of digesting us’ (184).
behaves rather as Annabel does in Love, denying him an existence independent of their relationship and seeing him as two-dimensional. The difference is in the quality of their sexual contact, which is described as a 'third thing':

...this erotic beast...eyeless, formless and equipped with one single mouth. It was amphibious and swam in black, brackish waters, subsisting only upon night and silence; she closed her eyes in case she glimpsed it by moonlight and there were no words of endearment in common, anyway, nor any reason to use them. The beast had teeth and claws. It was sometimes an instrument solely of vengefulness, though often its own impetus carried it beyond this function. When it separated out to themselves, again, they woke to the mutual distrust of the morning. (88-9)

Eros is not kindly. There is passion and violence, and a deadly struggle for supremacy. Jewel intimates a connection with butchery, daubing Marianne's face one evening with blood from the slaughtered animal carcasses. It is an conspicuous connection, more sharply in evidence in the big butchering scene earlier in the novel, a scene full of noise, movement, animals, children and excitement, a 'whirling conflict of black and red' (46), in which the brothers, with rape in mind, manoeuvre Marianne towards the table where the carcasses were so recently cut up. Only the arrival of Dr Donally prevents a pack rape. These scenes connote brutal sexual exploitation, indicating women as meat for men's consumption.

Carter also makes a connection between meat and living flesh in The Sadeian Woman, but in order to make a distinction. The butcherly delights of meat, she says, are not sensual but analytical, and any pleasure to be gained can only be technical - plus of course pleasure in the knowledge of being the cutter or the eater and not the victim. Hence the shock value when the
boundary is breached. The film *Delicatessen*, for example, nicely exploits the distinction by positing a butcher who takes pleasure in applying analytical ‘butcherly’ skills to human bodies, in the interests of making profit. Part of the film’s *frisson* for the audience is achieved through the clash between the ordinariness of going to the local shop to buy meat and the extraordinary knowledge of its being human meat (the almost apocalyptic *mise en scène* both justifying and emphasising the clash). Like Carter’s fiction, this fable has political resonances, and these go beyond the post-catastrophe similarities; not only does *Delicatessen*’s butcher represent acquisitive, cannibalistic profiteering but he is opposed by a vegetarian underground ‘alternative’ network who may be inept but are inventively heroic and enable the triumph of love, art and sensuality over the technical skills of the cannibal-butcher.

More pleasurable, though degrading, connections between sexuality and butchery are explored in Alina Reyes’ erotic tale, *The Butcher*, in which flesh is described as sinister, and the butcher’s sexuality and the flesh he handles in his work are closely linked. The descriptions of butchery and of intercourse are almost interchangeable, as for example when the narrator glimpses the butcher copulating with his woman in the freezer as though she is one of the carcases, or watches him at work: ‘I saw the knife enter the firm dead flesh, opening it like a shining wound’. According to Carter, when flesh is treated as meat - as in Sade’s writings - then sensuality and ambiguity are banished, and sexual relations become utterly distorted. She herself plays with these notions in the


38 See also footnote 63.

short-story reworking of Bluebeard, 'The Bloody Chamber'. In this story the Marquis' hunger for flesh is overlaid with vampiric suggestion (from the Marquis' wet red lips to the joking Transylvanian postcard from his second wife Carmilla) and hints of cannibalism, and it is very much concerned with questions of possession, objectification and fragmentation, specifically of women. Consider, for example, the heroine's description of the Marquis' behaviour at the opera, the night before their wedding:

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab (11)

This bears considerable resemblance to photographs in pornographic magazines of parts of women: the outsize breasts, the cheekily inviting buttocks, or the genitalia close-up chillingly referred to in the trade as 'split beaver'.

The Marquis is clearly a consumer; the cruelty of the ruby choker he gives the narrator for a wedding present ('like an extraordinarily precious slit throat'(11)) and his 'sheer carnal avarice' suggest he is one of arcane tastes. The choker prefigures the end he has in store for her, but also, like a dog collar, signifies total mastery (a mastery underlined, incidentally, by the difference in their ages, wealth and status); he sees her as his to do with as he pleases. Since what pleases is the satisfaction of appetites and his appetites are unchecked and perverse, the Marquis indulges in the most ambiguous carnality. The narrator describes his approach like this:

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41 The imprisoning and stifling qualities of Aunt Margaret's choker are given an additional and suitably gothic twist here.
He stripped me, gourmand that he was, as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke - but do not imagine much finesse about it; this artichoke was no particular treat for the diner nor was he yet in any greedy haste. He approached his familiar treat with a weary appetite,

and likens herself to the girl in a pornographic etching, 'bare as a lamb chop' (15). Everything suggests cannibalism. The heroine perceives the stems of his lilies in water as like severed limbs; the Marquis' cigar is as 'fat as a baby's arm' (12). Conversely, they eat an erotically gastronomic lunch including pheasant with hazelnuts and chocolate and a 'white, voluptuous cheese' (19); the food itself becomes libidinous and sexuality carnivorous. In the end, the distinction all but disappears as his unsatisfied (and unsatisfiable?) appetite is monstrously quickened by her delayed approach to the execution:

Don't loiter, girl! Do you think I shall lose appetite for the meal if you are so long about serving it? No; I shall grow hungrier, more ravenous with each moment, more cruel...Run to me, run! I have a place prepared for your exquisite corpse in my display of flesh! (39)

Yet he is not solely a monster, or at least he is one who also appears to suffer. His delight in his wife's virginity and his appalling despair when it becomes apparent that she has visited his torture chamber suggest he was, or could have been, redeemable. Like the bored countess in Vampirella and 'The Lady of the House of Love' he is impaled upon his desire whilst longing to be free of it, a freedom that demands innocence, not complicity.42 Satisfaction is ephemeral and desire self-perpetuating; the eaten may only temporarily assuage

42 The radio play Vampirella is in Angela Carter, Come unto these Yellow Sands (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1985) (four radio plays first broadcast by BBC Radio 3), 'The Lady of the House of Love' in The Bloody Chamber.
the tormenting appetite and the sole release for the Marquis is negation, which effectively means death. This dilemma is played out more fully, with a greater emphasis on negation as the impulse and consequence of cannibalism, in the figure of the Count in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, as will be seen below.

Murder, and still more so cannibalism, in Carter's view demonstrates the 'meatiness' of human flesh and is 'the most elementary act of exploitation', in which one person is seen by the other in completely primitive terms; the abyss between what she calls 'master' and victim is here at its greatest. This view has, I think, to do with what Carter identifies as the Sadeian libertines' 'economic' theory of sexual pleasure: that pleasure shared is pleasure diminished. This measure of exploitation cannot take account of the victim as an equal person in any real sense at all; the eaten is never on equal terms with the eater; eating is an act of absolute control. The 'economic' theory also relates to the libertines' almost Puritan sense that flesh as a means of production must be owned, and, like any resource, be made to pay for itself. Hence the importance of coprophagy: even excrement is not allowed to go to waste. In controlling the means of this particular production (by way of certain diets and timetables), the libertines strike at the primary and most fundamental autonomy of their victims. Seen in this framework, cannibalism too, both politically and psychically, is nothing short of dehumanisation.

Sawney Beane, the Scots cannibal with a walk-on part in *Vampirella* describes it as a curse, the 'most insatiable hunger in the world...' (96), but in

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43 *The Sadeian Woman*, 140.

44 According to the psychoanalytic theory, faeces are a child's first gift, the production or withholding of them (to the delight or distress of his or her parents), the first expression of independence. To be deprived of this primary autonomy is the ultimate enslavement.
this context the curse has strong political overtones. The Beanes have fourteen children and times are hard. He suggests cannibalism to her as a solution, and 'she says, aye, Sawney, let's eat them up the way they've eaten us,' an allusion, perhaps, to Swift's *Modest Proposal*. True to their words, they dine on 'earls, barons, marchionesses and so on' (95). As a manifestation of political revenge or the longing to achieve union with another, cannibalism may not seem so heinous. I have already suggested that Calvino transforms it into a positive act of intimate reciprocity, and intense feelings of love not infrequently manifest themselves in a desire to eat the beloved (as Freud suggests). But its insatiability also suggests a psychic (mal)function, and incorporation fantasy may become obsessive, as Abraham and Torok suggest in their discussion of the avoidance of accepting loss.\(^45\) Such hunger may be seen as a regression, an unrealisable longing for a state of total unity in which the world is not 'other', and the eater is undifferentiated from the eaten. Indeed, the area in which much of Carter's writing seems to me to hover is precisely where the individual becomes conscious of difference, of self and other, and the angry and frightened ambivalence, the mixture of love and aggression that accompany this discovery are what power many of her voracious characters.\(^46\)

But it is more complicated than this. Carter's writing deals with much more than individual pathologies and her novels and stories reverberate with psychological, political and cultural ideas. Her view that a narrative is 'an

\(^{45}\) See footnote 5 of this chapter.

\(^{46}\) I don't want to overstress symbolic, social or political aspects of her work in a chapter exploring a psychoanalytic view, but it seems to me Carter invariably focuses precisely on ambivalence, boundaries, margins - what is overlooked, repressed or suppressed, in both psyche and society.
argument stated in fictional terms, her scathing comments about writers who claim that their characters ‘take over’ a novel and her assertion that her characters ‘have always got a tendency to be telling you something’ emphasise her control and sense of purpose. David Punter claims that this purpose is in part to chart ‘the unconscious processes of Western society’, processes which include of course the making of identity. This is evident to some extent in her earlier novels, as my argument indicates, but it becomes explicit in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, and even more so in *The Passion of New Eve*. Underpinning the processes of the unconscious are the two great classes of instincts classified by Freud and which I referred to at the beginning of the chapter: the life instincts, or Eros, and the death instincts, or Thanatos. Cannibalistic desire may be seen in this context as a particular emanation from one or other of these, or sometimes from a conflicting mixture of the two.

*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* postulates a war between reason and desire: between the establishment, embodied in the Minister (‘the most rational man in the world’) and Dr Hoffman, the apostle of desire; between restraint and imagination; ‘between an encyclopedist and a poet’. The conflict begins with the Doctor bombarding the city with illusions.

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47 Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, 79.

48 See ‘Angela Carter’s Curious Room’, *Omnibus*.

49 Punter, ‘Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine’, 209. Carter takes a socio-political view as much as a psychoanalytic one; in her later novels especially, identity - and more specifically gender - is clearly shown to be socially constructed (or reconstructed, in the case of *New Eve*).

50 See footnote 6 of this chapter.

The Minister in his struggle against libertarianism attempts to give everything a 'reality rating', an effort that bears a more than passing resemblance to the nostalgic yearning 'to construct a transcendental system...that could contain all meaning'. It is the very lack of such a system that is promulgated by Dr Hoffman, the anarchic effects of which lack the Minister experiences as chaos. What is 'real' becomes impossible to disentangle from what is perceived and what is desired; 'reality' is palpably elusive and inconstant, a state of affairs endorsed by the proprietor of the peep-show: 'Nothing...is ever completed; it only changes,' he says; there is no 'hidden unity' (99). This is not to say unity is not itself desired. The phrase 'persistence of vision' which recurs in the novel applies not only to Dr Hoffman's own vision (of the transformation of desire into material actuality) but to the sustaining of human longings and illusions concerning continuity and coherence. Psychic tenacity has no dealings with empirical evidence, and humans continue to strive for coherence and order against all evidence of separation and fragmentation, or, to put it another way, to pursue a mythical ideal of unity which may be interpreted as a nostalgia-driven desire for oneness. The contradiction here between, on the one hand, Hoffman's move towards the fulfilment of desire and, on the other, the impossibility of realising the desire for coherence and unity (fully embodied in Hoffman's own continuing relationship with his dead wife) causes a tension that supplies one of the dynamics of the novel.

Desire - Eros or Thanatos - is the energy source in this novel. It is manifest in the emblematic images of the peep show, the narcissistic eyes, edible breasts, penis-shaped candle, perpetual congress, mutilated flesh and in

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52 Kilgour, From Communion to Cannibalism, 5.

53 See Punter, 'Angela Carter: Supersessions'.

utero landscape featuring Dr Hoffman’s castle, all of which suggest a potently masculine appeal to the voyeur. Desire is what powers the illusions Dr Hoffman projects onto the city and it is responsible for much of what appears or happens to Desiderio, since the force of desires in this novel leads to their apparent embodiments. The ‘transmutations’ that afflict the city represent the projection of people’s desires in the literal and psychoanalytic senses; given that projection is a mechanism whereby a person externalises what he or she refuses to recognise in his or her self onto someone else, it is perhaps not surprising that despite a few lyrical ones, most of the ‘transmutations’ are bestial and bloodthirsty. Similarly the natural world in the novel functions as a pathetic fallacy of carnivorous or cannibalistic behaviour. This is most obviously evident in images of birds tearing flesh from beggars or eyes from children (19), but is figured also in the growth of roses and ivy consuming Mary Anne’s house (51), the pious town and circus being swallowed up by the earthquake, and the actively cannibal landscape in Chapter 7.

The same can be said of the contents of the peep show, which confront the most inadmissible of ideas. One of the samples Desiderio looks at in his futile attempts to catalogue them is a ‘typical’ scene of ‘a nursemaid mutilating a baby, toasting him over a nursery fire and then gobbling him up with every appearance of relish’ (107). Since this follows not long after Desiderio’s escape from the river people, it obviously reflects his experience there; the psychological horror of such an experience could not easily be absorbed and might well be projected outward, particularly given the surreal possibilities here

64 The fact that the number and nature of the samples are never constant is an ingenious way of suggesting the ever shifting nature of desire as well as endorsing the peepshow owner's contention that things 'cannot be exhausted' (104) and always change. The device is similar to that used by Borges in his short story 'The Book of Sand'. Jorge Luis Borges, The Book of Sand (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 87-91. (The story 'The Book of Sand' first appeared in The New Yorker.)
for realisation of such projection. But the scene also looks forward (to the
cooking of the Count), and, like the other samples, represents archetypal fears
and desires. The samples 'represent everything it was possible to believe by the
means of either direct simulation or a symbolism derived from Freud' (108), and
it is this Freudian symbolism that connects this scene with the intertwining of
cannibalism and desire which runs through the novel.

Cannibalistic desire operates in two directions in this novel. Desiderio's
longing to belong represents a desire for absorption which is only repudiated
when his actual survival is threatened. He wants, really, to be incorporated.
The family of boat people represent the 'belonging' Desiderio has never had, and
with them he feels for the first time a sense of home. This is no simple family
substitution, however. Not only is Desiderio a stranger to the tribe, but the
Indians themselves are outsiders, 'bogeymen with which to frighten naughty
children' (69) - no doubt with threats of cannibalism, like those of Heroes and
Villains. As such, they are more turned in on themselves, more rejecting of
outsiders than the society at large, for they fear being assimilated and absorbed
into that society. They are immune to Dr Hoffman's manifestations because of
their logical self-sufficiency; when an elder says something is so, it is so, and
desire is repressed by tradition and ritual. For a while, Desiderio is enchanted by
this communal solipsism; he loves the simple predictability of the diet of maize
and fish and is delighted to see from his reflection in a window that he looks
indistinguishable from the others. He learns their chirruping language, which has
only a present and simple past tense and no existential copula which, with the
absence of abstract nouns, suggests a society only on the brink of language and
the symbolic. The density, complexity and skill of Carter's narrative are evident
here; this little society, 'frozen in themselves' (87), represents an arrested pre-
conceptual, pre-symbolic stage in the development of subjectivity.

The snag with the family, as with the stage, is that it is all-devouring. Desiderio wants to be incorporated, but not, ultimately, at the expense of his own existence. He is, of course, 'the desired one', and as much the focus of the river people's desires as of the rather different desires of Albertina (and himself). The simple narrative of the episode with the river people is revealed in tribal terms: Desiderio possesses something the people want: the ability to read and write; the way to obtain that quality is to incorporate it literally, so that by eating pieces of him they will each effortlessly receive his knowledge. This is a primitive commonplace, Carter playing here with notions of tribal and superstitious cannibalism, but Desiderio's sojourn is not just a picaresque episode. Primal fantasies are also suggested: Desiderio's wish for (re)incorporation indicates a longing to return to the womb; his sexual relationship with 'Mama' represents half the Oedipus Complex (his mission to kill Dr Hoffman providing the other half); the doll-fish nursed by Aoi, his child-bride-to-be, is a Freudian symbol for desire and the phallus which, when it is replaced by a knife, clearly suggests the castration complex.

Desiderio's experience with these people becomes a symbolic rebirth, into consciousness, into language and out of the regressive desire whose fulfilment can only lead to a self-perpetuating and incestuous circle of ignorance and obliteration. He discovers the impossibility of unity, and indeed of stasis, the major flaw in the nostalgic myth of wholeness being the fantasy that a sense of completion in the moment can be developed into an existential state. As the peep-show proprietor later confirms, 'Nothing...is ever completed; it only

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55 W. Arens, intent on debunking the myth about primitive cannibalism, goes so far as to suggest that many if not most instances of primitive cannibalism are in fact apocryphal. See The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy (New York: OUP, 1979).
changes’ (99). Interestingly, Desiderio’s visit to Hoffman’s castle (as figured in the peepshow) constitutes his second symbolic return to the womb; this is where he finally confronts the powerhouse of desire, and embraces not Eros so much as Thanatos, negating both the consummation of his own desire and the possibility of fantasy emerging into the world. This, at least, is how David Punter sees it. As mentioned before, however, Eros seems to me to have the last word, for Desiderio is doomed to live the rest of his days in insatiable desire for his lost love.

Desiderio’s yearning for incorporation by the family proves unrealisable (prefiguring the fate of his desire for Albertina) and - in classic Freudian terms - is sublimated into a wider social activity. His desire to be consumed (to be metaphorically absorbed into the community) is that of the potential victim of cannibalism, of the dinner not the diner, and the impossibility of its realisation comments, perhaps, on the inadequacy - or failure to prevail - of passive desire in general. Indeed, his position in this situation renders him unequal almost to the point of death. The one advantage he does have, that of his education, is the very factor that will seal his sacrificial fate. His enforced passivity becomes increasingly apparent as the wedding night approaches - he is excluded from jokes, feels like a ‘love slave’, indeed is already ‘eaten’ in pre-nuptial fellatio, and senses a veiled hostility on the part of his putative father-in-law. It is only at the final moment of revelation that he feels constrained to act, or react. The same

56 Punter in fact goes further, to claim that this represents the defeat of libertarian political aspirations of the 1960s.

57 Carter is as impatient as Alice Thomas Ellis with what the latter describes in Unexplained Laughter as ‘beaten sort of humility’ (98): ‘I suppose I am moved by the desire that no daughter of mine should ever be in a position to be able to write BY GRAND CENTRAL STATION I SAT DOWN AND WEPT, exquisite prose though it might contain. (BY GRAND CENTRAL STATION I TORE OFF HIS BALLS would be more like it, I should hope.)’ Quoted from a private letter in Lorna Sage, ‘Death of the Author’, Granta 41 (Autumn 1992), 235-254.
is true of his behaviour with the cannibal chief; not until the Count is cooking does Desiderio do anything to try to rescue Albertina and himself. This passive, reactive posture, half way to compliance, reveals Desiderio to be as much object as subject, and reinforces the negative or deathly aspect of both the character and his society.  

The death instinct is even more in evidence in the second major cannibalistic episode of the novel, in which the Count encounters the Cannibal chief in Africa. The Count makes the grandiose claim of living to negate the world. His obliterating egocentricity is evident in the picnic on which he feasts so heartily as to leave little for Desiderio and Lafleur, in his voracious and bestial sexual appetite and in his habit of never answering questions (since he rarely notices the questioner). With his Sadeian superiority and fantasies of omnipotence, the Count has strong cannibal tendencies. At the ‘House of Anonymity’ where the prostitute creatures are simply ‘the undifferentiated essence of the idea of the female’ (132), he chooses a ‘girl’ with a whipped back, ‘the most dramatic revelation of the nature of meat’ (133), whom he seizes voraciously, crying ‘...she is bleeding fire, a cannibal feast’ (135), then proceeding to ravish her with gusto. Their revels are cut short by the arrival, with the police, of the black pimp, ‘my retribution...my twin...my shadow’ (139), whom the Count most desires and fears and whose presence is described

58 David Punter again: “Desiderio,” the desired one, is also anagrammatically ambivalent: the name contains the “desired I,” but also the "desired O," and this encapsulates the problems of subjectivity which the text explores.’ (213).

59 Desiderio’s story is of a picaresque quest through various fantastic episodes of desire: forced with Mary Anne into a role combining Sleeping Beauty’s prince and demon lover, he escapes to become member of a river-people family. From here he escapes again, to work for the peep-show in the circus, where, ‘normal’ among freaks, he is buggered by the nine Moroccan acrobats, before becoming half-unwilling companion to the Count, a libertine adventurer. The Count is cooked by the cannibal chief whom Desiderio slays, thus becoming hero to Albertina’s heroine, before a spell as a sort of Gulliver amongst the Houyhnhynms finally leads into his apotheosis as disenchanted lover and hero.
as 'baleful', 'appalling', like 'a depth of water': pure negation. What seems to be represented in the Count is the *reductio ad absurdum* of Desiderio's negating impulse. If Albertina is a projection of Eros, the Count is a projection of Thanatos. The Count's thanatic tendencies are in turn projected onto his alter ego, the black pimp, who becomes, according to the Count's desire, the cannibal chief in Africa.

In this small but perfectly brutal society cannibalism is not an aberration nor a rite of passage but a way of life, given the same physiological justification as that asserted by Sawney Beane in *Vampirella*: that it produces strong, healthy, virile and libidinous children. The political motivation for cannibalism here is, however, diametrically opposed to Beane's egalitarian sentiments: its function (as for the Sadeian libertine) is one of total social control, maintained through the ever-present threat to dissidents of being shipped off to the kitchens. The cannibal chief's rule is despotic and deathly. His women soldiers are encouraged to negate their human feelings and eat their firstborn children (prefigured in the peep-show sample of the nanny); every one circumcised of their clitoris, they retain no capacity for sexual pleasure and human feeling, responding only to cruelty and abuse. This is a realm in which the deathly counterparts of love hold sway, motherhood masks 'untold abysses of cruelty' (160) and the disfigured wives and concubines bear witness to the depredations of Sadeian libertinism.

The relation of cannibalism to desire here is one of power rather than of love (to recall the distinction I made at the beginning of the chapter). This desire is for negation; indeed the whole scene and its cast of characters may have been called up by the Count's powerfully ambiguous desire. The strength of his desire is responsible for the nature of the sailing ship and the identification of
the cannibal chief with the black pimp, and is explained by the fact that the
Count is said to live on closer terms with his own unconscious than others.
Such closeness also explains the realised 'puns' or parapraxes in the
anachronisms on board ship, and the Count's palpable rage and fear when
thwarted. Living close to his unconscious (186), he responds like the infant to
'good breast' and 'bad breast'. His anguish in chains on the ship ('They have
eaten me down to an immobile core' (146)) is the terror of the disempowered
monster, but it is also the infant's fantasy that the breast or love object that he
desires to incorporate and demolish will, in fact, swallow and destroy him. The
Count embodies the process outlined at the beginning of this chapter, of
projection and reaction against his own desire to assimilate and possess what is
external to himself.

The overwhelming nature of this desire, like an exaggerated version of
Uncle Philip's mania in *The Magic Toyshop*, is evidence of omnivorous
egocentricity. If its psychic origin is also analogous, then the Count is equally
desperate for a sense of wholeness. Here, however, the similarity ends, for
whereas Uncle Philip longs for love, the Count craves negation; the one strives
perhaps towards Eros, the other surrenders to Thanatos. Like Desiderio, the
Count wants incorporation, though courting obliteration, but as with Annabel (in
*Love*) the union he seeks is with himself; uroboros-like, he will complete his own
circle. The cannibal chief, as his alter ego, voices the desire: '...I wish to see if I
can suffer, like any other man. And then I want to learn the savour of my flesh.
I wish to taste myself' (162); the Count's triumph comes as he begins to boil
and learns, finally, to feel ordinary pain, to be (re)unified with himself, as both
subject and object. It is an ambiguous triumph: the moment of wholeness and
completion is the moment of death. It is also the moment that spurs Desiderio
once again to reject annihilation; in killing the cannibal chief, he rejects incorporation and negation in pursuit of an equally illusive and ultimately unsatisfiable goal of erotic completion. The irony is that his behaviour parallels that of the Count; the Albertina he desires is also, revealingly, the reflection of himself: 'I was entirely Albertina in the male aspect. That is why I know I was beautiful when I was a young man. Because I know I looked like Albertina' (199).

The apprehension of another purely in terms of one's projected desires and self-image is arguably tantamount to cannibalism, and it is a theme which runs right through Carter's fiction. It is what Eve retrospectively perceives to have been the case in her relationship (as Evelyn) with Leilah in *The Passion of New Eve*, though the mirroring is fatal to the relationship: 'she... mimicked me so well she had also mimicked the fatal lack in me that meant I was not able to love her because I myself was so unlovable' (34). Like the cannibal chief, all he can taste is himself. The callous and stereotypically 'masculine' way in which Evelyn treats Leilah, and the condition in which he leaves her (pregnant, aborted, sterile) provide the dynamic of the rest of the narrative of this novel. Captured by the angry women of Beulah in the desert, he is transformed by Mother's surgery into his 'own masturbatory fantasy' (75), a curvaceous centrefold blonde; she then escapes prior to projected impregnation with sperm from her previous (male) self. Her capture by Zero, a self-styled Nietzschean superman somewhat in the mould of the Count in *Dr Hoffman*, introduces her to an experience of total female subjugation and humiliation before she escapes again, into the arms of trans-sexual Tristessa and an ultimate symbolic rebirth into motherhood.

There is little about eating in this novel, and still less reference to
cannibalism. It does, however, pick up some of the cannibalistic issues from *Dr Hoffman* and relate them more specifically to questions of gender. Indeed, the conflict between order and chaos in the (just) futuristic America of this novel might itself be read as a conflict between the genders as much as a conflict between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', continuance and negation, myth and history. The opposition between Eros and Thanatos in *Dr Hoffman* here becomes a gendered struggle: Zero, associated with negation and masculinity, represents an urge towards destruction, entropy and sterile control whereas Mother, 'Our Lady of the Cannibals' is associated with change, revolution and a potentially fertile chaos. The cannibalistic allusion here relates to Mother as proto goddess; in the sense in which Desiderio is devoured by the river people before being 'reborn', Mother (literally) engulfs Evelyn (65), then giving birth to Eve.

The figure of Tristessa is more ambiguous. Although in reality a man, s/he appears to embody the 'essence' of femininity, the point being - as Carter is at pains to point out in the 'Polemical Preface' to *The Sadeian Woman* - that there is no such essence; femininity is constructed by history, ideology and other social forces which go to shape subjectivity. Tristessa's 'femininity' is fixed, just as her glass sculptures are fixed by being dropped into the pool; her image is frozen onto celluloid where she remains unchanging, like Desiderio's frozen tribe of river people. Like Garbo and like Eve herself she is too perfectly female a creature (and indeed too static) to be credibly entirely woman.60

There is some gender play: Tristessa is really a man masquerading as a woman; Eve is a woman who used to be a man; they are forced into a cross-

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60 See Carter's comments on the construction of femininity, 'Angela Carter's Curious Room, *Omnibus*. 
dressing marriage. There is a kind of completion, the fleeting achievement of a wholeness, whichever way they are put together. The one overtly cannibalistic image of the novel occurs when they are alone without water in the desert: looking down at her limbs, Eve sees them ‘dusted with sand, like a fine, golden powder and I thought, how delicious I look! I look like a gingerbread woman. Eat me. Consume me’ (146). She is racked with a desire that has never been fulfilled (despite the ‘unqualified success’ of her clitoris), because this desire is a manifestation of the insatiable ache for unification with another. Her coming together with Tristessa is like the ‘great Platonic hermaphrodite’:

The erotic clock halts all clocks.
Eat me.
Consume me, annihilate me. (148)

But, like all such couplings, even when phrased in an erotic cannibal language that would grant them permanence, the congress cannot last, and the memory of Tristessa is relegated to an emotional cul de sac, ‘his cock stuck in his asshole so that he himself formed the uroboros, the perfect circle, the vicious circle, the dead end’ (173).

Like Desiderio, and Joseph in Several Perceptions, Eve makes a return to the womb, but the idea here is taken through several stages. Evelyn (involuntarily) first goes through such an experience in Beulah, when he is turned into a woman. This ‘rebirth’ bears some similarities to Desiderio’s symbolic experiences with the river people: in this ‘place of transgression’ Evelyn is urged to kill his father, copulates with his ‘Mother’ (now symbolically called Jocasta) and is castrated, thus literally mirroring some of the stages of psychic
development outlined by Freud. But rebirth as a woman is not in itself a solution and Eve is still left with a sense of incompleteness, or rather of division and doubleness. At the symbolic heart of the novel lies the notion of mirroring - Leilah recreating herself in the mirror, Eve first meeting herself in the looking glass at Beulah and Tristessa providing both a partial reflection of Eve and an image of femininity through Hollywood - that suggests a specifically gendered problem.

The plethora of reflected or constructed images might be said to offer women a whole range of possibilities for do-it-yourself identity, and this may, in the end, offer some kind of active antidote to unrealisable urges for completion and - by definition - stasis. Congress, as we have seen, is fleeting and, as Freud suggests, ultimately unsatisfactory. A desire to stop the clock, longing for unity, for the healing of self-division or for a sense of wholeness, is akin to the nostalgia reflected in both active 'cannibalistic' urges to consume the world (or love object or breast) and passive desires to be consumed, to return to the womb. Though the latter is literally impossible, Eve does attempt a symbolic return at the end of the novel, discovering amongst other things a cracked and fissured mirror which reflects nothing, a symbol which may allow her to remake herself. She discovers too that 'Mother is a figure of speech and has retired to a cave beyond consciousness' (184), failing to respond to her cry. Returning to

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61 Carter rewrites some of Freud, however; the newly created Eve shows no sign of penis envy; indeed when offered the return of Evelyn's penis, she laughs and refuses, and Lilith throws it into the sea.

62 Sophia (whose name means wisdom) is significantly described as looking 'like a woman who has never seen a mirror in all her life, not once exposed herself to those looking glasses that betray women into nakedness' (54). By comparison, and as though to cock an irreverent snook at both the predicament and society's expectations, the 'overdone' twins in Wise Children, looking like parodies of femininity, are first shocked and then delighted at the sight of themselves in the mirror at their father's party, for 'We could still show them a thing or two, even if they couldn't stand the sight' (198).
the womb does not answer, and Eve is constrained to give birth to herself, a solution that keeps alive the possibility of fluidity and change. Even symbolically, it seems, the doubly unappeasable hunger of being human and female cannot be satisfied by external agency.

The burgeoning female assertiveness and perhaps a greater sense of connection with the natural world in Carter's last novels do suggest, though, that alternatives may be found. In *Nights at the Circus* the heroine Fevvers twice resists being associated with cannibalistic behaviour. When describing to Walser the dinner she is offered at the house of Mr Rosencreutz she reflects: 'if there's the option, I won't touch a morsel of chicken, or duck, or guineafowl and so on, not wanting to play the cannibal' (77). Later, on the train in Russia when the Colonel's appetite is sharpened by rhapsodising about the omnivorousness of pigs and the similarity in taste of human flesh to pork, she responds by giving her 'nasty' veal cutlet to the pig (203). Though she has an appetite to match her size, it is not, I think, a cannibalistic one; her appetite is for life, and experience, and change, an antidote to the 'frozen' and hopeless appetite of the cannibal.

The Colonel, by contrast, does manifest a cannibalistic tendency in the shape of an omnivorous business appetite. Like Uncle Philip in *The Magic Toyshop*, he exerts control, but he is an attenuated monster in comparison. He is largely good tempered and distinctly less solitary than Uncle Philip, his intelligent piggy sidekick and the performers in his show being living creatures.

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63 In a scheme in which cannibalism represents an extreme of (patriarchal) rapaciousness and negation, vegetarianism is bound to be invoked as a holistic or feminine principle. The beginnings of a general cultural shift towards ecological concerns during the 80s no doubt also has some bearing on Carter's development.

64 See also the end of chapters IV and VI for further discussion of Fevvers' appetite.
rather than, as the puppets are, simply a product of craft and imagination. The Colonel’s empire-building is less pathological than Uncle Philip’s, though no less alarming in its effects. (It is, after all, his fake publicity about Fevvers’ relationship to the Prince of Wales that leads to their train being dynamited.) Despite his status and power as the proprietor of the whole circus, he is both comic and pitiful. He falls asleep when he tries to seduce Fevvers, is outfoxed by the Professor’s assiduity, weeps when he learns of the elephants’ death, melodramatically and sentimentally demands that he should be eaten before Sybil the pig, keeps bunting flags in his flies. It is only with the aid of Sybil, whose loyalties are in any case divided, that he can hope to succeed.

The circus itself, of course - that metaphor for life and the public presentation of the self - has an omnivorous and autonomous quality that suggests the Colonel is truly in its service. The circus ring echoes the self-completion of the uroboros, reflecting both outwards, to life, and inwards, to the desire for completion. Carter has used this image in earlier novels to suggest solipsism and sterility; here, with a more social than personal flavour it suggests inclusiveness and flexibility, so that it seems possible for it even to ‘absorb madness and slaughter into itself with the enthusiasm of a boa constrictor and so, continue’ (180).

The show - as life - must go on. But there is no sense that either is easy or unproblematic, even though this is a comic novel. The bitter underside of comedy is encapsulated in the figures of the clowns, specifically Buffo, the one

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65 ‘What a cheap, convenient, expressionist device, this sawdust ring, this little O! Round like an eye, with a still vortex in the centre; but give it a little rub as if it were Aladdin’s wishing lamp and, instantly, the circus ring turns into that durably metaphoric, uroboric snake with its tail in its mouth, wheel that turns full circle, the wheel whose end is its beginning, the wheel of fortune, the potter’s wheel on which our clay is formed, the wheel of life on which we are all broken. O! of wonder; O! of grief’. Nights at the Circus, 107.
truly cannibalistic character in the desperate sense I have used earlier. Buffo’s hunger for the world is insatiable because it is powered by despair. He has a ‘tremendous and perpetual thirst’, but his prodigious drinking is always unsatisfactory,

as if alcohol were an inadequate substitute for some headier or more substantial intoxicant, as though he would have liked, if he could, to bottle the whole world, tip it down his throat, then piss it against the wall’ (118).

In psychoanalytic terms this recalls a destructive oral-cannibalistic desire to suck the breast dry, but goes beyond it, in desiring not so much to retain the world as to annihilate it. Buffo’s hunger is a cruel hunger and this makes his comedy a cruel comedy, playing out his cannibalistic and ultimately murderous impulses at the expense of the hapless Walser. The ‘Clowns’ Christmas Dinner’ act - conceived as a slapstick reversal in which the dinner takes control from the diners - becomes, as he pursues Walser the Human Chicken with the carving knife, Buffo’s Last Supper, at the end of which the Clown is symbolically crucified in a straight jacket. Yet there is no Ascension, for clowns are ‘doomed to stay down below, nailed on the endless cross of the humiliations of this world’ (120). This suffering Christ offers no redemption; the world is all bad breast; it gives him nothing and he desires to make it nothing. Buffo is a figure of negation, a creature of Thanatos: ‘Nothing will come of nothing. That’s the glory of it,’ he says in a positive celebration of Lear’s threat (123). The requiem the clowns dance for Buffo invites disintegration and regression, a surrender to the forces of entropy and negation:
They danced the perturbed spirit of their master, who came with a
great wind and blew cold as death into the marrow of the bones.
They danced the whirling apart of everything, the end of love, the
end of hope; they danced tomorrows into yesterdays; they danced
the exhaustion of the implacable present; they danced the deadly
dance of the past perfect which fixes everything fast so it can’t
move again; they danced the dance of Old Adam who destroys
the world because we believe he lives forever. (243)

Buffo and the clowns represent the death instinct in its extreme form,
unalloyed by the admixture of libido that transforms it into the will to power
seen in the Count in Dr Hoffman. It is not surprising that Fevvers, the
incarnation of Eros, should say to Walser, ‘Don’t you know how I hate
clowns...I truly think they are a crime against humanity’ (143). Fevvers is not,
of course, immune to helpless longings and nostalgia; as her substitute mother
Lizzie suggests, all wise children want to stay in the womb, to remain whole and
undifferentiated, but she goes on to say that ‘nature will not be denied’ (34),
and nature is what Fevvers embraces, in all its changeableness and ambiguity.
As Lorna Sage points out, this novel is ‘radically picaresque in the way it refuses
to settle down with labels’, an observation equally justified by Carter’s use of
Fevvers to reject the manipulation of women as representations of abstract
notions (such as justice or virtue, for example). Such representation is a
dangerous, constraining, denaturing practice, a threat Fevvers is shown to
apprehend physically:

Fevvers felt that shivering sensation which always visited her
when mages, wizards, impresarios came to take away her
singularity as though it were their own invention, as though they
believed she depended on their imaginations in order to be herself.
She felt herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea.
(289)

Lorna Sage, Women in the House of Fiction 176.
Fevvers progressively frees herself from labelling and entrapment through the course of the novel. She will not be confined and reduced into some category of 'woman', a resistance encapsulated in the recurring question 'Is she fact or is she fiction?' (7). Insisting instead on plurality and potential, she escapes from her fate as spectacle (in the brothel, in Mme Shreck's gallery of freaks and even in the circus itself) and, like the wings confined in her bodice, breaks the bounds and 'spreads'.

New Eve's dilemma is here given an alternative slant: Fevvers' ambiguity offers the continuing possibility of creating an identity that does not have to stem from a return to the womb (or egg). What is suggested here is self-creation, a theme taken up again in Wise Children. Fevvers is not in the end the victim of a male-created ideology, though she has often enough been the object and victim of male gaze. What the mirror holds for her is feminity in the aspect of the tiger, and though she is quite capable of playing the nurse she likes to take the active role. Walser appreciates this and luxuriates as the object of her gaze in the imagined impression that, 'her teeth closed on his flesh with the most voluptuous lack of harm' (204). This is Calvino's positive cannibalism, but for Walser only in its passive form, for until he is 'hatched...by a combination of a blow on the head and a sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy' (294), Walser is simply 'putty' in Fevvers' hands. Though she is as much an object of desire as Desiderio she is very much the active subject and never a potential cannibal feast. Indeed the only hint of mutual eating is Walser's rueful contemplation, 'Am I biting off more than I can chew? (293).

What Walser's experiences teach him is to feel, and to be a 'serious

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67 Carter writes of herself 'questioning... the nature of my reality as a woman. How that social fiction of my 'femininity' was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing'. 'Notes from the frontline', 70. For discussion of Wise Children see my final chapter.
person', but Fevvers remains superior, for 'nature had equipped her only for the
"woman on top" position' (292). Their coming together, unequal but
reconstructed, suggests a healing reciprocity in which both taste but neither
gets eaten. The ending of the novel is truly comic inasmuch as it stresses
fertility, continuance and the restorative power of laughter; Fevvers embodies a
spirit which is none other than that of libido, evoked by Carter herself in that
last Omnibus interview: 'the inextinguishable, the unappeasable nature of the
world, of appetite, of desire...'

\[^{68}\text{\ldots now he knew the meaning of fear as it defines itself in its most violent form, that is, fear}
\text{of the death of the beloved, of the loss of the beloved, of the loss of love. It was the beginning of}
\text{an anxiety that would never end, except with the deaths of either or both; and anxiety is the}
\text{beginning of conscience which is the parent of the soul but is not compatible with innocence.}^{1}
\text{Nights at the Circus, 292-3. See also Haffenden on Walser's becoming a 'serious person' (89).}\]
In a thesis which devotes itself to food and eating, it may seem strange to be dealing with vampirism. The level of consumption involved, in the sucking and drinking of blood, may seem hardly the nutritional equivalent of roast and two veg., or even of a meaty cadaver, but the overwhelmingly oral focus of the vampire does suggest a powerful consuming urge, and that vampirism is at least a further manifestation of insatiable hunger or thirst. Vampirism, a splendid figure of insidious domination and undermining oppression, also lends itself to psychoanalytic interpretations, and this short chapter will contain a brief exploration of these. I will offer a view of vampirism as a further manifestation of oral nostalgia, an explanation predicated on generational conflict and a further argument, drawing on Freud, that vampirism represents the return of the repressed, a reaction against excessive rationality and control and a rejection of the rigidity of categorical polarities. I will also consider the notion of vampires as indubitably ‘other’, examine what kind of other they represent, and discuss the effect of this otherness on the status quo. Underlying all these is an intimation of vampirism’s essential ambiguity.

At the core of this ambiguity is the fact that the act of ‘eating’, or gaining sustenance, is invariably portrayed as tantamount to the sexual act. Penetration, fellatio, bloodsucking and breastfeeding are all figured in the act
that keeps the vampire alive - or at least un-dead. The connection between
vampire and victim is obsessively sexual, connoting violation and (paradoxical)
destruction, while at the same time providing a peculiar nourishment. The drive
of Eros discussed in the previous chapter is here strongly tinged with deathly
resonances, yet the vampire resists Thanatos in her or his resolutely
transgressive condition of death-in-life.

The question behind all this is not just why vampires in this study, but
why vampires at all, and why, indeed, now? Vampires have their origins in
ancient myth, European folklore, historical figures such as Vlad Tepes and the
Countess Elizabeth Ba’thory, and re-emerge with a vengeance in the nineteenth
century, most notably in Dracula by Bram Stoker.¹ The matter of this particular
novel, drawing on fact and legend, and with its proliferation of vampire lore
(such as the use of garlic) and its covert but unmistakable sexuality, has set a
vampire standard, a standard taken up and elaborated in numerous stories and
films, with the effect that Dracula has become the vampire archetype.

This archetype represents rather more than just a spook in the dark. In
the late nineteenth century, penetration by biting and the exchange of blood -
with ecstatic responses - allows the coded but explicit representation of erotic
activity, and vampirism provides a powerful vehicle for the expression of
anxieties about unbridled sexuality (especially women’s) and its effect on
society.² Vampirism is a rich metaphor; critics have claimed that the image

¹ An extensive and useful investigation of historical and folkloric sources can be found in
Raymond T. McNally and Radu Floresu, In Search of Dracula, a true history of Dracula and vampire

² Ernest Jones comments that vampire fictions, like those about the incubus, relate to
repressed incestuous conflicts from early life, observing that in the 'unconscious mind blood is
commonly an equivalent for semen'. Ernest Jones, On the Nightmare, London: Hogarth Press &
Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1931. There is a considerable body of discussion of the metaphorical
or allegorical significance of Dracula, some of which is dealt with below.
suggests plague, the spread of syphilis, non-specific fears about contagion, immigration, especially from the East, and even that the loss of blood figures the loss of the soul, no small concern in the age of Doubt.³

Dracula in particular is embedded in the decadent culture of the fin de siècle, and decadence has become a vampiric hallmark. Vampires are nothing if not stylish - as the weary sophistication (and sweeping cloaks) of the Hammer Horror film vampires and the self-conscious stylishness of Anne Rice's contemporary un-dead attest.⁴ There is a distinct, if sometimes covert, homo-erotic element to the culture.⁵ Self-indulgence and a single-minded concentration on the satisfaction of appetite is suggested, but so are decay and corruption, decline, and a world disappearing into oblivion, or into the unknown. In this connection, blood is not simply a food or semen substitute; it has many resonances, suggesting wounds and preoccupations with health, death, and life. And in the late nineteenth century, the spread of birth control, with its resultant decrease in pregnancies, meant that menstruation became a more common occurrence: women's blood, nourishing blood, sexual blood, was in evidence.

³ In a discussion on The South Bank Show (on the release of the film Bram Stoker's Dracula), various such interpretations were offered by contributors including Elaine Showalter, who pointed out that the vampire's features are portrayed as Eastern, possibly Jewish. The South Bank Show, London Weekend Television, (24 January 1993). Kate Belsey also suggests (in a paper given at the 1993 ESSE Conference) with perhaps a more contemporary referent, the analogy of rampant consumerism. Catherine Belsey, 'Vampires and Postmodern Love', ESSE3 (Bordeaux 1993). A small amount of material from this paper appears in Belsey's book, Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994).

⁴ See, for example, films such as Dracula (1931), Dracula's Daughter (1936), The Return of the Vampire (1943), Dracula (1958), Brides of Dracula (1960), Dracula (1979), Bram Stoker's Dracula 1992 etc. etc., and Anne Rice, Interview with the Vampire, London: Futura Publications, 1977 (1976) (filmed by Neil Jordan, see footnote 8). Other volumes in the 'Vampire Chronicles' include The Vampire Lestat, Queen of the Damned and The Tale of the Body Thief. It is worth noting that vampires are generally of aristocratic antecedence; perhaps indeed they are representative not only of threats to the established order, but of threats by it in the form of a degenerate ruling class.

A fascination with blood is not the sole preserve of the nineteenth century. An exhibition in 1993 featured a sculpture by Marc Quinn, a self-portrait bust made from nine pints of his own blood, taken and frozen over a period of five months. In a review of the exhibition, Waldemar Januszczak calls it 'one of the totemic art images of the 1990s, a work that defines our fin de siècle, and could not have been created in, or for, any other', a judgement that is technically incontrovertible at least. A sculpture made of blood, refrigeration units notwithstanding, is almost by definition temporary. Rather like life, in fact, and this is the point Januszczak makes: 'a sculpture about the inevitability of death made from the essentials of life,' he calls it, suggesting that it reflects 'some kind of journey inwards, into previously secret human terrain' - precisely the terrain of the vampire, who solipsistically pursues just such a voyage, putting the inside on the outside. Yet there are still further bloody resonances. If for the nineteenth century drinking blood is a figure for absolute carnality, for the twentieth it suggests ultimate risk, since neither blood nor semen can now be contemplated without an awareness of the spectre of AIDS. It is this spectre, perhaps, that accounts for the resurgence of interest in vampirism, with its dangerous exchange of body fluids, and the fascination with details of vampiric contact, at the same time as vampires are recast in a specifically romantic mould. Francis Ford Coppola's film of Dracula is a case in point, with its much publicised emphasis on the romance, as is Clive Sinclair's short story 'Uncle Vlad' which culminates in a young vampire's first 'kiss'. The vampire novels by Anne Rice have become a considerable cult and a film has been made

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of _Interview with the Vampire_. Catherine Belsey goes so far as to suggest that the vampire is the very type of the modern lover: displaced, unsatisfied, solitary. And, one might add, anorexic. When it comes to the linguistically truncated 'vamp' this is perhaps even more obviously (and literally) the case. Angela Carter's _Tristessa_, in _The Passion of New Eve_, though certainly no bloodsucker, bears many of the characteristics of the romantic aspect of the vampire: cadaverous thinness, style, lethargy, other-worldliness, sexual ambiguity. S/he is, in short, 'the very type of romantic dissolution' (7).

Vampires, then, are romantic or romanticised figures. But this still doesn't altogether explain their appeal, nor their metaphoric force. For this, we need perhaps to investigate further the 'nature' of vampires in relation to how they are figuratively used. There is, for example, a set of culturally accepted vampiric characteristics that may be assumed, or challenged or extended by any particular writer, so that, whereas Bram Stoker's treatment of vampirism suggests a horror of sexually empowered women, Angela Carter not only plays with vampirism (and cannibalism, and lycanthropy) as a way of exploring dark recesses of the contemporary psyche, but makes a point of incorporating vampiric suggestion into many of her novels alongside the ordinary and everyday. The inhabitants of our imagination, she infers, need to be taken seriously.

Literal blood drinking does from time to time, of course, occur. A

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8 _Interview with the Vampire_, dir. Neil Jordan, Warner/Geffen, 1994. (Jordan also adapted and directed the film _The Company of Wolves_, ITC/Palace, 1984, drawn from Carter's wolf tales in _The Bloody Chamber._)

9 Catherine Belsey, 'Vampires and Postmodern Love'.

10 See chapter IV for discussion of anorexia nervosa.
sprinkling of published stories attests to this.\textsuperscript{11} How potent is the suggestion of the demonic! Religion has made full use of this, from the ancient semitic myth of Lilith (who, having left Adam after a dispute about superiority, was said to roam by night trying to drink the blood of Eve’s children), to periodic propaganda such as that about Jews drinking the blood of Christian children - an accusation that suggests some kind of psychological projection, coming from a religion whose most exalted experience is predicated on drinking the blood of God’s child. The first example encodes a cautionary tale about the nature and fate of non-submissive women, the second functions as a means of racial and religious exclusion.\textsuperscript{12} On a secular level, literal blood drinking, like literal acts of cannibalism, in this society betokens the lowest pitch of degradation to which a human being can descend. The case of Andrei Chikatilo, the ‘Rostov Ripper’, convicted in 1992 of over 50 counts of murder and assorted cannibalism, is a case in point. It is not easy to match this for horror.\textsuperscript{13}

But by and large the literal blood-drinkers are a pedestrian lot, and are of less interest than the incubus/succubus, shape-changing, all-desiring, helplessly predatory fantastic or metaphorical vampires. The vampire features in many guises, and with differing degrees of literalness. Sometimes the metaphorical

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{11} ‘Stephen Kaplan, sixty-five, of the Elmhurst, New York-based Vampire Research Center, the self-described “father of vampirology,” claims to possess dossiers on 850 living blood guzzlers....Kaplan...asserts that Los Angeles ranks as the vampire capital of the world....[in a] Bay Area case, says Kaplan, a judge dismissed a man’s claim that his ex-wife’s habit of drinking blood in front of the children was good reason to deny her custody.’ Hans Askenasy, \textit{Cannibalism: from Sacrifice to Survival} (New York: Prometheus Books, 1994), 160.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} It is interesting, and not altogether surprising, that Angela Carter reinvents Lilith, in her portrait of Leilah/Lilith as transformed radical feminist in \textit{The Passion of New Eve}. Similar reclamations have been made by a number of feminists.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} Chikatilo was convicted of murdering 21 boys aged between 8 and 16, 14 girls aged 9-17 and 17 women. He boiled and ate his victims’ testicles and nipples and carved slits in their bodies for acts of necrophilia. He was executed in February 1994. See \textit{The Guardian} 16 October 1992, 14, and 18 February 1994, 10.}
connection is so loose as to be merely hinted at, for example by the enlargement of one character at another's expense, such as Mona Brigstock in Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*, or Sethe's revenant daughter in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, who grows ever larger as Sethe herself diminishes.¹⁴

Sometimes vampirism - especially in the shape of the vamp - is used to figure women specifically as bloodsuckers, in an emotional and economic echo of Bram Stoker's misogynistic alarms. Here, as with the whore (who extracts money rather than blood, along with depleting the man's vitality through orgasm), the 'bloodsucking' woman is both feared and despised, yet exercises an irresistible attraction.¹⁵ Angela Carter picks this up both with Tristessa, whom the impotent Zero believes to be responsible for his condition, and in the person of Daisy Duck, the Hollywood starlet of *Wise Children*. As usual, Carter refuses the simple stereotype, however, turning the suggested vampirism into its opposite in Tristessa's case and an expression of female shrewdness and integrity in Daisy's. Women writers and critics may themselves become 'vamps', according to Gilbert and Gubar, who suggest there is 'a fatal seductress and a ferociously "Undead" figure who haunts the nightwood of the collective unconscious', seeking 'a defiantly inspired and demonically sensual attack on - indeed, a seduction and betrayal of - patriarchal systems of thought'.¹⁶

Whatever its manifestations, vampirism is thoroughly enmeshed with


¹⁵ Christopher Craft stresses the vampire's irresistibility. See footnote 5 above.

orality, sexuality, repression and strangeness (or the unheimlich\textsuperscript{17}), and it is these aspects that I now propose to examine, with - given her predilection for the vampiric and macabre - particular reference to Angela Carter's writing. Underlying the more obvious superficial characteristics of the vampire are desire and dependence. This dependence is at once both predatory and leechlike, suggesting a fusion of victim and perpetrator and evoking a creature who is suffering and vulnerable, but who nevertheless besieges others. Vampires, like leeches, literally depend on blood for survival; the lives of their suppliers are drained and the victims are depleted and even corrupted as a result. Combining the bloodsucking and dependent qualities of the leech with an aggressive and rapacious search for the victim/host - with a suggested sexual fulfilment for the sucker, and at least a frisson for the victim - the vampire becomes the very figure of an oxymoron. In metaphorical terms, the emotional vampire, a figure of insatiable need, seeks out and feeds off an (often willing) victim, heedless of the damage caused in his or her furious and fruitless attempt to make some person fill the unbearable emotional or spiritual vacuum in his or her being. The net result is a draining which returns nothing save a kind of bondage, and in which the victim may be as locked into being exploited as the emotional vampire is predacious.

It is such insatiable appetite and existential vacuum that are (at least partially) responsible for the collapsing of hunger and sexual desire together into an essentially vampiric (or cannibalistic) appetite - and if this vocabulary of interior vacuum calls to mind my discussion of incorporation in the previous chapter, this is because a similar nostalgia for complete union is often suggested, or indeed explicitly portrayed. A similar degree of 'stuckness' at the

oral stage may be intimated; not only is the vampiric appetite for ever renewing, or even increasing, itself, but it is figured in a specifically oral image, and this baby - whether representing individual or class - is intent on sucking the breast dry. David Punter emphasises the insatiability of desire represented in Dracula: 'Dracula's is the passion which never dies, the endless desire of the unconscious for gratification,' a desire that 'turns love into possession and demands incorporation of the love-object'. In this, Dracula stands for all vampires - gothic, emotional or political. Seen thus, vampirism, like cannibalism, is not only rapacious but possessive and destructive. Hence my description of a 'predatory and leechlike' dependence. Carter frequently uses images of vampirism in an almost emblematic way to indicate such a mode of behaviour: 'lips of vampire redness', vicious love bites, filed teeth, the sucking of a wound, kisses which try to 'drink' the lover and so on. In the novel Love Annabel has pointed teeth. She is acutely, fearfully dependent, yet she attempts to 'seduce' Lee in a 'vampiric' attack, so that in the end he can only experience her as a diablesse or succubus. Her drawings of him are a further manipulative attempt to possess and mould him into the object of her desire. The lust to encage and control is similarly tagged with vampiric signs in Nights at the Circus, when the Arch-Duke invites Fevvers to supper in his frigid mansion, which may be glittering but has no windows; here he kisses her palm wetly and tries to subdue her, with a display of exceptional physical strength (a sure characteristic of the vampire). Like the Erl-King, who also bites throats and weaves cages, he wishes to have


19 Angela Carter, Nights at the Circus, chapter 11.
his victim on display, a bird in a cage.\textsuperscript{20}

In Carter's writing orality generally connotes the vampiric. The cannibalistic Marquis in 'The Bloody Chamber' has lips 'that always looked so strangely red and naked' (13); they are repeatedly described as red and often as wet. It is as though he were perpetually eating or drinking - but eating or drinking what? Blood? When he takes the narrator to bed, he kisses the rubies on the necklace he has given her; the necklace metonymically bites into her neck, making a clear connection between sexuality, economic dependence, murder, cannibalism and vampirism.

All these, it may be argued, have links with the play of power relations, and suggest political oppression.\textsuperscript{21} 'The Bloody Chamber' is not merely a reworking of Bluebeard, it is one which emphasises questions of class and gender oppression. Yet from the vampire's point of view the Marquis' behaviour, albeit hideous, is characteristic of the psychic nostalgia I have been discussing. Since nostalgia is as much a reflection of a lack of something in the present as a real desire to return to the past, vampirism seems an ideal metaphor for incomplete or damaged relationships. This is most overt in Carter's first novel, \textit{Shadow Dance}, which has a heady mix of oral excess in images of vampirism, cannibalism and auto-cannibalism, nausea, anorexia, butchery and bad teeth. Emotional vampirism is rife.\textsuperscript{22} Morris's wife Edna

\textsuperscript{20} Angela Carter, 'The Erl-King' in \textit{The Bloody Chamber}. Vampirella too has a pet lark in a cage.

\textsuperscript{21} Though it would, I feel, be inappropriate to devote a large space to vampires' political significance in a chapter which is framed largely within psychoanalytic interpretations, I think it is important that this aspect is signalled. (The following chapters are concerned with a more socio-political approach to appetite and eating.)

\textsuperscript{22} Angela Carter, \textit{Shadow Dance} (London: Virago, 1994). An early 60s cultural vampirism is equally in evidence: Morris and Honeybuzzard run an 'antique' business which involves the stripping of empty houses.
stifles him with smotherlove. His best friend Honeybuzzard has cut the face of a girl called Ghislaine whom Morris perceives as a vampire woman and who has a wound like a hungry mouth, which Morris fears will swallow him, and whose large eyes seem to gobble up her own face. She is described as under-nourished, but somehow wanting to fatten herself up on her own public displays of emotion. The suggestion is of a self-consuming desperation to find a host. She is a prototype of the suspect ‘innocent’ victim, like Annabel in Love or the absent Charlotte in Several Perceptions, perceived as, or portrayed as vampiric.

Most of the characters in Shadow Dance are vampiric in one way or another, as the novel’s title perhaps suggests, and they exhibit both dependent and predatory characteristics; Morris, for example, drinks milk and relishes being treated as a child in the café, yet he bears some guilt for Ghislaine’s wounding, and his mouth fills with blood when he is reminded of his responsibility for events. It is Honeybuzzard, however, who has the full vampire trappings. He is predatory, has the cruelty of a child, wears fake vampire teeth and has a rusty substance beneath his fingernails which resembles dried blood. In a candlelit scene where he and Morris dance in an abandoned house, his vampirism is almost literally realised:

Honeybuzzard...convulsively crushed his partner in a fierce embrace, pressing his sweating face deeply into the other’s shoulder, straining bruising fingers into neck and back, wet mouth fastened on his throat, clinging as if he would never let go until the round world toppled into the sun and the last bell-tower rang midnight and everything was extinguished.

Honey’s prickling hair filled Morris’s mouth and nostrils with a strong, yellow perfume, the sliding mouth tore at his throat... (16)

Honeybuzzard is not a pitiful character; he rather personifies the vengeful aspect
of the vampire. Though Carter handles the theme more subtly in subsequent novels, there is a gothic vigour in the ‘eat or be eaten’ struggle between Honeybuzzard and his victims. Ghislaine submits, and for her pains is killed by him and laid out in a room full of burning candles, faintly reminiscent of the banquet room of that other old vampire, Miss Havisham.\(^{23}\) In death Honeybuzzard (whose name spells out the vampiric oxymoron) achieves total possession of his victim, for she cannot resist; like the vampire he now has absolute domination, and at least in fantasy his victim becomes his feast.

Carter plays more directly with vampirism in her radio play *Vampirella*, and the short story that followed from it, ‘The Lady of the House of Love’. This vampire Countess is not at all happy with her condition; she sees herself, like her ancestors, as ‘victim of the most terrible passion’, terrible because of its effect, but for her most terrible because it results in (and, like a vicious circle, is caused by) atrocious loneliness.\(^{24}\) Her story spells out the pitiful emotional subtext of vampirism: her vampiric connection with human beings keeps her inhuman and fails, therefore, to yield the real connection she longs for. She has, ‘an insatiable thirst for life and yet an inability to live!’ (110).

She is rescued by a (rationalist) cycling Hero who takes pity on her, in the belief that she needs psychiatric help. He effectively decides not to be a victim/host. In reminding himself to beware of masochism, he pulls the plug on complicity; he refuses to submit to her desire and the doubtful pleasure of having his life blood sucked out, and, in refusing, offers her a cure. His kiss renders her human and adult, but also mortal - in fact dead - so that the moment

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\(^{23}\) Miss Havisham also provides a model for the equally hollow Tristessa, living ‘in her own wedding cake...burrowed deeply into its interior’ (*The Passion of New Eve*, 112).

\(^{24}\) Angela Carter, *Come Unto these Yellow Sands*, 84.
of wholeness and completion, just as for the Count/Cannibal Chief, becomes the moment of obliteration. The vampire may be sexual and is certainly hungry, but s/he is at least half in love with death and is thus a true figure of Romance.

If the Countess is the embodiment of insatiable longing, the focus of this longing being her mouth and the satisfaction of her desire achieved through sucking blood, then a psychoanalytic interpretation in terms of nostalgia for the breast becomes only too obvious. There are, however, other explanations, and one at least bears looking at briefly under the broad umbrella of the psychoanalytic. In ‘Fictional Fathers’, Jon Cook discusses contemporary popular romances in the light of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*. The strong, masculine, capitalistic lovers of these romances are, he maintains, a manifestation of the ‘fictional fathers’ that have been created and recreated ever since the primal sin of patricide.²⁵ ‘Romantic fiction’, he says, ‘proposes a simple message: woman’s desire depends upon dependence, as though the paradigm of desire was in a child’s feeling for her parent, a daughter’s for her father’.²⁶ Vampirella longs for just this kind of relationship; the irony is that her actual dependence is vampiric, which destroys that on which it would depend. She both feeds off men and longs for a human, golden, masculine lover; when her dependence is transferred to the Hero in a ‘normal’ way, however, she ceases to exist. Carter rejects the ‘romantic solution’. This heroine will not be allowed a ‘fictional father’; she may not trade down from a

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²⁵ This alludes to Freud’s account of the primal sons’ murder and eating of their father outlined in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* (see footnote 21 of chapter II).

vampiric dependence to a specifically feminine one.

But let us look at this dependence a little more closely, in relation to Cook’s (and Freud’s) ideas. The Countess is an ambiguous - and ambivalent - character. Her ancestors’, and specifically her father’s, influence is strong, her desire impregnated with bloodlust. Like Dracula, she thus effectively represents the arm of the father reaching out from the grave to control his sons. So far, she is a dutiful child. But her longing is to go over to the other side, to attach herself to the sons, to the rejectors of parental authority. Here we have a conflict equivalent to the cultural and psychic ambivalence Cook draws from Freud: ‘[The father’s] death in nature produces his life in culture as symbol (a totem or a god), as source of the law, and as the subject of a seemingly unresolvable ambivalence, oscillating between hatred and veneration, identification with the father and rejection of him’ (my emphasis). Culturally, Vampirella embodies the irresolvable, and her attempts to effect a ‘cure’ culminate in extinction (like the Hero’s, ultimately, in the trenches).

What this interpretation does not take account of is Vampirella’s gender; a more gender-dependent Freudian analysis might go something like this: Vampirella’s transfer from vampirism to ‘love’ is equivalent to what Freud claims is girls’ necessary transfer from the clitoral to the vaginal, with its associated acceptance of inferiority and transition from activity to passivity. Carter’s response suggests that if this is the case then she might as well be dead. Vampirella could be said to move from a stage of attachment to the breast (sucking), or of penis envy (acted-out fantasies of penetration) to recognition of

27 Jon Cook, ‘Fictional Fathers’, 143. Cook sees Freud’s ‘murdered father’ as a prototype of the undead, ‘reaching out from the grave to control and terrify the living’, and he specifically quotes Dracula as example.

the father's (and later men's) phallic power and his adoption as love object in
the person of the Hero, at the same time (fatally) outgrowing fears of death
associated with the castration complex. Finally, it could be suggested that
she moves from the pleasure principle to the reality principle - this, too, proving
to be a killer.

As I have already suggested, Carter is inclined to subvert a patriarchal
culture. But perhaps we should look at vampire figures as much less wholly
human. In her Preface to *Come unto these Yellow Sands*, Carter writes of
wanting to get inside Richard Dadd's painting, 'to hear the beings within it - the
monsters produced by repression - squeak and gibber and lie and tell the truth' (my emphasis). Dadd's world is peopled by fairies, but the phrase holds
good for vampires, since they represent all that is irrational, unbelievable, and
hidden from the workaday world. Vampires are anti-social, associated with
taboo, transgression and degradation, feared and reviled for the highly erotic
undercurrent of their appetites, the contagious nature of such appetites, and
what it is that their hunger really expresses. In short, vampirism represents a
rebellion against excessive rationality and control and a rejection of the rigidity
of a polarisation that would classify experience nicely; in short, it personifies the
return of the repressed.

Repression of sexuality in the nineteenth century (now almost a cliché)
illustrates very well how the trope of vampirism may be used to represent what
is excluded by a rigid code of socially allowable thought and behaviour. The
sexuality that is repressed (by the 'good' characters in *Dracula*, for example)
returns with a vengeance through the vampiric. I quote David Punter again:

30 Carter, *Come unto these Yellow Sands*, 12.
the emphasis in [Van Helsing's] character is on order, neatness, reserve...etc...Dracula's is the passion which never dies, the endless desire of the unconscious for gratification, which has to be repressed...He is 'un-dead' because desire never dies...  

In Dracula the female vampires (and they are all female except for Dracula, and even he has an added feminine ending to the name of his factual antecedent, Vlad Dracul) are significantly not only evil and abhorrent, but deeply attractive and tempting, so that Jonathan Harker admits, 'I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips,' lying back as one bends over him, 'in an agony of delightful anticipation'. The alarming female sexuality here combines a highly charged eroticism with the thrill of the illicit. Rosemary Jackson goes so far as to say that vampire sexuality is 'perhaps the highest symbolic representation of eroticism'.

Sexuality is, however, alarming by no means only to Victorians. A disturbing sexuality is suggested by coded allusions to vampirism in Wide Sargasso Sea, where the young Rochester seems to uphold Stoker's fearful subtext, in a fantasy which goes something like this: if a woman is infected she becomes transformed into a voluptuous monster, a creature who ceases to be passive recipient of kiss and penetration and becomes instead active and penetrative herself. In other words, give a woman a taste for the vampiric/erotic and she will become depraved and may even run riot and infect the whole of

31 David Punter, Literature of Terror, 259.


society. Thus, once Bertha begins to enjoy the depths of sexuality into which Rochester has initiated her, he all of a sudden fears and shuns her. The voodoo remedies she resorts to (in a terrible ironic self-fulfilment of Rochester’s fantasy) have supernatural or diabolic overtones, and the allusions to death (*petit mort*) depict Bertha as refreshed and replenished (un-dead) by the act of love. The alleged poisoning, Rochester’s lassitude, Bertha’s incarceration and night-walking, not to mention the fact that she must be negated by fire, all point to vampirism, and specifically involve the repression of sexuality.34

The violence in this novel, like the staking of Lucy in *Dracula*, is perpetrated by ‘normal’ men against women (thought to be) vampirically infected. With a somewhat different emphasis, in his short story ‘Uncle Vlad’ Clive Sinclair depicts an entirely vampiric world, in which, amidst arcane gourmandism - or gourmetism - rampant sexuality propels a young vampire through the rite of passage of his first, orgasmic ‘kiss’.35 As usual, the love-bite represents a close analogue of phallic penetration:

I placed my face on Madeleine’s offered neck and began to kiss her, moving my tongue over her smooth skin, seeking, seeking, pressing, until I could feel the blood pumping through her jugular vein. Then I took a roll of the powdered flesh between my lips so that it was pressed against my teeth. I had to hold Madeleine tight, for her whole body was swept again and again with a series of short but violent tremors. I could feel her breathing right into my ear, her warm breath came in gasps and clung to me for a few seconds before vanishing. I sank my teeth into the skin and pushed, harder, harder - suddenly a great wave seized me and with a convulsive spasm of my cervical spine I bit deeper into Madeleine’s vein. Then my mouth was filled with her blood and I think I heard her shriek of

35 It is an interestingly gourmet world. Like Vampirella’s castle, famous for its hospitality, there may be an element of ‘feeding the food’, but the chief impression is of a rarefied aestheticism - another example of vampiric stylishness, no doubt.
pleasure through my own blaze of delight.\textsuperscript{35}

The description here is positively rapine, and the ‘shriek of pleasure’ nothing if not ambiguous. Considering these examples, and Honeybuzzard, it seems that what is repressed and returns in the form of vampirism is not simply sexuality, but a specifically sado-masochistic sexuality.\textsuperscript{37}

Dracula’s real historical ancestor, Vlad Tepes, Dracul ‘The Impaler’ was notorious, amongst other things, for prolific impaling, cooking and eating flesh, cutting off women’s breasts or disembowelling them, or such casual brutalities as nailing a group of Turks’ turbans to their heads when they failed to take them off in his presence. Elizabeth Ba’thory, another likely ancestor, had young girls drained of blood to provide baths that she believed kept her young. Even the nicest of vampires have long pointed teeth and clawlike fingernails - ‘all the better to eviscerate you with’ as Angela Carter wryly remarks in her prefatory remarks to \textit{Vampirella}.\textsuperscript{38} Vampires overpower, penetrate, bite, suck, draw blood and fatally weaken; they are irresistible, voracious and wholly parasitic.

And yet, despite - or perhaps because of - this catalogue of nastiness, they legitimise or at least in some sense give expression to what the rational and social exclude. What should also be noted is that vampires are always portrayed as unable to help themselves; their behaviour is as inevitable as


\textsuperscript{37} Ernest Jones suggests that love, hate and guilt, arising from infantile incestuous desires for reunion, are projected onto the vampire. Sadism, and especially the oral sadism evident in vampires, replays the sadism of infantile sexuality, reflecting regression to an insatiable desire for total possession. See Ernest Jones, \textit{On the Nightmare}, Chapter IV, 98-130.

\textsuperscript{38} Angela Carter, \textit{Come unto these Yellow Sands}, Preface, 9. Burton Hatlen points out this sado-masochistic tendency, but only in relation to \textit{Dracula}, and so does Phyllis Roth, though strictly from an oedipal viewpoint. See Hatlen, and also Phyllis A. Roth, ‘Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker’s \textit{Dracula}’, both in Margaret L. Carter, ed., \textit{Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics}. 
gravity. What is repressed must return. There is a high degree of compulsion in a vampiric relationship, as Carter’s Countess, Rice’s Louis, Harker’s response to the three female vampires, or Sinclair’s young initiate illustrate. Obsessional behaviour, from which there is effectively no escape, is equally evident in Angela Carter’s Marquis. The victim, of course, is also ensnared, both by the act of penetration and by the exchange of blood, though it seems to be the case that the victim has an initial (masochistic) willingness to yield that the vampire merely exploits. The same holds true of emotional vampirism, where the mutual entanglement is often strongly marked (as in Carter’s Love, for example).

Notwithstanding the compulsion, however, it must be said that there often seems to be a degree of calculation about Carter’s vampiric characters. Honeybuzzard, for example, dons vampire teeth as a joke to gain some control over people in the pub. Most of the posturing in Love is done purely for effect. Coldhearted, deliberate manipulation is at its most obvious in Heroes and Villains. Vampirism of a sort is endemic in this world from which much ‘civilised’ behaviour has fallen away, and vampiric references are frequent: many of the Barbarians have pointed teeth; one of the attacking Out People tries to bite Jewel ‘in the throat’; Dr Donally dubs Jewel the ‘prince of darkness’; Barbarians make the sign of the cross to ward off Marianne’s ‘evil eye’; Jewel sucks poison from Marianne’s leg, giving her an ‘extraordinary sensation’ (28); and she perceives the ‘erotic beast’ as having teeth and claws. The overall impression is certainly of a generalised resurgence of what was repressed in ‘civilized’ society. Yet ironically it is Dr Donally, the rationalist posing as medicine man - calculatedly filing his teeth to frighten and subdue the tribe - who is truly vampiric inasmuch as he battens on to the tribe, and especially Jewel, feeding his thirst for power at their expense.
Donally consciously and manipulatively adopts vampiric characteristics (filed teeth, blood-play and so on) though he is not a literal bloodsucker. Yet he unconsciously behaves in a vampiric manner, striving to control and subdue what gives him substance. It is no coincidence that he is so very much larger than anyone else among the barbarians. The vampiric here seems to do not so much with the repressed as the oppressed. Which, since Carter is concerned with gender and sexual power games, often amounts to much the same thing. Though she is clearly interested in the whole of society - and uses her writing to challenge boundaries, including gender boundaries - she does say in interview (with a mock apology) that she is largely interested in women. So we perhaps rather curiously come full-circle to the question of women’s sexuality.

For Carter, unlike Stoker, this is hardly a subject of horror. The combination of fantasy and cool speculation, which functions to release the repressed and oppressed in *The Power of New Eve*, lends a disturbing force to its exploration of the construction of gender and the play of male and female sexuality. But disturbing is not the same as threatening and Leilah/Lilith is not out to suck the blood of Eve’s children; rather, she pities her ‘just because of the exile to which she believed [she] was condemned’ (188).

In ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’, by contrast, fantasy is put to more self-fulfilling effect as the puppet with ‘ferocious teeth’ and five-inch fingernails comes to vampiric life in Transylvania, aroused out of her ‘undead’ state and taking on the ‘unappeasable appetites’ and life of the character she has hitherto...

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39 ‘Of course - you know - it’s inevitable, that in a sectarian way, I’m more interested in women than I am in men. I mean, I’m sorry, I think lots of people have been interested in men. Uhm, I am interested in men. I mean lots of people have been very very interested in men...you know, over the period of history of the human race. So, I mean I think it’s o.k., that I should have my special interest...’ *Angela Carter’s Curious Room, Omnibus.*
only performed on stage. Created in the image of a vampiric and sadistic
whore, she springs to life in response to her maker’s infatuated embrace, her
kiss emanating ‘from the dark country where desire is objectified and lives’ (36).
The vampire, as suggested, embodies desire. Although she sucks out his blood,
she retains the ‘leprous whiteness’ of a corpse (or indeed a vampire), and the
appearance of being ‘animated solely by demonic will’ (38). With a deadly
inevitably, Lady Purple plays out her script, killing her maker and heading for the
town brothel. Her sexuality, we see, is programmed; one kiss and she runs
riot, just as her stage incarnation suggested she would. The idea is, of course,
not new; it foregrounds what I suggested earlier is a subtext which begins to
surface in Dracula and emerges further in The Wide Sargasso Sea. Here,
however, the question is begged: does Lady Purple run riot because she has
developed a ‘taste for it’, or because this was the role that was constructed for
her? As every good teacher knows, people will generally fulfil the expectation
they are given.

Does this indicate Carter’s particular view of women’s sexuality?
Perhaps it suggests something about men’s idea of women’s sexuality, just as
Leilah’s is perceived through the responses of Evelyn at the beginning of The
Passion of New Eve. Or, that sexuality, like gender, is largely a constructed
thing (vampirism being a particular form) which may be seen as aberrant or
oppressive (the Marquis), as an inescapable trap (Vampirella) or as releasing and
maybe even splendid (Lady Purple). Where in Wise Children the vampire shrinks
to vamp, personified in Daisy Duck, ‘the classic thirties blonde, tough, sweet,
lewd, funny, fast, tender’ (115) and with a ‘rude joke of a mouth’ (162), she is
thoroughly endorsed by the narrating Dora for her style, her agelessness, her
spontaneity and her prevailing - and triumphant - sexuality.
Sexuality, and specifically women's sexuality, is closely associated with dependence. This is not inherent, I hasten to add, but in relation to historical cultural, legal and psychic constructs. To put it crudely, economic and culturally endorsed emotional dependence works to infantilise women and keep them safely enclosed in marriage. This has the twin effects, socially, of preventing threat to the established order and, psychically, of reinstating patriarchal power through the superego or fictional father. In the past, economic dependence has been a fact, though Angela Carter maintains in *The Sadeian Woman* that 'the economic dependence of women remains a believed fiction and is assumed to imply an emotional dependence that is taken for granted as a condition inherent in the natural order of things...’ (7). The fact or desirability of economic and emotional dependence is a current that runs right through literature in the Western tradition, but is specifically fostered by romantic fiction, especially the sort that Jon Cook discusses, in which the heroine offers 'her absolute dependence, the dependence which romantic fiction labels love' (my emphasis).40

This is where vampirism comes in. The point about vampires is that they operate from both sides of this supposed dependence. As Carter points out in *The Sadeian Woman*, sexuality becomes depraved in power-dominant situations, and vampirism may represent either absolute and cruel sexual domination of one party by another, or its subversion. Hence the Marquis in 'The Bloody Chamber' (though note the narrator's collusion, in visiting the forbidden room). When vampirism operates to subvert oppressive power relations, the focus is on the power of what or who is 'other', in much the same way as happens with the return of the repressed. It is this notion of vampirism as 'other' that I want,

40 See Jon Cook, 'Fictional Fathers', 160.
finally, to consider.

That vampirism offers a challenge to the social order, to the established and proper condition of (women in) marriage is made clear by the horrific staking and decapitating of vampires and their victims, the sexually vindictive quality of which - like some punitive gang rape - has been recognised by several commentators.\footnote{Elaine Showalter is one such, commenting that decapitation was an extremely effective, if 'draconian' way of silencing the New Woman. See footnote 3.} It is worth noting that this aspect of vampirism has no place in the writing of Angela Carter or Anne Rice, though film-makers have no such scruples, depicting the penetrating stakes, spurting blood and screams of agony in loving, lascivious detail.\footnote{No doubt prurience and the box-office appeal of shock have a good deal to do with this, but I can't help thinking that the inherent conservatism - and capitalism - of Hammer Films and Hollywood may have some connection. Such films, of course, rely on the idea of family audiences deemed to want to see 'traditional values' re-endorsed, and whatever is disturbing or uncomfortable (violently) exorcised.} Similarly, the lesbian sexuality evident in Sheridan LeFanu’s \textit{Carmilla} is briskly dealt with once it is perceived, and the heroine Laura is ‘saved’ for normality, all vampiric sisterhood crushed. The notion of female vampires (echoing indeed the pornographic industry’s representation of lesbian sexuality) is at once titillating and threatening to a patriarchal order, a combination which explains both figurative use and violent destruction. Women (vampires) prowling to satisfy their transgressive appetites offer a revolutionary possibility, an active, penetrative and indeed vengeful role model.

It is surprising that this figure has not been taken up more by feminist writers. Perhaps the element of dependence is off-putting; vampirism is, after all, parasitic. It is, also, highly individualistic; Angela Carter’s truly vampiric characters are, like her cannibals, monstrously egocentric, and although the liberated and subversive aspect may be celebrated, it must be admitted that
politically vampires evoke competitive market capitalism rather than collective effort. Besides, when it comes to the erotic, vampirism offers no equality; as Carter says in *The Sadeian Woman*, sexual relations in an unfree society (and vampires specialise in duress) are tyrannical, the male becoming a tyrant and the female a martyr, whatever their genders. But this is no reason why there should not be a little play, a keep-them-guessing-game about women's power and identity and the nature of their appetites. In *Nights at the Circus* Walser is driven to speculate as to whether women are more interesting as freaks or frauds.\(^{43}\) The whole point of the novel is that Fevvers is ambiguous and happy to be so. She is taken to be something like a vampire by the politician who has her kidnapped from Madame Schreck's; he calls her his 'dark angel' and a 'reconciler of opposites' and intends something like a dawn sacrifice for her. But, just as her big appetite for life is not cannibalistic, so, when in Siberia she feels herself diminishing through lack of Walser, it is certainly not a vampiric connection she misses, since she longs 'to see herself reflected in all her remembered splendour in his grey eyes' (273) - and vampires, as we know, have no reflection.

I do not, however, want to suggest that there is no more to vampires' otherness than female sexuality. Some of the possible origins of the superstitions and folklore about vampires and how not to become one are instructive in suggesting what is or has been considered 'other'. In most cases some kind of transgression of boundaries is in evidence: criminals, witches, magicians, the excommunicated or unbaptised, those born with teeth or a caul, the seventh son of a seventh son (and so on) are all capable of becoming

\(^{43}\) The ostensible goal of Walser's quest is to find out which Fevvers is. The same question hovers behind the circus folk in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman*. 
vampires. The newly dead, especially where the various appropriate rituals have not been observed to the letter, are equally prone. Certain medical conditions may give rise to symptoms that mark people as somehow different, symptoms which coincide with the properties of supposed vampirism: rabies, pernicious anaemia, tuberculosis, porphyria (which causes light sensitivity and can lead to deformations of the teeth and nails - and is hereditary).

Vampirism fairly obviously suggests disease, and contagious disease at that. At the time Dracula was written, syphilis was a scourge; the 1922 film Nosferatu emphasises accompanying rats; more recently the exchange of body fluids entails the risk of AIDS. The mad, the sick, the diseased, are inevitably set apart, and in terms of the polarity I am suggesting, diseases clearly represent the inverse of health and sanity. Vampirism, especially in Dracula, has been taken as a figure for (unwanted) immigration, in which case it would be true to say that vampires no more choose their condition than humans their race. What is outside the (prototypically white, middle class English) tribe, be it African, Ashkenazi or generally Barbarian (as in Heroes and Villains), must - the ‘insiders’ feel - remain safely outside, be incorporated, absorbed and assimilated, or be considered to have transgressed. It is this transgression, crossing of boundaries, this forcing of themselves, undiluted, on the attention of the ‘normal’, the majority, the ordinary, the everyday, that makes vampires so disturbing, and vampirism such a versatile figure.

Similar ‘transgressions’ are involved in the homo-erotic overtones of vampirism. Numerous critics have drawn attention to the fact that a vampiric

44 As Christopher Frayling has pointed out, vampirism has many metaphorical meanings: the rich living off the poor, Europe feeding off America, white exploiting black, the past draining the present and so on. Christopher Frayling, The Vampyre: Lord Ruthven to Count Dracula (London: Gollancz, 1978).
connection between Dracula and Jonathan Harker remains a tantalising possibility, never consummated, and both the ‘enchantment’ Lestat initially holds for Louis in *Interview with the Vampire* and the ecstasy Louis experiences when sucking Lestat’s wrist (losing his vampiric virginity?) are clearly sexual. Aspects of ‘heterosexual’ vampirism also connote a gay culture. Richard Dyer suggests that if we read vampire fiction in such a way as to identify with the vampire, several similarities are revealed, such as the condition being beyond the individual’s control, suspense about discovery (and persecution) and the tension between ‘going public’ and living a double life. Stereotypes of activity and passivity are overthrown and the transposition of women into penetrators and men into passive recipients is a reversal that not only casts women into a rapacious role, but emphasises the pleasures of passivity for men.

Angela Carter’s writing does, it seems to me, encourage identification with the vampire, and this works in part to blur other-excluding boundaries and distinctions. Sometimes characters are subject to a kind of temporary vampirism, such as in *Heroes and Villains* when the pregnant and suddenly vulnerable Marianne kisses Jewel’s throat with ‘small, sipping kisses as if she were trying to drink him down’ (119) so that he is moved to comment on her insatiability. Such incidents, together with the inherent ambiguity of vampirism, frequently make it difficult to determine just who is vampiric. In *Love*, for example, Annabel behaves like a vampire, yet cannot cope with ambiguity and is subject to ‘gothic’ fears - and it is Lee who is pictured with the blood of two


women on him. There is a similar confusion in Several Perceptions: Charlotte's photograph is imagined by Joseph as thoroughly gothic, with 'lips of treacherous vampire redness and a wet red mouth which was a mantrap of ivory fangs. Witch woman. Incubus.' (16), but she perceives him as vampiric, and Mrs Boulder accuses Joseph of having preyed on her. The implication is that, blinded by their own egocentricity, the vampiric are not aware of the nature of their behaviour, and that mutual vampirism (an aberrant mutual dependence) may involve the kind of transition in which even the bounds of vampirism are transgressed.

There is a certain irony about this, since vampirism essentially involves a transgression of boundaries. In Carter's writing there are profound ambiguities within vampires, between characters, and in attitudes to vampirism. Her 'Lady of the House of Love', preternaturally beautiful, with a body brimming with erotic promise, nevertheless has eyes filled with terror, sadness and a 'dreadful, balked tenderness' (105); she is corpse-like in her stillness, not living in the present but held in suspension, torn between her irresistible hunger for blood and her insatiable longing for love. The conflict of dependence and destructiveness (reminiscent of conflicting oral stage desires focused on the breast as discussed in the previous chapter) which coexist in the vampire is externalised in her case into a desire to be rid of both, the paradoxical interconnection between predaciousness and need sharpened into an opposition. Responses to the vampire in general are almost invariably ambivalent, combining repugnance and fearful excitement in almost equal measure. Even given the tendency of the gothic to polarise the supernatural and the rational (used to humorous and somewhat deflating effect here when, for example, the Hero pronounces the Countess to be in need of psychoanalysis), the embodiment of
the irrational, imaginative and emotional in the uncertain figure of the vampire works to undermine the opposition.

But even more than this, the vampire figure straddles the most fundamental of borderlines; it is un-dead, poised between the two states of living and extinction, neither solid flesh nor pure spirit. It is not alive and therefore doesn’t eat, but has an insatiable appetite; this appetite mingles the desire for sustenance with sexual desire and the longing for possession. When Angela Carter points out in *The Passion of New Eve* that Tristessa has ‘no ontological status, only an iconographic one’ (129), she is drawing attention to an equivocal nature; Tristessa, like the full-blood vampire, is hardly alive, but is at least un-dead. The description of her as ‘an invitation to necrophilia’ underlines this. Other borderlines are suggested: between man and beast, man and God, man and woman.47 Indeed, vampirism hovers somewhere between fact and fiction, as my citing of both historical and folkloric sources indicates — and a number of commentators insist that vampires do, in fact, exist.48 If, as Dr Ransom tells the uncertain Joseph in *Several Perceptions*, ‘You’re wedged in the gap between art and life’ (67), the full-blown vampire deconstructs the very categories. And perhaps it is this, vampirism’s deconstruction of the oppositions that it spans, as much as the interest in physical risk, which makes the vampire such a compelling figure for the later part of the twentieth century. The vampire is indeed a prototype of the modern protagonist, existing in a fragmented world, alienated, solitary, of uncertain gender, a voracious consumer.


48 See McNally, *In Search of Dracula*, Askenasy, *Cannibalism: from Sacrifice to Survival* and also *The South Bank Show*. 
We are back, it seems, with the insatiable hunger of the monstrous egocentric. But the injection of sexuality into the equation makes a difference. Essentially oral though the vampire’s fixation may be, the act of penetration and the victim’s orgasmic response bring eating and sexual intercourse into direct connection. In effect, the vampire conflates nourishment with sex, since the two appetites are assuaged in one and the same act. The ‘kiss’, the ultimate act of non-phallic penetration, provides the death-defying sustenance the vampire needs; the sucking and drinking of blood in the vampire’s feast (figuring penetration, oral sex and the exchange of body fluids as well as blasphemously echoing the Eucharist) is an absolute consummation. Is the vampire a pathological degenerate, who debases both healthy appetite and normal sexuality by confounding them? Or is s/he a paradigmatic figure in the pursuit of communion, achieving, if not wholeness, then at least the unification of two of our ‘lower’ appetites?
Chapter IV

EATING, NOT EATING & THE BODY:

CULTURAL VISIONS

Literary representations of the handling, cooking and consumption (or indeed non-consumption) of food and its effects embrace widely differing degrees of physicality. (Compare, for example, Magwitch's pie, Mrs Ramsay's Boeuf en Daube and Proust's madeleine - which might crudely be characterised, respectively, as gut food, heart food and food in the head.) To focus on the body as an eating, digesting, excreting organism draws attention to fundamental questions of survival, the nature of nourishment, and, more obliquely, autonomy and empowerment. It also makes unavoidable the evocation of all manner of conflicting and contradictory cultural reverberations, many of which have been the subject of considerable interest and debate, both in academic disciplines and in popular culture. This chapter will attempt to map some of these. I will consider ideas and perceptions about the consuming and non-consuming body, including eating disorders, and the literary significance and function of eating in relation to bodies and the notion of embodiment. The chapter will cover a variety of novels and short stories, with the major focus on the writing of Doris Lessing.

My starting point is a brief consideration of the body in Western culture, in which attitudes towards the body are complex and contradictory.¹ In

¹ The waters are somewhat muddied, I think, by the fact that body has become such a fashionable topic of study; as Maud Ellmann puts it, "...It has become the latest shibboleth of literary theory, particularly west of the Rockies, where essays on the body are churned out of PCs with demonic rigor.....Indeed, the theorization of the body has become the academic version of the "workout". See Maud Ellmann, The Hunger Artists, 3. I do not intend to rehearse all the debates
religion, education and the criminal justice system, for example, a guiding principle seems to have been the subjugation of the body as a means of disciplining the spirit. Indeed, Roy Porter, medical historian at the Wellcome Institute, outlined in a talk at the South Bank how our society has always taken a punitive attitude towards the body, being ever ready to mortify or torment the flesh, particularly in the name of religion or justice. Yet, in the Judao Christian tradition the body is held to be sacred, a concept exemplified in the doctrines of individual life after death, the embodiment of the son of God, transubstantiation, the bodily resurrection of Christ and so on. For the body to be subjected to crushing oppression and yet also to be revered suggests that it is the source of considerable, frightening and perhaps unknown power. It is not difficult to identify this apprehension in literature; from Shakespeare to Paradise Lost to gothic fiction there is a sense of unknown and unknowable physical - as well as extra-physical - power.

One of the appeals of the body to postmodern culture is precisely this power, seen as oppositional and potentially liberating. Resurgent interest in de Sade illustrates the point: the body as locus of desire, irrationality, passion and (interesting as that may be), but to touch only upon what is most germane to my discussion of the body in relation to food and eating, concentrating chiefly on how this is handled in fiction.

2 Roy Porter (and U. A. Fanthorpe), Body and Mind in the Parallel Lines series at the Voice Box, Royal Festival Hall (11 February 1992). Porter draws heavily on the work of Foucault here (see footnote 7 below).

3 Religion is rather less comfortable with women's bodies, however, the Jewish mikva (ritual bath) and the 'churching' of women after childbirth to cleanse them suggesting a repugnance for the messy and contingent aspects of womanhood.

4 Kim Chernin suggests that 'the struggle to dominate the body is endemic to this culture, and may well characterize patriarchal culture altogether'. See Kim Chernin, Womansize: The Tyranny of Slenderness (London: The Women's Press, 1983), 58.

5 Such an opposition, framed in the battle between desire and reason, is at the heart of Angela Carter's The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman.
subversive appetite becomes the focus of a romantic rebellion against ‘classical’, rational - and capitalist - thinking. Since it is in opposition to reason, however, the body is also seen as the object of colonization by reason (particularly in its gendered form: the female body colonized by male reason), even when this does not take the violent forms catalogued by Porter. Indeed, according to Foucault, regimes of surveillance lead to the production of useful and disciplined bodies both externally and through learned internal restraints ‘inscribed’ upon the body (effected by the suppression of libido). The body, then, is subject to external constraint, is itself a constraint or limitation and is a source of immeasurable potential. Being palpably whole, moreover, what it also most appositely represents is an antidote to deconstructionism.

There are, however, different kinds or conceptions of body. Leaving aside gender for a moment, the body can hardly be considered outside of its context, or to put it in more Foucauldian terms, bodies exist within specific discourses. The body in military discourse, for example, will hardly be the same as the maternal body. Arthur W. Frank offers four categories: the Disciplined body, of which Foucault is the great theorist, and which knows itself as

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6 Bryan S. Turner elaborates on these ideas in an informative summary of anthropological, sociological and socio-cultural thinking about the body: ‘Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body’ in Mike Featherstone et al., The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory 1-35.

7 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), and The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction, transl. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1979), especially the final chapter. The parallels Foucault draws between the micro politics of the regulation of the body and the macro politics of the surveillance of populations might be particularly appropriate to the question of body image and dieting, which, wide-scale as it is and has been, might be considered a means of social control. See also Hilal Schwartz, Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1986).

8 See, however, Cecil Helman’s discussion of ‘spare part surgery’ and perceptions of the ‘modern body’ as fragmented into a collection of independent organs or parts, comparable, he suggests, to a collection of nation states. Cecil Helman, Body Myths (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991). (As a matter of interest, this book was reviewed by Angela Carter in The Independent on Sunday, 7 July 1991.)
predictable and lacking in desire and thus seeks subordination within a hierarchy; the *Mirroring body*, in which continual surface play prevents access of pain, 'projection and introjection take place in seamless reciprocity' and desires are constantly produced to conceal the lack of consummation; the *Dominating body* (male) which acts through a sense of lack, seeking 'subhuman enemies' to fight, is dissociated from itself, incapable of relating and has no self-knowledge, relishes the abstract but is threatened (by contingency) as much as threatening; and the *Communicative body*, which is an ideal exemplified in dance, performance and the caring practices of medicine. This is a body in the process of creating itself and for which therefore contingency offers possibility rather than problems. Women's embodiment, incorporating contingency as it does in the processes of the reproductive cycle, may well, according to this formulation, provide a predisposition towards the communicative.

The question of gender cannot, of course, be set aside. Bodies are not only biologically gendered, but socially, culturally and politically so. It is here that feminism asks such questions as how is it that the conditions or perceptions of bodies have allowed men to so dominate women? For it is generally accepted, both historically and currently, that women's bodies especially, to put it in Foucauldian terms, supply a locus of social control. Perhaps this has something to do with the very contingent and communicative characteristics outlined above. Or that the threat posed to (male) reason is seen as necessarily other, so that the body identified with desire, irrationality, helpless passion and subversive appetite becomes an archetypally female one.

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10 Doris Lessing, at least, seems to indicate as much - as will be seen below. See especially *The Four-Gated City* and *The Marriage Between Zones Three, Four and Five*. 
It is surely no coincidence that late twentieth century reclamations of the body ride the wave of feminism.

Such polar oppositions cannot be simply overturned, however, and attempts to reclaim and reconstruct the despised or subjugated female body can run into difficulties, as Jacqueline Rose points out:

When feminism takes up, and valorises for women, the much-denigrated image of a hysterical outpouring of the body, it has often found itself doing so, understandably, at the cost of idealising the body itself. In a classic feminist move, [the] argument inverts a traditional devalorisation of women. But in the very process of this inversion, what is most discomforting about the body disappears. The body must be positive, it must figure as pure (aesthetic and moral) value if its low-grade ideological colouring is to be removed. Thus uplifted, this body often seems remote from sex and substance, strangely incorporeal, suspended in pure fluidity or cosmic time. ¹¹

The problem seems to be this: how to reclaim, validate, empower what the body, and especially the female body, represents, without either on the one hand removing what is most characteristically body-like or on the other simply reproducing a ghettoising polarisation that may reinforce old prejudices (such as that women are irrational and emotional, and therefore inferior).

Underlying the problem may be the lack of any really comprehensive, and culturally authorised theory about specifically female psychic development.¹² Mythical, traditional and psychoanalytic traditions focus on the male, on the son striving to surpass his father. Kim Chernin points out that this is neither adequate nor appropriate for women, but there are no mythic guides, nor any rule about girls surpassing their mothers: ‘for female development, in this


¹² I have in mind the almost casual phallocentrism of much theory.
respect, we have formulated virtually nothing at all'.

Eating disorders, she suggests, allow daughters to evade the problem, and it seems to me that here lies a clue to the understanding or theorising of female development. We have already seen, in previous chapters, how Freud’s and particularly Klein’s theories of human development devote considerable attention to the significance of feeding, and others go further. As previously quoted, Maud Ellmann makes the extravagant claim that food and not sex is the repressed in Freud.

Eating, claims Ellmann, is a fundamental violation of the ego, an ‘everyday catastrophe’, since ‘all eating is force-feeding’, for the simple reason that our first experiences of eating are of being fed by others, ‘ravished by the food they thrust into our jaws’ (36). Thus, she suggests, is hunger constructed (note the flavour of the language Ellmann uses: the emotive language of anorexia).

Could it be, then, that female infants, who do not have to accommodate a dramatic separation from the primary love object through a sexual identification with the father, must somehow effect their separation through the battleground of food? And is a failure to achieve separation successfully

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14 Beneath eating disorders, Chernin suggests an unconscious ‘Kleinian memory’, a wish to bite and tear at the mother, to scoop and suck out her fluids, with the concomitant belief that one has really done this and has consequently damaged the mother, drained her, depleted her, sucked her dry’ (121). She claims that the self-destructiveness of eating problems suggests such a belief.

15 Chernin, for example, disagrees with Freud that the move from mouth to bowels leads to autonomy, suggesting, on the contrary, that struggles over food continue, prefiguring those of toilet training. She even goes so far as to say, ‘all the issues of development...between infancy and adolescence are negotiated in a first, essential form through the relationship to food and feeding’. *The Hungry Self*, 101.

16 See footnote 36, Chapter I.

17 It is temptingly simple to suggest Freud for men and Klein for women. In their rereading of sexual fetishism, Gamman and Makinen take issue with the phallocentrism of Freud and Lacan (though not wishing ‘to throw out the notion of the uncertainties and the unattainability of desire given in the Lacanian model’), proposing an explanation that focuses on the pre-Oedipal, oral stage,
reflected in eating disorders? Certainly, psychically speaking, male separation relieves boys of responsibility for their mother, which may explain the relative scarcity of male anorectics; male rage against the mother may be outwardly expressed in domination, rape or other violence but female rage, simultaneously protecting and rejecting the mother, is more problematically expressed, in the symbolic destructiveness of anorexia nervosa.

Although it might be interesting to piece together a coherent theory of female development through the literature on eating disorders, what I am specifically aiming to do here is to sketch possible explanations of the relationship between women, eating and their bodies as portrayed in fiction, not just in psychoanalytic terms but within the context of late twentieth century Western society. While examination of eating disorders in particular may seem to have more to do with the many ‘non-literary’ texts than with fiction (and certainly literary representations are far outweighed by theoretical and soft-scientific studies), there are a few novels specifically about eating disorders, as well as frequent more oblique treatments of the subject. The major part of this chapter will focus on the relations between eating and the body in Doris Lessing, but first I want to look at an ‘eating disorder’ novel, Life-Size by Jenefer Shute, which portrays and offers some explanation of the phenomenon of anorexia. The novel is a slim text, like its heroine taut, lean, bony but capable of binges; largely witty, elliptical and caustic, the first-person narrator occasionally breaks out bulimically into luxuriant eloquence or furious rant.

The novel traces the slow and unwilling path towards recovery of a seeing female fetishism as occurring ‘as a consequence of separation anxiety’. They do not suggest that Freud’s account, focusing on castration anxiety, is inappropriate for men, but rather that ‘a new positive theoretical model of female sexuality needs to be designed’. Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, Female Fetishism: A New Look (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1994), 111, 117.
fiercely expert anorectic, and manages to incorporate almost every characteristic attributed to sufferers of anorexia by Hilde Bruch in her seminal work, *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa*. Indeed, Shute includes acknowledgements not only of various first-person accounts, but of the work of Bruch, Kim Chernin and Susie Orbach amongst others. She manages to suggest, in keeping with Joan Jacob Brumberg’s thesis, that her protagonist Josie’s condition has a range of causes, including an appalling relationship with her mother, immature sexuality and a hinted possibility of childhood sexual abuse, peer group pressure and the combined might of the diet and teenage magazine industries. Indeed, as one reviewer has noted, anorexia nervosa is simple neither to explain nor cure, so Shute’s complex presentation (at least in relation to cause) offers us no easy response.

*Life-Size* offers a portrait of the anorectic as punitive, selfish and rude, full of arrogance, rage, anger and hate. Josie translates her fears and misery into a self-loathing that is played out in a punishing battle to deny herself, which must logically end in death. Gradually, her fears are revealed, and a terrible

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18 For example: the need to do something outstanding; ‘relentless pursuit of excessive thinness’; a frantic preoccupation with self along with seeing self-denial as the highest virtue; a sense of enslavement; rejection of anything the parents offer; severe disturbances in body image; fear of loss of control; bulimic fits; exhausting exercise; misinterpretation of stimuli (e.g. hunger); obsession with food; lack of parental acknowledgement; manipulative and intimidating behaviour towards therapists, tricks to defeat weight gain - and more. See Hilde Bruch, *The Golden Cage: the Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa* (London: Open Books, 1978).

19 Brumberg identifies three distinct models of causation: biological, psychological and cultural, arguing that no single one is sufficient, and offering a web of interaction between the three as a preferable model: ‘anorexia nervosa is a multidetermined disorder that involves individual biological and psychological factors as well as environmental influences’. See Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge Ma and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 164.

20 Jenny Turner: ‘Jenefer Shute makes her...biggest point...that *anorexia nervosa* is not a simple condition either to explain or cure, and so does not allow you the luxury of the catch-all bleeding heart response.’ ‘Consumed by anorexia’, *The Guardian* (6 August 1992), 25. See also Diana Hume George, ‘Sister survivors’ in *The Women’s Review of Books*, IX (12) (September 1992), 9-11.
underlying hunger becomes apparent. Somehow, her pursuit of the slim body ideal has become pathological. Which, leaving aside for the moment the question of psychology, is a danger courted by a society that makes a cult of the body predicated on both narcissistic indulgence and rigorous self-discipline. For there is a profound contradiction driving Josie as an individual, and Western capitalistic society as a whole. What in the third world betokens poverty and starvation, in the West is a sign of wealth; the shift which has redefined the suntan from the badge of the outdoor labourer to being a signifier of wealth and leisure has gone on to bring the well-developed, muscular body of the working classes and criminal community (boxing ring, chain gang) into the realm of fashion; along with work on the shape of the body goes a whole industry devoted to its surfaces. As Jenefer Shute puts it: ‘painting, plucking, powdering, steaming, soaking, shaving, spraying, scenting, smoothing, straightening, oiling, creaming, curling, coloring, conditioning, toning, tanning, bleaching, blackening, moisturizing, abrading, exfoliating...’ (Note the kind of female image that emerges: lean, taut, smooth and hairless, something like a mobile, androgynous statue).

What is going on here is the commodification of the body. Both John Berger and Susie Orbach have identified how our bodies are, as it were, taken

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21 The provenance of the slim body ideal is not easy to establish (though see Hillel Schwartz’s Never Satisfied). It is, however, a devastatingly potent influence - illustrated by Life-Size and other texts - as suggested by my discussion of the cult of the body. Susie Orbach points out that the ‘right’ size for women has decreased every year since 1955, a claim substantiated by the figure of the early 1990s’ ‘supermodel’, Naomi Campbell, known as the ‘Perfect Body’ (Evening Standard, 23 January 1992), who is 5ft. 11 in. in height and weighs just 7st 7lb. We have come a long way since Marilyn Monroe’s fabled size 16. See Susie Orbach, Hunger Strike: the Anorexic’s Struggle as a Metaphor for our Age (London and Boston: Faber, 1988).

22 Eating disorders are notably mostly prevalent among the privileged middle classes of affluent societies. The quip ‘you can never be too rich or too slim’ (attributed to the Duchess of Windsor) underlines the problem.

from us, reconstructed and then offered back to us through advertising, only now conjoined to consumer goods.\textsuperscript{24} The implication of such advertising is that our bodies are deficient, requiring the intervention of whatever is being offered, be it dietary aids, fast cars or the comfort of chocolate. Needless to say the bodies that are offered back are slim, firm, young etc. etc. etc. We are constantly bombarded with images urging consumption and promising instant gratification; no deferral, no restraint, no self-denial is seen as desirable, advertising pandering to the child, to the id, to the insatiable appetite for the impossible.\textsuperscript{25} We are simultaneously exhorted to be thin and to consume, to be hedonistic and virtuous, to worship the body and punish the body; the difficulty, even impossibility, of achieving a homeostasis in this culture is reflected in anxiety, guilt and obsession.\textsuperscript{26}

Western culture seems racked with confusions and contradictions about materiality, fear of uncontrolled impulses, of processes spilling over, of disorder and riot. The more developed consumerism, the leaner and more controlled the ideal body. If we can no longer work to produce as a sign of grace (as in the Protestant work ethic) then at least we can work to reduce; if we can do nothing about the collective body, we can mould and punish the individual.\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{26} Susan Bordo takes issue with the view of eating disorders as pathological, arguing that eating disorders, 'far from being "bizarre" and anomalous, are utterly continuous with...the experience of being female in this culture', and that they result from hunger, desire and fat being culturally saturated with negative associations. See Susan Bordo, \textit{Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body} (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1993), 57, and Carole M. Counihan's review of this in \textit{The Women's Review of Books}, XI (3) (December 1993), 19-20.

\textsuperscript{27} 'From the vantage point of the historian, anorexia nervosa appears to be a secular addition to a new kind of perfectionism, one that links personal salvation to the achievement of an external body configuration rather than an internal spiritual state.' Brumberg, \textit{Fasting Girls}, 7.
This, it seems, is the contorted logic of consumerism.

The thin body ideal, with its narcissism, obsessiveness and competitive conformity, is taken to its absurd conclusion in *Life-Size*, as Josie ritualistically examines her body:

Every morning the same ritual, the same inventory, the same naming of parts before rising, for fear of what I may have become overnight....the first thing I do is feel my hipbones, piercingly concave, two naked arcs of bone around an emptiness. Next I feel the wrists, encircling each with the opposite hand, checking that they're still frail and pitiful, like the legs of little birds. There's a deep hollow on the inside of each wrist, suspending delicately striated hands, stringy with tendon and bone. On the outside of the wrist, I follow the bone all the way up to the elbow, where it joins another, winglike, in a sharp point. (9-10)

And so it goes on, the knee hollows, hardened thighs, bony buttocks, collarbone like a coat hanger, corrugated ribs and vertebrae like 'a row of perfect little buttons'. She is as near as possible to being a skeleton. Significantly, she avoids taking note of her breasts, remaining indicators of some femininity. Not only is she typically amenorrhoeic, but she has a real horror of menstruation, with its reminder of 'the body's dark red rotten interior' (157):

Who, given the choice, would really opt to menstruate, invite the monthly hemorrhage - a reminder that the body is nothing but a bag of blood, liable to seep or spatter at any moment? (5)

Add to this her chilly distance from sexual excitement and her narcissistic self regard, and the autonomous, androgynous, idealised, ethereal-material girl of the advertisements is realised: 'Be Some Body.' *The secret word is body* (66-7);

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28 This suggests not only aversion to sex but resonates with alarm about the very condition of embodiment. It is as though Josie's only way of coming to terms with this is to turn herself into a 'disciplined' body. See page 136 above.
‘It all seemed so simple, at sixteen. If I could lose enough flesh, I could have any body I wanted, look like anything, anyone’ (140). However, unlike the ideal creature of advertising, Josie is almost fatally unsure of her outlines, of her place in the world. She frets about how she can justify taking up so much space, realising only later that she believed, ‘I could make more of myself by making less of myself’ (204).29

The question of boundaries is essential to the construction of body image. In a fascinating book, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, Leslie Fiedler writes of the challenge ‘freaks’ pose to the fragile boundaries between male and female, animal and human, sexed and sexless, large and small, self and other. He argues that we have a psychic need for freaks precisely because of uncertainty about the limits of our bodies and our egos. Indeed, he suggests, if freaks did not exist we should have to invent them (as of course we do, in fiction and film, myth and legend), for they allow us to explore our fears and perplexities about embodiment. He points out how stories such as *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Alice in Wonderland* play with scale, reflecting changing perceptions and confusion in our sense of body size, as well as blurring boundaries between animal and human. Adult sexuality may be conveyed as freakish, as, for example, in fairy tales such as ‘Beauty and the Beast’ and the wolf stories played with by Angela Carter, especially in *The Bloody Chamber*, calling to mind both childish horror of hairy genitals and Freudian theories of sexuality and the *unheimlich*. Frankie’s fear of being a freak in Carson McCullers’ *The Member of the Wedding* reflects just such anxieties about sexuality and embodiment: during her ‘summer of fear’ she calculates that if she

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29 Susie Orbach, in *Hunger Strike*, claims that anorexia is an ‘expression of woman’s confusion about how much space she may take up in the world’ (14).
continues to grow at the same rate she will be over 9ft tall by the time she is grown up, and tests herself by seeking signs of recognition at the local freak show. Women who make themselves very thin or very fat are certainly acting out some of these anxieties about body limits.

Josie’s limits are both very clearly defined - by her boniness and her ‘naming of parts’ - and very tenuous, since she feels invaded by physical contact, food or medical care. Her ambiguous boundaries are clearly very alarming to her. Her one ambition is to shrink the limits further. But her desired body shape and self-negation are achieved only at the expense of massive struggle, subjecting herself to a mind-numbingly oppressive regime of starvation and punishing exercise, according to self-imposed rules of mathematical precision and obsessive scheduling. Every rejected mouthful, every hundred sit-ups represents a ‘victory of the will’ an ‘exercise of power’.

Here, for example, is a meal:

First I slice the apple into quarters, then eighths, then sixteenths. With delicate precision, I slice the one-inch cube into sixteenths, too, each slice as transparent as skin. I arrange the apple pieces in a perfect ring around the plate and then place a slice of cheese on top of each piece. Then, very carefully, I consume each piece, first nibbling around the edges of the apple segment so it is the same shape as the cheese slice, and then biting delicately away at the resulting square, one side at a time. It takes about four minutes to eat each piece this way, and I wait three minutes between pieces. To discipline myself, I leave one piece on the plate, one perfect white wedge of apple, edged with a nail paring of green and topped with its skin of cheese.

When it’s over, I lie back in fear... (47)

Josie’s exercise of control is a response to being controlled; she interprets all

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expressions of concern, affection, love (which she interprets as lies) as attempts
to impose control and to force(-feed) her, claiming that, 'Like prisoners
everywhere - like the suffragists, even - all I have left is the power to refuse' (50). The control she exerts in pursuing her refusal runs nightmarishly out of control, however, until she can do nothing but abstain. The circularity is encapsulated in a brief Godotesque dialogue she has with herself in the hospital:

I must eat. I have to get out of here.
I can't eat. I'll die. (28)

One of the peculiarities of anorexia is the obsessive, self-tormenting interest anorectics demonstrate in food. Indeed, since anorexia is often coupled with bulimia, sufferers may devote considerable money and time to eating. To Josie food is both enticing and disturbing:

Translucent slivers of scallop have the texture of firm custard, with a frothy oceanic flavor.
The veal chop is tempting, too, thick and tender.
Try the juicy breasts of squab, the succulent grilled quails brushed

Later on, her speculation about therapists suggests violation: 'The therapist and the rapist - a matter of spacing, but the approach is the same. The psychology student with her jellied probes. The endocrinologist with her vampire prick. The doctor with his insistent tube' (144). For a lively if tendentious discussion of anorexia and force-feeding, see Ellmann, The Hunger Artists.

Concern that other people should eat well, interest in recipes, the collecting and display of food illustrations etc. are common practices among anorectics (see Bruch's The Golden Cage and Brumberg's Fasting Girls). Josie's ideal career, at one stage, is to be a 'food stylist: the one who, before the photo shoot, blowtorches the turkey and injects the berries with dye...' (160).

A documentary in the BBC Television Forty Minutes series portrays a young anorexic/bulimic woman whose entire life revolves around the £25 worth of food she gorges on each evening, and subsequently makes herself vomit. Katinka Blackford and Jeremy Llewellyn Jones, Caroline's Story, BBC2 (11 January 1994).
with hazelnut vinaigrette -
or a sole's
snowy, crisp-skinned flesh.

It's poetry; the only kind I read, tasting each word on my tongue.

The saltiness from the ham plays
seductively
off the sweet cognac.
Don't miss the silken artichoke mousse,
boosted by a lusty black truffle sauce;
or the brittle lid of sautéed potatoes
atop
melting tender fruits de mer -
a rousing combination.

No, it's pornography. (34-5)

In fact, what she is reading is the food section of the newspaper, but its sexual suggestiveness and luscious sensuousness give a strong indication of Josie's suppressed desire. For when she does eat (not at the hospital when she has to force herself, but during flashbacks to bulimic lapses), her appetite is full of savagery and desperation:

I knew if I ate anything I'd eat everything....Desire gradually took over - not simple need, like hunger, but a taut, elastic compulsion. It took all my energy to withstand it, this urge to ravage, to tear with the teeth, to devour and destroy, to stuff the hollow skull. I knew I was lost...(182-3)

The use of 'lost' is revealing. When she begins to eat, something in her opens 'like a funnel': 'This has nothing to do with hunger. It has to do with filling the mouth so the howl can't make its way out' (167). In case we should miss the importance of this, Shute has her associate eating three times with a
cry or wail. It is only when she begins to recover that she is able to observe:
'It never occurred to me that I had a choice. It never occurred to me that I was
in despair' (209). In a touching little scene in the hospital she is overwhelmed
by the prospect of eating porridge and finds herself saying to the nurse, 'I want
you to feed me' (80). This is both different from compulsively filling her mouth,
and progress from steadfastly keeping it empty; she is asking for maternal
care. Anorexia, defined originally as loss of appetite, is widely accepted to
be something of a misnomer. Here Josie is not only hungry; she is starving.

A point is being emphatically made about maternal care (or its lack) and
about the importance of proper separation and individuation. The novel
attacks abuse and oppression, whether direct (even if, as often seems likely
here, largely fantasised) or, more insidiously, indirect, as for example in the
subordination of female desire to male (evident both in the rule 'women prepare
the food but mustn’t eat it’ (89) and in Josie’s attenuated sexual relationships).
Notwithstanding the inward-looking nature of the first person narration, and the
individual nature of suggested psychological factors, the novel also lays blame
on the pressures created by a goal-driven, competitive, conformist, consumer
society. And, notwithstanding the inward-looking tendencies of the sufferer,
anorexia is a condition that, at some level at least, demands to be witnessed,

34 Cf. ‘...why not just run to the tray and devour everything on it, cram it in, shove it down
this spiraling tunnel, keep shoveling to prevent the wail from making its way out?’ (39), and ‘...eat;
stuff myself with everything I could find that was chewy and creamy, gagging as I forced down ever
more, blocking in the only way I knew how the banshee wail that inhabited me’ (209).

35 It is clear that she knows her oral theory, and has maintained a refusal to know the world
through her mouth, suggesting that in some way the 'current has reversed in me, and I negotiate the
world by keeping it out' (168).

36 Many of the writers on eating disorders draw attention to failures of separation, and
parents’ interference in the child’s attempts to establish normal adolescent peer relations. See, for
example: Susie Orbach, *Hunger Strike*; Peter Lambley, *How to Survive Anorexia* (London: Frederick
Muller, 1983); Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa, and the Person Within*
and which accounts, no doubt, for the phenomenon of ‘hunger artists’ and for why appallingly thin women often wear the most revealing clothes.\textsuperscript{37}

The significance of Josie’s story is perhaps that her not eating, though framed to herself as empowerment, is in fact an enslavement. She is shown as developmentally flawed, a victim of her own psychological malfunction, of capitalist ‘commodification’ and of a culture in which women are subordinated to the desires and needs of men.\textsuperscript{38} Her attempts to exercise control through the medium of her body result in the production of a ‘disciplined body’, knowing itself, predictable, lacking desire and seeking subordination; this cul de sac, despite the physical self-awareness, represents much the same trap as that articulated by Jacqueline Rose, since ‘what is most discomforting about the body’, its palpable but insecure physicality (‘a bag of blood, liable to seep or spatter at any moment’, (5)) is rejected.\textsuperscript{39}

There are, however, ways in which not eating may be seen as an empowerment, not (as Josie is portrayed as using it) for evasion, but as part of a process towards growth into a ‘communicative’ body. This is not necessarily, and certainly not wholly, a conscious, wilful act, success is not guaranteed and the cost - even risking sanity - may be very high indeed. A powerful

\textsuperscript{37} Josie describes herself as a hunger artist performing for her schoolfriends (125). For a discussion of the ‘hunger artist’, and a comparison of hunger strikes with anorexia, see Maud Ellmann. Joan Jacobs Brumberg observes that there is some romanticising of anorexia nervosa (as with madness), and deplores the popular likening of anorectics to suffragists, given the difference between ‘conscious political strategies involving refusal of food until a goal is reached and forms of food refusal that are unrelentingly self-destructive’ (Fasting Girls, footnote 67, 289). She points out that, far from being devoted to a cause, anorectics are characterised by an obsession with self, that they frequently derive emotional satisfaction from the starvation to which they become addicted and that in the second stage of anorexia the sufferer may achieve a negative energy balance, all of which factors point to the anorectic being out of control.

\textsuperscript{38} And, perhaps, of an arid culture. Joan Jacobs Brumberg comments: ‘Sadly, the cult of diet and exercise is the closest thing our secular society offers women in terms of a coherent philosophy of the self’. Brumberg, Fasting Girls, 169.

\textsuperscript{39} See page 138.
attentiveness is necessary, though again this is unlike the obsessive and neurotic attention of the anorectic disciplinarian. I refer not simply to the ecstasy of fasting, but to what seems to be an almost structured pattern of breakdown, fragmentation and enlightenment which relates to the body and to eating in a number of Doris Lessing's novels. The pattern is in evidence from the beginning, in her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*. Initially, the main female character Mary Turner bears some similarities to Josie. She employs various strategies to avoid becoming a woman, such as dressing girlishly, and living, dependently, in a girls' club, only marrying in reaction to overheard gossip about her lack of sexuality. She does not make good her development, however, withholding herself during sex, taking refuge in a pseudo-maternal attitude towards her husband Dick, and dreading the idea of pregnancy. She has no image on which to model herself or her situation other than the 'commodified' romantic images at the cinema, and once established as Dick's wife on the farm she finds herself despising him and falling prey to obsession - the weather, water, but most of all a fascinated hatred of the natives.

She is repelled by the bodies of the native women, 'the exposed fleshiness of them, their soft brown bodies and soft bashful faces...and their chattering voices that hold a brazen fleshy undertone....Above all, she hated the way they suckled their babies, with their breasts hanging down for everyone to see; there was something in their calm satisfied maternity that made her blood boil' (100). She is doubly affronted, by their fertility and by their easy

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40 One of the gossipers suggests she should marry a man old enough to be her father, an indication of her repressed desires. Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* (St. Albans: Granada 1980), 42.

41 Compare Martha Quest's envy of the 'connected' instinctual black mother, not bound by 'the book' as she herself is. *A Proper Marriage* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon 1977), 374.
communicative comfort in their own bodies - not to mention their black otherness.

When Dick falls ill and she supervises the workers in the fields, she finds herself hating their language, their bodies, their smell. This time it is masculinity that repels. She is harsh and fearful, if efficient, and the scar she inflicts on Moses is an inscription of the future in which she will have to recognise his humanity and his masculinity. Her active role is taken from her when Dick recovers, and the external limitations on her life are solidified. Recognition of the 'reality' of the farm, and her own lassitude and sterility, begin her disintegration.

What she has repressed all along is libido. Jeanette King gives a persuasive account, drawing on Kristeva's rereading of Freud, of the repression of both Mary's desire for and identification with her father, because of close identification with her mother. When Mary plaintively longs for a child to give her purpose and companionship, she remembers and empathises with how 'her mother had clung to her, using her as a safety-valve', and how she had responded by comforting her mother, wrung with love, pity and 'hatred for her father' (143). No healthy separation here!

Quite early in the book, Dick warns Mary, 'If you get yourself into a state over your boys, then you are finished' (71). Later on, faced with the inevitability of Dick's hopeless, ill-fated schemes, the narrator comments that

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42 '...the repression of [forbidden] desire for her father is reinforced by her close identification with her mother and thus with her mother's conflict with her father... the choice is between identification with the mother, which renders her marginal to the symbolic order of language... or raising herself to the symbolic stature of the father... and thus repressing those qualities labelled as 'female'. Each choice involves the repression of the other self. It is thus not just the Oedipal desire for the father that is repressed, but that part of herself which identifies with the father - a more dominant angry self which she learns to identify as masculine and therefore unacceptable in her female self.' Jeanette King, Doris Lessing (Modern Fiction Series, London: Edward Arnold, 1989) 10.
women married to men like Dick have two options: 'they can drive themselves mad, tear themselves to pieces in storms of futile anger and rebellion; or they can hold themselves tight and go bitter' (95). Given her identification with her own mother, her pride and her repression, it is perhaps inevitable that she will contract. She has, however, a tell-tale sensitive patch of skin which flushes, and this metonymically prefigures the emergence of Mary’s repressed self.

The turning point comes when she witnesses Moses washing. Not only is she fascinated by the power of his body, his size, his muscles, but she is forced into acknowledging his embarrassment: a human contact. Her horror of physicality is slowly transformed as an intimate personal relationship develops. Moses is gentle, fatherly, indulgent, a metaphoric replacement for her own loved and hated father. Moses begins to look after her; he urges her to eat (her breakdown already rendering her anorexic), brings flowers on her lunch tray, his desire to please lending him power over her. She feels helpless, irrationally fearful, uneasy, subject to an unacknowledged ‘dark attraction’ - and has dreams which confuse him with her father.

Mary’s fear, yearning, desire and inability to understand are of a piece with the release of her repressed unconscious. Her strange, coquettish behaviour is like a parody of femininity, or like a child’s play-acting. She discovers herself, albeit without wanting to, to be sensuous and physically aware, developing, unknowingly, something of a communicative body. 43 And all the time, this body is becoming thinner, more stringy, more yellow, more bony as her personality breaks down, she forgets about food, forgets to eat, cannot eat.

43 The fact that the communication crosses the ‘colour bar’ makes the relationship especially significant, since what Mary connects with is all the more ‘other’. Lessing is also, no doubt, making an ideological point, but this is not germane to my argument here.
Is there, then, a connection between breakdown, not eating and some kind of enlightening development in Lessing's fiction? If so, it is not entirely explicit, or at least not unequivocal. The idea sketched here gains credibility, however, if considered in relation to other Lessing novels, in which mental and physical fragmentation and breakdown, frequently accompanied by failure to eat, weight loss, yellowing skin and protruding bones, herald the disintegration of set mind and body models - and even the attainment of a Communicative body, which, it will be remembered, is an ideal body 'in the process of creating itself'. This process might perhaps be said to reach its apotheosis in the ultimate complete transcendence of the physical at the end of The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 (discussed further in relation to the idea of social eating in my final chapter).

I should stress that Lessing's writing is by no means schematic, and she handles the question of breakdown and enlightenment with subtlety, within complex and varied novels. In the 'Children of Violence' series, for example, she creates a dense fictional world filled with realist narrative detail. Here, body image and slimming are embedded in the fiction, almost incidentally, as part of a young woman's life. The eponymous young and isolated Martha Quest sets

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44 Catherine Stimpson writes of Lessing's 'stubborn belief in an active, hopeful consciousness', invoking Northrop Frye's description of her utopia: 'rooted in the body as well as in the mind, in the unconscious as well as the conscious, in forests and deserts as well as in highways and buildings, in bed as well as the symposium'. Catharine R. Stimpson, 'Doris Lessing and the Parables of Growth' in Elizabeth Abel et al., ed., The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development (Hanover NH and London: University Press of New England, 1983), 205, and Northrop Frye, 'Varieties of Literary Utopia' in Frank E. Manuel, ed., Utopias and Utopian Thought (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 48-9.

45 See page 137 above.

46 In The Hungry Self, Kim Chernin suggests that culturally we lack a ritual whereby the female body may enter culture, and that in the face of this a girl's eating what and how she wants may be seen as filling in for such a rite of passage. Food obsession thus becomes a kind of puberty rite, its obsessive quality deriving from its being 'asked to serve a transformative function it cannot carry by itself' (167).
out to starve herself ‘into a fashionable thinness’ before she even leaves her parents’ farm, to the extent that her hip bones stick out, although she is described as plump by nature.\textsuperscript{47} Here again, incidentally, we have a dysfunctional mother/daughter relationship in which the mother is incapable of keeping out of her (resented) daughter’s life.\textsuperscript{48}

By the time she is installed in town and has joined the hedonistic round of sleeplessness, club drinking and sundowner parties, described as ‘delicious activity’, Martha cannot eat,

\begin{quote}
...without feeling guilty and promising restitution to herself by giving up the next meal. On the other hand, she would suddenly turn aside into a shop, without even knowing she had intended to, and buy half a dozen slabs of chocolate, which she would eat, secretly, until she was sickened and very alarmed, saying she must be careful, for she would certainly lose her figure if she went on like this (150).
\end{quote}

Eating junk food is a classic anorexic/bulimic relapse from excessively controlled eating. The good food Martha’s mother sends her she gives to the landlady.

The image she strives towards is curiously like that of the competitive 1980s\textsuperscript{49}:

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Martha Quest}, London: Paladin 1990, 51.
\item In \textit{The Hungry Self} Kim Chernin suggests that a mother’s anger at sacrificing herself for her child and the daughter’s division over her mother’s sacrifice and precarious happiness result in guilt. In a symbolic substitution, the daughter’s self-starvation figures an attack on the mother’s body. Thus the mother’s crisis is hidden, the daughter expressing her mother’s breakdown. This makes some sense in relation to May Quest who projects all her resentment onto Martha, and signally fails to ‘mirror’ her as an independent being. Ultimately, in \textit{The Four-Gated City} when Mrs Quest comes to visit Martha in London, the deadlock is replayed. It is only broken when Mrs Quest finds herself able to vent her self-hating resentments in an hour-long tirade to a psychotherapist, following which she effectively disappears from Martha’s life. \textit{The Four-Gated City} (London: Paladin, 1990).
\item This must surely have something to do with enfranchisement and empowerment; in both decades women’s ideal image adopts features generally considered to be masculine - and for Martha, southern African culture stresses this ideal.
\end{enumerate}
Just before the war women were supposed to be tall, broad-shouldered, slim-hipped, long-legged. Martha’s room may have been littered with books, but it was also plentifully supplied with magazines, where all the women conformed to that shape, and when she saw her reflection, when she imagined herself in this dress or that, she continually strained her mental image of herself upwards, thinning it, posing it; when she saw herself ideally, crossing a room, under fire from admiring eyes, it was in the guise of this other, imposed woman. (193)

It is significant that her boyfriend at this time sees her as just so much raw material for him to mould. It is not until she moves into an alternative, left-wing social group that she encounters people who do not conform, are unimpressed by her fashion sense and slim self-consciousness and tacitly disapprove of the endless frivolity of sundowner parties.

The point about Martha is that, notwithstanding her reading, rebellious tendencies and view of herself as different, she accepts the socially endorsed female model at this early stage in her life without question, just as she adopts the assumption that she must be ‘good in bed’, irrespective of her feelings. (This happens in A Proper Marriage when she simulates pleasure with her first husband, Douglas, and again in A Ripple from the Storm with the sexually incompetent Anton.50) The disciplines she uses to train herself not to eat in her pursuit of slimness become firmly conditioned reflexes, so that her response to the body changes and tenderness of (unacknowledged) early pregnancy in A Proper Marriage prompt her only to eat less, ‘with satisfaction at the thought that she was depriving herself of a meal’ (374). Denying her body, refusing her hunger becomes a satisfaction in itself. By the time she has grown to be politically active, self-deprivation has become established as a habit, and she slips easily into a pattern of familiar hungry irritability because she is simply too

50 A Proper Marriage, Part IV, end chapter 1, and A Ripple from the Storm (London: Paladin 1990), 294.
busy to eat.

Martha is never characterised as being in the grip of an obsession about eating. However, her satisfaction in self-denial and deprivation and the conditioning of her body to accept a state of semi-starvation indicate what are generally considered to be the hallmarks of eating disorders. The line between normal and compulsive behaviour seems to be at its thinnest where eating and body image are concerned, so that it is easy for the determined dieter to be unaware of how preoccupied and driven she becomes, and Lessing touches on this most delicately.

Martha’s slimming seems, in its conformity to a fashionable ideal, to be of a piece with Western capitalism’s commodification and exploitation of women’s bodies explored above. Along with her hedonistic participation in the club, her banal marriage and her other conventional activities and attitudes, her conformity is part of a ‘nightmare of repetition’ which she both participates in and deplores. She is, it seems, inescapably the daughter of her mother, part of the white, ruling society of the colony, subject to the force of historical circumstance. But what Lessing sets against this is the other, more disturbing, aspect to Martha’s personality and Lessing’s project, offering a potential path to

51 Indeed, rather as Susan Bordo argues that eating disorders should be seen as a logical consequence of the pressures on women ‘in this culture’ (see footnote 28 above), so Lessing seems to characterise Martha’s slimming behaviour as fairly run of the mill: ‘...she was by no means finished with that phase of her life when she was continuously thinking about food, not because she intended to eat any, but because she meant to refuse it’. *Martha Quest*, 134.

52 Much more explicitly, in ‘the Self-Loathing Diet or How to Hate Yourself into Thin Air’ Kate Pullinger delineates the crossing of this border in the painful course of the slimming of Sophie Gayner who enters a vicious circle of obsessive slimming and exercise, feeling bad and alienating her friends. Though the slimming regime works and she is able to wear a mini-skirt, she is avoided by her friends on account of ‘the dark clouds in her eyes’. She goes to a party but has to keep reminding herself, ‘I’m having a good time; I have great thighs’, and when she experiences unwanted male attention, she realises that ‘perhaps cellulite wasn’t her only enemy after all’. Kate Pullinger, *Tiny Lies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), 52.
Such possibilities of growth are sketched embryonically in *Martha Quest* in Martha's 'familiar daydream' of the noble city and in the painfully ecstatic interval during her emancipating walk home from the station. While the first is idealistic, even ideological, the second is distinctly mystical. Triggered by the extraordinary beauty and integrity of the landscape and occurring with the irresistibility of an orgasm, a 'confused and painful delirium stirred in her...so powerfully she did not fear its passing'. For a timeless moment she understands 'quite finally her smallness, the unimportance of humanity'. This is not a new experience, but newly painful (because always forgotten or afterwards mentally rewritten as 'an extremity of happiness'), and difficult, as though some new conception were demanded of her (73-5). She has to resist her usual tendency to conceptualise and analyse, in favour of fully experiencing the process and opening herself to understanding. Significantly, though this is as yet a tenuous link, the experience occurs after she has hesitated over and mentally rejected the possibility of calling in at McDougall's farm, where she would have been treated to 'a wonderful Scotch tea of bannocks and griddle cakes and newly churned butter' (72). 'Difficult knowledge', it seems, is opposed to pleasurable eating.

Lessing provides a clear indication that the reverse is equally true: that eating may be an escape from knowledge. Certainly, the 'most expensive meal the colony could offer', to which Binkie takes Martha with a dozen other

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53 Several critics note the existence of a 'divided self' in Martha, encompassing both the conformist and the visionary. See, for example, Jeanette King, *Doris Lessing*; Lorna Sage, *Doris Lessing* (London: Methuen, Contemporary Writers Series, 1983); the 'Critical Studies' collection edited by Annis Pratt and L. S. Dembo: *Doris Lessing* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), especially Dagmar Barnouw, 'Disorderly Company: From The Golden Notebook to The Four-Gated City'. It should be stressed that the 'division' is not a simple polar opposition, since both conforming and visionary selves are powered by a desire for community and belonging - a theme I explore further in my final chapter.
‘wolves’ and girls, suggests, in both its hollow ritualistic quality and its content, engagement in frantic displacement activity:

...it did not matter what food was actually brought, for they would not notice. They did not care about food, or even about wine. If they ordered wine, they might spend five minutes debating about a title on the wine list, and forget what they had ordered when the bottle arrived....They ate a thick white soup, which tasted of flour and pepper; round cheese puffs, the size of cricket balls and tasting of nothing in particular; boiled fish with gluey white sauce; roast chicken, hard white shreds of meat, with boiled stringbeans and boiled potatoes; stewed plums and fresh cream; and sardines on toast. They were all drinking brandy mixed with ginger beer. (208)

Martha’s increasing need to look in these people’s eyes, to see beneath their apparent ‘possession’ by catch phrases, their convulsive dancing, drinking and merrymaking, is a correlative of her as yet largely unconscious striving for a communicative body.

Much of the following three novels is given over to the development of Martha’s ‘ideological’ self. In *A Proper Marriage* she has bouts of not eating, but because she progressively shuts herself off there is little in the way of communicative experiences. She feels trapped by Douglas’s claims on her body, which she has only just freed from her mother, and her consequent disconnection from a body which is ‘pursuing ideas of its own’ prevents her even recognising her pregnancy. Though she envies the shadow of the integrated black woman (374) her ‘loyalty to progress’ (ideology) prevents any emulation. Only her spontaneous jumping into deep puddles with Alice, in which she is significantly rather shocked at herself, suggests a release. Even during childbirth, when the native cleaner talks her soothingly through some of her pains, she must resist her body, caught up as she is within the mechanistic
approach of the nursing home. This disciplined approach carries over into nurturing Caroline 'by the book', and there are great battles centred around feeding. Either, it seems, she can do things by the book or be numbed and smothered, as suggested metaphorically by the meal Douglas insists upon eating on his return in preference to her omelette and stewed fruit: 'one of those vast meals which must be among the worst offered to suffering humanity anywhere, the southern-African hotelier’s contribution to the British tradition in food' (584).

Martha’s physical disconnection is intensified in A Ripple from the Storm, in which the focus is still more on her ideological self. In moving from a man whose degustatory self-abuse has given him a stomach ulcer to one whose eating is dogged and methodical, and who admonishes her to eat on the grounds that if she gets ill she will be a burden to comrades, she merely exchanges one self-deception for another. As Lorna Sage observes, Martha twice marries ‘a vision of community and wholeness in a man who has already repelled and disappointed her’. Her involvement with meetings and her general busyness, plus a naturally rebellious inclination, make for an irregularity about eating that leaves her ‘irritable with hunger, a condition she had become so used to she was beginning to wonder secretly if she had some illness’ (301). She is so

54 Martha wonders why, when toilet training was so easy, they should battle over food (see footnote 15 above). Despite her determination to be the reverse of her mother, Martha cannot avoid repetition; just as her mother had found Martha ‘difficult’ and had (unwittingly) half starved her of milk, so Martha finds motherhood difficult, and starves Caroline of affection, and ultimately of herself.

55 The terms in which this is framed are highly significant. Not only is the meal large, extravagant and of poor quality, it represents the oppressive and distorting influence of colonialism. The British tradition it implies, is bad enough (and the mouth-watering descriptions of Greek food as opposed to egg and chips in the next two novels bear this out), but the southern-African hotelier’s adaptation compounds the insult to the palate.

56 Sage, Doris Lessing, 37.
preoccupied she only remembers she has not eaten when she smells food, a preoccupation that, like the frantic pre-war partying, signals displacement activity.

In *Landlocked*, Martha is once again shown dashing about, from official to unofficial meetings, to friends, to her parents. Rarely does she stop to eat with her mother, despite her mother’s ordering supper for them both. She airily reassures her mother she is just in ‘one of my thin phases...I'll just get fat again by myself’ (94). At this time, however, she begins to listen to her body. Noticing how her flesh begins to relax with Joss, she realises she wants to have an affair, while with Anton she feels the need to cover her nakedness. When Thomas Stern finds her thinness and tension attractive she understands that being with him will somehow be serious, intense, and thus, for the first time, she has a real love affair, her body in absolute communication (though, notably, she has to be thin for this to happen). She feels on the verge of being ill; it is not that she feels empty and light as she felt when she was really ill, but rather, as with the visionary experiences of her youth, that her body takes over: when her body remembers Anton she vomits; her stomach, intestines and bladder rebel against her making love with one man while she is the wife of another (142). When they all go dancing to the Parklands hotel she gets very drunk, and has a strange, disorienting, fragmented experience of physicality, prefiguring the process of breakdown, defamiliarisation and growth that is worked through in *The Four-Gated City*.

Before that novel, however, came *The Golden Notebook*, in which

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57 On one occasion her mother cooks a jam tart, seeing herself in fantasy giving it to Martha, though she knows full well that Martha never eats sweets. This says a good deal about May Quest’s infantalisation of Martha, but also perhaps indicates an awareness that Martha is denying herself the sweet things of life. *Landlocked* (London: Paladin 1990), 97.
Lessing explicitly explores fragmentation and breakdown, and here the boundaries of the body are considered from a far less literal point of view. The characters of Anna, Ella, Saul Green, Marion and others are not concerned with being fat or thin, drunk or sober; indeed attention may be said to be firmly turned away from their bodies' appearance. The body here is intimately and inextricably tied up with questions of understanding and sanity. As language breaks down and knowledge cannot be put into words, so Anna's personality fragments; she can rely on nothing, as language and the 'female creature' inside her are thrown into conflict (when, for example, Saul Green writes in his diary that he does not like to make love to her). She must open herself to other ways of knowing, try out new perspectives, allow herself to listen. Might she be one through whom the future may pour in a different way? It is not remotely possible to do justice to the scope and complexity of the novel here, nor even to give full weight to Lessing's use of food, the metaphorical and metonymic importance of which is implied in Anna Wulf's speculation about the immediacy and significance of cinematic images, with the example of Ella peeling an orange and giving it to Paul, who eats it absently. For the purposes of my argument here, I will focus on the consumption or non-consumption of food and drink in this novel in relation to connection and fragmentation, touching upon the instinctively communicative sharing of food, but mainly considering eating in relation to the breakdown of mind and body, and how this may enable

58 Concern about the effects of capitalism is certainly in evidence but commodification of the body is not highlighted. Indeed the only reference to desirable body shape is Paul's comment that Ella is too thin. Since he goes on to suggest, obliquely, that she is hungry for love, however, the implication is of psychological rather than cultural factors.

59 Lessing picks up this image in *A Four-Gated City*, when Lynda peels an orange on the Aldermaston march, her bitten hands hidden in gloves, and gives pieces, variously, to Martha Francis and Paul.
reakthrough.

Connection through sharing food is almost too obvious to mention - in fact the other cinematic image Anna imagines is of a woman cooking for her lover. Mutuality in shared sensuousness makes for an unspoken communication, as for example when Anna and Molly greedily eat bowls of strawberries, ‘loaded with cream’, the light, colour and texture highlighted as an almost tangible sensation:

‘With strawberries, wine, obviously,’ said Anna greedily; and moved the spoon about among the fruit, feeling its soft sliding resistance, and the slipperiness of the cream under a gritty crust of sugar. Molly swiftly filled glasses with wine and set them on the white sill. The sunlight crystallized beside each glass on the white paint in quivering lozenges of crimson and yellow light, and the two women sat in the sunlight, sighing with pleasure and stretching their legs in the thin warmth, looking at the colours of the fruit in the bright bowls and at the red wine. 60

Here is a mixture of pure physical pleasure and friendship, comparable to (if unlike) Ella’s connection with her uncomplicated American to whom she responds as a ‘healthy savage’, ‘all flesh, a body of warm, abundant, exuberant flesh’ (290).

More likely, perhaps, is the sensuous connection of lovers, for whom an easy relation through taste and smell has an extra physical dimension. Ella’s & Paul’s lovemaking in the field spells out how the communication is physically enacted when she later finds words to express how ‘our bodies understood each other’; it is the mutuality of that connection that lies behind Ella’s insistence on

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60 The Golden Notebook (London, Flamingo 1993), 34. Different ways of eating are revealing: while Anna and Molly eat with greedy good humour, making easy their communication, Tommy eats with a self-absorbed bullying determination that suggests a frightening - or frightened - control and isolation. (This connects, perhaps, with the accusation that Willi would be capable of ordering the shooting of 50 people before breakfast and then eating six courses).
the vaginal orgasm, 'emotion and nothing else', only possible 'when a man, from
the whole of his need and desire takes a woman and wants all her response'
(200).

The intensity of this is, it seems, threatening for the man in question, at
least when he is on the way out of a relationship or keeping himself at a
distance, as so many seem to do in Lessing's fiction. Before considering this
further, however, I want to emphasise how important the love/food connection
is, especially for women. The pleasures, for example, anticipatory and actual, of
shopping and cooking for her lover are deliciously evoked by Anna (303 and
323-4). Her pleasure is sensuous, even sensual, loving and potentially
communicative, and says much about the kind of woman she is and the nature
of her relationships (as Saul Green indicates when he tells Anna she is born to
cook for a man). Such rich, sensuous happiness is swiftly replaced by a
physical coldness, however, as she is flooded with tiredness and guilt, her body
registering that Michael is leaving. The potency of Anna's description and her
acute shifts of mood suggest much about the importance of a shared meal,
especially the shared meal cooked for someone. It is like a statement of intent,
of commitment, which is precisely why Michael does not come and is
deliberately casual in his apologies.61

Why should men feel threatened by an intensity of mutuality, a shared
body experience that dissolves some of the rigid boundaries of the individual?
Food seems for Lessing's 'free women' to be part of the idyll, a means of

61 There is no mistaking the dissociation: even when arranging to come for the meal and to
stay the night he spoils the intimacy by saying if they have nothing else at least they have sex -
which she feels as rejection, negation.
conversation; for the men it is simply part of a trap. On the straightforward level of the realist text such incidents could simply be taken to illustrate a male fear of commitment or entrapment (especially marital). On a less literal or less conscious level a man may withdraw from a sensation of infantalisation, of being mothered, as though feeling constrained to make the separation all over again. It seems we come back to the question of boundaries. One explanation suggests psychic gendering. Maggie Kilgour writes:

While male sexual identity is achieved through the discovery of sexual difference and the need to turn from the mother to the absent father who represents separation, female development and discovery of sexual identity involves a continuing identification with the first love object because both are female. As a result of this, women tend to develop a less rigid sense of ego boundaries than men, and a more fluid sense of the relation between the self and the world outside.

This more fluid self, accessible to the contingent, has a natural inclination towards communication which endorses women’s food sharing and offers an explanation, at least in part, for the almost exclusively female gender of Lessing’s fasting communicants.

An entirely psychoanalytic explanation is hardly sufficient, however, especially given the balance between individual and collectivity, private and public in Lessing’s writing. Power relations of all kinds operate in and around the kitchen and, as Foucault might suggest, acts (or discourses) of apparent

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62 Not all the men are threatened, of course. Some don’t even realise communication is possible, as Anna’s heroine Ella in The Yellow Notebook discovers with the eager puppy American she meets on the aeroplane, who hungrily orders ‘the biggest steak they have in the place’, drinks nothing but orange juice, and happily completes sexual intercourse within seconds.

63 Maggie Kilgour, From Communion to Cannibalism, 244.

64 Kate Fullbrook identifies Lessing as being ‘attuned to the position of the individual’, but also ‘convinced of the power of collective decisions and potentialities’. See Free Women, 142.
communion mask the exercise of power. Dominance and subservience - whatever the fixed positions of authority - are tenuous and slippery and interactions are frequently complex. Power relations are crucial even to situations of 'shared' food, for the provider is in a dominant position, whether this is a man taking a woman to a restaurant or a woman cooking for her lover. These two scenarios are so familiar as to be virtually paradigmatic - though the actual power transactions between the parties can challenge the status quo - and thus the detail of what happens in any such scene makes general as well as particular points. In other words, Lessing's men's withdrawal from eating intimacy says as much about (gender) power relations as about individual psyches. Indeed, power relations in Lessing's writing invariably nudge from the simply private towards the public and the representative, and wider historical, political and social implications are always part of the picture.

Where individual connection does occur through shared eating or sexual congress, Lessing suggest that a wider communication, a more significant breaching of the immured body of individualism is desirable and even possible. This can be suggested as embryonic in a simple scene such as in the 'Blue Notebook' when Anna's fellow Communist worker Jack shares his sandwich lunch with her. But for it to happen in a major way, all kinds of fear and resistance have to be overcome. For Anna, the fear of chaos which leads her to fragment her writing neatly into four books, bracketing off 'blood and brains' from buying tea, must be confronted, accepted and taken in. The

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65 In The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, Foucault outlines a view of power as omnipresent, exercised through a complex network of unstable and shifting power relations. See especially Part Four, Chapter 2, 'Method'.

66 This discussion is taken further in my final chapter, which focuses on collectivity and 'social' eating.
putting away of her own pain into stories or history must not be a substitute for feeling: '...if what we feel is pain, then we must feel it, acknowledging that the alternative is death' (478). Anna is representative, a woman in solitariness, living in the shadow of the bomb, subject to the effects of capitalism, struggling with idealism, at a time and in a situation unlike anything before. Her breakdown offers her as one of the people with a 'crack...through that gap the future might pour in a different shape' (416). 67

The first things to break down are certainties. After an unpleasant raw male/female confrontation with her friend’s ex-husband Richard, Anna’s idea of herself as a woman, her independence and control become precarious, and she has a panic attack in response to a lascivious man in the underground. She buys some beautiful fruit for a sense of calm and balance. It is interesting that as intelligence, her ‘only bulwark’ begins to crack, it is food which offers some solace. 68 The one external constraint that holds her together is the presence of her daughter Janet, for whom she must cook, maintain routines and keep her own moods under control; it is when Janet goes to boarding school that Anna can give time to herself and Saul Green, allow herself to break down, to feel her feelings, let herself sink, experience and acknowledge the negative ‘in a positive way’, as her analyst Mother Sugar would have it. Although she cooks for Saul the emphasis here is not on food but on physical clenching (not letting anything in), on coffee (an artificial stimulant) and whisky (a suppressant), though in

67 It should be stressed that ‘nervous breakdown’ in the popular sense is not seen as necessarily productive. Nelson’s party shows this, with everyone on edge, using gallows humour to save themselves from pain. The tie between Nelson and wife is characterised as “the closest of all bonds, neurotic pain-giving” (433). There is no enlightenment and no progress; he is perpetually about to leave her and never will; she bemoans being abandoned and rejected and never will be.

68 Food is shown as a sort of bedrock. Significantly, following Tommy’s blindness, it is his mouth that is most revealing, becoming the one uncontrolled thing about him.
drinking to excess - a wittily conventional touch - she genuinely shocks herself. Physical dysfunction here echoes psychic breakdown. Anna is sick, she does not cook, she is not in control, helpless because of the need to play something through.

The physicality of the breakdown is interesting. Anna watches herself in the bath, her body being taken over by the symptoms of anxiety, and by Saul. His deathly cold in sleep is frequently referred to. Anna, too, is overwhelmed by fear, cannot breathe, cannot walk, becomes exhausted. They go through repeating cycles of fear, cruelty, spite, anger, exhaustion, sanity and a kind of knowledge. Anna tries to hold on to the ‘female creature’ in her body that ‘cannot be lied to’, but has in the end to acknowledge the male/female joy-in-destruction dwarf figure of her dreams as part of herself. She discovers and accepts ‘what is most discomforting about the body’. Her body is distasteful to herself for the first time:

I looked at my thin white legs and my thin white arms, and at my breasts. My wet sticky centre seemed disgusting, and when I saw my breasts all I could think of was how they were when they were full of milk, and instead of this being pleasurable, it was revolting. This feeling of being alien to my own body caused my head to swim... (532)

Yet she knows that sanity depends on bodily presence, ‘that it should be a delight to feel heat strike the skin, a delight to stand upright, knowing the bones are moving easily under flesh. If this goes, then the conviction of life goes too’ (533). This simple, physical understanding short-circuits the neuroses of intellectualising.

Anna’s breakdown gives birth to some kind of integrity. She becomes

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69 See page 138 above.
able to write the 'Golden Notebook'. She can rerun or rewrite experience (or fiction) with enhanced perspective. The battle played out through the kitchen at Mashopi, for example, concerns not just the toppling of a colonial boss, but the hurting of a woman's feelings. Instead of caricaturing or ironising a foolish bigot she writes:

Mrs Boothby stood in the kitchen of the hotel at Mashopi, her stout buttocks projecting like a shelf under the pressure of her corsets, patches of sweat dark under her armpits, her face flushed with distress, while she cut cold meat off various joints of animal and fowl, and listened to the young cruel voices and crueller laughter through a thin wall. (550)

Ultimately, through the 'films' in her head she learns the value of 'a small painful sort of courage which is at the root of every life, because injustice and cruelty is at the root of life', and that 'the small endurance...is bigger than anything' (551). This is not personal but general, and reinforces the point that her breaking down represents communication and responsibility. In 'Free Women 5' Anna dreams that Janet and Tommy are both her children and Janet has all her milk while Tommy is starving. It is a recurrent dream, though with different players, and has a multitude of resonances about nurturing, equity, self-division. Predominant among them, however, is her waking certainty: 'no doubt she felt responsible' (565).

In *The Four Gated City*, not-eating, breakdown and the communicative body are all more overt, and more explicitly linked. The novel traces Martha's progress from her arrival in England to her death in the years after a chemical/nuclear catastrophe. As in *The Golden Notebook*, there is a move

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70 The sections of the book move, as it were, through four qualities of the body, nodding towards the four elements and the four humours, perhaps: earth (most cloddish), water (beginning to flow), air and fire (leavening) and finally intelligence, mirroring the process of Martha's growth.
between fragmentation and wholeness, separation and communication; as with
the supreme paradox of Anna Wulf's reintegration through fragmentation and
breakdown, so here understanding and growth are achieved through
reincorporation of the madwoman in the basement.\(^{71}\)

When first in London, Martha is acutely aware of the rigid stratification of
English society and of the gulfs between people (to which Anna Wulf's separate
notebooks offer a formal parallel, perhaps). She muses, 'To whom in the world
could she say what she had found in London?...Fragments. This was a country
where people could not communicate across the dark that separated them' (92).
She is determined not to split herself up or keep part of herself 'in cold storage'
by accepting the sort of life she is offered in London, a wish Jack interprets as
her desire for the mythical city, an ideal. Mark's is a strange household, which
might appear fragmented with its basement of 'alien' people, a 'shadow world',
but it is, Martha feels, a whole, with palpable, if strange, connections.\(^{72}\) Each
part has a different feel, and the middle-aged Martha (who conceives her
personality as like a 'faceted mirror' reflecting qualities embodied in other
people) is like 'a special instrument sensitized to mood and need and state' in
her handling of it all. The wholeness of the house (as of Martha) is literally and
metaphorically fragile, however; full of shabbiness, 'everything declined and
frayed and came to pieces in one's hands...a mass of fragments, like a smashed

\(^{71}\) As in "The Golden Notebook", not all breakdowns are equally productive, of course, though
those who suffer them are certainly prolific in this novel, including Patty, Margaret, Elizabeth and
Phoebe, as well as various inhabitants of Paul's house. Phoebe's breakdown is a signal case of
failure: she refuses the opportunity to 'open and absorb', instead becoming more rigid and
controlled.

\(^{72}\) The basement of alien people in a 'shadow world' certainly seems to indicate something like
the unconscious, with a passing allusion to Jung. It also calls to mind Angela Carter's "Shadow
Dance", whose characters are, similarly, alienated from the conventions of their society.
mirror’ (371).

One way of resisting fragmentation is to focus on physical integrity and the development of a communicative body. This is what Jack devotes himself to, ‘time moving in [his] breath’ (61) in his post-traumatic awareness of mortality. There are danger signs, however. If, in the metaphorical scheme I am proposing, not eating is related to heightening the senses, opening the self to possibilities, then Jack’s crazy hunger is suspect. His appetites are an expression of Eros, desire for life. Yet Martha somehow feels he is not a serious man. Could it be that he eats to avoid knowledge? His body is, initially, immensely sensitive, so that although he cannot hear the meaning of Martha’s words he could catch, sense and feel what she said and respond with his body. Living in the body without attempting to open himself is ultimately corrupting, however; he loses his ‘subtle physical intelligence’ as his unexamined and cunning mind takes control.

If the body on its own is insufficient, an existence that takes no account of it is equally distorted. Jimmy Woods is described as ‘a human being constructed on a different model from most’ (182). He does not resonate, so that Martha feels unable to connect with him, no matter how she tries to engage. She concludes that he is someone ‘born with one of the compartments of the human mind developed to its furthest possibility, but this was at the cost of everything else’ (536). His sale of instruments designed to destroy parts of the brain and develop others, drawing on ‘alternative’ thought for use in telepathy and brainwashing, is comparable to the unbridled scientism of ‘pure’ scientists interested only in the possibilities offered by their research, without taking into account the uses to which it may be put - nuclear weapons, for
example. Just as Jack suffers attacks of violent hunger, so Jimmy, his ‘round pinkish face, on his round (probably) pinkish body...his unvarying pink-rubber smile, and the surface of round staring spectacles’ (536) sits unembarrassedly uncommunicative, heartily drinking tea, eating lots of cake and ‘energetically dott[ing] up loose currants on the end of a wetted forefinger’ (183). Little more is made of his relation to food, but his roundness suggests a physical sluggishness that is shown to be the enemy of insight. Martha’s boat trip to England typifies this enervation, the voyagers’ bodies wishing to sleep, not wanting to get up, but nevertheless eating ‘enormous meaty breakfasts, making jokes about greed. They didn’t want to eat it, but they had to, because it was there and they had paid for it’ (109), going on to soup, alcohol, two hours of lunch, a little sleep, possibly a few games, then tea and ‘masses of cakes’ and an evening of sex and drinking. No wonder they are ‘permanently heavy and dead and gone with food, alcohol and sex’ (110). The ‘bad time’ for Martha is similarly characterised by lethargy, heaviness and division (198). When she is slowly working to recover the past, however, the hard work of it makes her fight for survival; though she never actually says to herself ‘I must sleep less, I eat too much, I am physically flabby, I must not drink so much brandy in the evenings with Mark...’ she discovers, ‘fighting against the dark, that she was sunk fathoms deep in sleep and lethargy and sloth and so - she had had to survive’ - and draws her own conclusions (316).

If food dulls, then lack of food sharpens the senses and quickens the emotions, as demonstrated by Martha’s flaring anger when Henry implies that

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73 It also suggests that if ‘alternative’ potential is not harnessed by ‘reasonable’ people it will simply be annexed and exploited by warmongering governments (which means all governments).
she is combative when they meet for dinner at Baxters. More than this, though, Martha has learned that 'if she walked long enough, slept slightly enough to be conscious of her dreams, ate at random, was struck by new experience throughout the day, then her whole self cleared, lightened, she became alive and light and aware' (45), and when she first meets Phoebe she is in a real dilemma over whether or not to eat the soup and thus begin a routine, ordered life, risking the loss of her new understanding of the nature of separation and division, which she characterises as 'a vision'. The lightness and clarity she experiences walking through London she regards as a 'reward of not-eating, not-sleeping, using her body as an engine to get her out of the small dim prison of every day' (519).

The step from this kind of heightened awareness to madness is both a small and a large one. Martha draws on her own experience and also on what she sees with Lynda when getting ready for her experimental bout of 'madness'. She first attends Lynda, who seems to have prepared herself for the 'task or challenge' of being ill and does not eat, drink or rest for days. Martha is drawn into the experience through Lynda's rejection of Mark's rational approach, and it is through this wordless, foodless, sleepless experience that Martha's non-rational and communicating self is confirmed. After weeks of near starvation, the two women emerge as skeletal; when they dress up and go out with Paul it is as caricature women.

Martha's own courted 'breakdown', her solitary psychic exploration, is similarly prepared for, since she knows she has not to eat or sleep, but to keep

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74 Martha's previous breakdown is not willed, but triggered by her mother's visit and the repetitive cycle into which they become locked, playing in turn persecutor, victim, rescuer (the 'drama triangle' of Transactional Analysis). Martha's recovery involves the reclamation of memories she had blocked off to alleviate pain, and allowing herself to 'hear' what her life has been repeatedly saying.
alert, sharpen and fine down her senses. Despite the danger, particularly the violence of the 'self-hater' within her, she is able to use common sense, memory, judgement, comparison and understanding to in some way sort her unknown states of mind. The interrupting visit to a restaurant sets her back; when she returns to her room and checks her body, 'the instrument, the receiving device', she knows it will take twenty four hours to regain her 'sensitive' state, after all that she has eaten and drunk.

Significantly, at this meal Lynda orders salmon but does not eat it. Whereas Martha is able to eat or not eat at will (hence her 'thin phases'), Lynda is locked into anorexia. Even when she cooks, she does not often eat, but returns to the basement. Her anorexia is connected to her recurring illness, her inability to pull back into a 'normal' state. She is constantly 'tuned in' to the collective chaos of the human mind, perpetually visited by her demons, unable, like Martha, to 'move in and out of' (thinness and) the landscape of pain. Whether the anorexia is cause or effect is impossible to detect: such is the circle.

The effects - generally beneficial if individually problematic - of what the women decide to call 'madness' have to do with listening, telepathic communication, intuition and a connectedness to something much larger than the individual. A chaos of human sound, mental pictures, premonitions and apprehension of moods as colours, extraordinary beauty in the natural world and the terror and hidden unfamiliarity of ordinary, isolated, sleep-walking people, locked into themselves and eaten up with wants and needs (a chaos of connection which the futuristic appendices suggests offers the only hope for human survival and development) are the rewards and the price of being thus awakened.
In some ways Martha Quest/Knowles/Hesse may be said to come full circle, from her instinctive sense of connectedness to the natural world in the veld when 'she understood quite finally her smallness, the unimportance of humanity' (75) to her understanding of connection and impersonal forces. The difference, it seems, lies in the degree of connectedness and in the quality of the understanding. Which lends authority to the undeniably authoritative Rosa Mellendip, who claims that 'one could never be told what one did not already know, though of course the 'knowing' might be hidden from oneself' (390).

In the full flood of her breakdown Martha thinks, 'If all these sub-human creatures are aspects of me, then I'm a gallery of freaks and nature's rejects' (574). Although this is part of a realisation about human sadism, masochism and schadenfreude and the possibility of choice ('These things are there. Always. I can choose to be them or not'), it touches on fears about embodiment which bring us back to the question of human freakishness. Given the defamiliarised perception Martha has of the grotesque physicality and strangeness of people when she goes out into the street from her session with Lynda (comparable to Kate's visions of animality in The Summer Before the Dark) perhaps all humans are freakish, not just the so-called deformed or the very fat or the very thin or the very large.

Martha's and Anna Wulf's enlightenment and ability to communicate are

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At one level it could be said that she simply grows up; as Lessing herself puts it in the Preface to The Golden Notebook, 'growing up is after all only the understanding that one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares' (13). This is more than a commonplace about losing egocentricity; as Martha's sexual experience with Jack indicates, Lessing is suggesting that there is a level of connectedness that reaches beyond the personal.

In the end Martha rejects the individual and exclusive relatedness of married love and what she sees as the insatiable needs it breeds.
achieved through their bodies, but at the expense of their physical needs. Lessing does, however, offer an alternative enlightenment, one which is deeply rooted in the physical, embraces perceptions of freakishness as relative and which is achieved precisely through ministering to the body's needs and hungers. I have in mind *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, which confront the unavoidable future underlying all our fears about embodiment, that of deterioration and debility. The two novels which make up *The Diaries* keep the body very much in focus, both as conceived in popular culture (Jane Somers, or 'Janna', is the editor of a women's magazine; her niece Kate suffers an eating disorder) and in terms of its disturbing reality in decline - and few novelists dwell so directly or so movingly on the physical details of old age.

The instinctive repulsion of the healthy from the alarming 'freakishness' of the very old or very sick is encapsulated in Janna's withdrawal from her husband when he dies of cancer, looking 'like a boiling fowl'. Her claim 'I hate physical awfulness. I can't stand it' (15) suggests fastidiousness, but the sick and panicky feelings that accompany it reveal a terror and refusal to acknowledge mortality - or indeed embodiment (the 'what is most discomforting about the body' of Jacqueline Rose). Her inability to tend to her dying mother demonstrates a similar reluctance to acknowledge her physicality and therefore vulnerability to change and decay; as she says of her refusal to see old ladies, 'I was afraid of being like them' (210).

The substance of the first book, *The Good Neighbour*, is the breakdown of Janna's distaste, fear and separation from the realities of embodiment, its contingency and entropy. Janna is representative as well as specific; through

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her and other characters, discomforts, preconceptions and (real or imagined) persecutions are examined. Her speculations about how this society (de)values the old through criteria of usefulness, and the recurrence of the idea of putting people into Homes ostensibly for their own good but actually to keep them (and the reminders they embody\(^7\)) out of sight, provide a disquieting critique, but it is through the detailed narrative of growing friendship between Janna and old Maudie Fowler that the intense physicality of old age and communion by means of food are conveyed.

Janna’s initial overtures to Maudie Fowler are fraught with difficulties caused by her own ignorance (she takes fruit that Maudie cannot eat because of her teeth) and Maudie’s prickly dignity and pride. Such difficulties are compounded by the women’s relative positions of privilege and poverty - and class.\(^7\) She is embarrassed to appear Lady Bountiful, and ashamed of the luxury of her own lifestyle (especially the bathroom, which Maudie, with her outside lavatory, eagerly dwells upon). There is a gradual increase in physical intimacy between the two women as Janna overcomes her distaste for drinking tea out of grimy cups and Maudie’s sour smells, and begins to help - making tea, shopping, feeding the cat, cooking Maudie a piece of fish, sweeping the floor, emptying urine from the full commode.

The women regularly take tea and cake together, and Janna encourages Maudie to reminisce about her early life, much of Maudie’s nostalgia centring on

\(^7\) As Richard Curtis observes in *If the Old Could...* (and as Muriel Spark has portrayed in *Memento Mori*), we do not, in contemporary society, much care to be reminded of mortality: ‘the very old are too frightening, too much of a threat, we can’t stand it, *memento mori*, one and all, so they have to be dear little children’. Or, indeed, kept out of sight. (The Diaries of Jane Somers, 354).

\(^7\) ‘I thought how one did not have friends with the working classes. I could be many things to Mrs Fowler, including a Good Neighbour, but not a friend’ (46). By the end of the novel, Janna’s achievement is to proclaim herself truthfully as Maudie’s friend.
food. The climax of the women’s intimacy comes not with eating, however, but in connection with the other end of the digestive tract. Maudie hints that she would like to be washed, and Janna is confronted by the inescapable facts of defenceless old age. Maudie’s body is pathetic:

A fragile rib cage under creased yellow skin, her shoulder bones like a skeleton’s, and at the end of thin stick arms, strong working hands. Long thin breasts hanging down. (59)

But worse, she has ‘shat her pants, shat everything’, so Janna must cope with the smell, the mess, the washing, and Maudie’s suffering at the invasion. She is struck, above all, by the contrast between her own self-love and such pitiful helplessness and deep embarrassment.

Maudie’s body is disturbing because it holds a promise of what is to come. In this respect, the body is seen as a burden. In an extraordinarily evocative passage Lessing gives a detailed account of the old woman’s day, dominated by her own weight, stiffness, effort, panic, weariness, numbness, emptiness and the labour and difficulty of moving, reaching or bending, to feed the cat or make the fire. With everything such an effort, solitude is no luxury but an affliction, and Maudie’s mood vacillates between fantasy and depression. The arrival of ‘Meals on Wheels’ is an event for all the old women, often eagerly awaited, partly because it offers a moment (though frequently minimal) of social

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80 Maudie dies from stomach cancer, a disease figuratively in keeping with the details of her life: the pains and indignities she had to swallow, her anorexia after her mother died, her periods of near starvation, the connection established with Janna through food and lavatory care.

81 All the old people Lessing characterises in the Jane Somers novels are women. Whether this is a question of demography or verisimilitude or whether Lessing is suggesting that this kind of communion and intimacy belong to female friendship is an open question. Milan Kundera’s Immortality (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) offers an insight: Agnes muses that because of menstruation and reproduction the body is more present for women, needs more care and attention, is more insistently body-like as women age, whereas men just slowly dematerialise.
contact, but also because eating is almost their only physical pleasure.\footnote{Maudie Fowler is portrayed as never having enjoyed sex, regarding the penis as ‘the stick they beat you with’. The manifestation of Eros in her life is rather through her fearness and anger at the prospect of death - and through her appetite. Eating is also, of course, a means of asserting life.}

Lessing makes the most of its poignancy, here in the case of Annie Reeves:

The two little oblong containers are sitting one above another on the sill. Annie carefully opens the first, and she is sick with disappointment. It is Wednesday, she had forgotten; Wednesday they bring this great sog of a pie, all damp crust with some dubious mince in it, a spoonful if that. She loathes cabbage. She hates carrot. She picks at the mince, her face squeezed up with distaste. No, she cannot. She investigates the pudding. It is a sponge, in custard. ‘On a hot day like this, you’d think they’d give us a bit of salad,’ she moans. And eats slices of white bread and jam and biscuits, one after another, till she’s full. (427)

But there is real pleasure, often in defiance of the ‘experts’, particularly when it comes to eating starch and cakes, as tellingly demonstrated by Vera Rogers’ story of the 94-year old who responds to her advice on nutrition with the question, ‘And how old did you say you were, dear?’ (112).

For both Annie and Maudie, food offers a present pleasure and a source of sporadic nostalgia. They recall details of meals eaten sixty or seventy years previously: dumplings in sheep’s head stock, boiled puddings with fruit and sugar, eels and potatoes, batter pudding first with meat and then again with jam, to fill hungry stomachs cheaply. Maudie reveals periods of deprivation, when she was so poor she took bread from the birds, or when she thought she was being poisoned by her father’s ‘fancy woman’ and so refused to eat, a refusal or inability to stomach the facts of her mother’s death and father’s inconstancy. Janna empathetically labels this to herself: anorexia.

But food is not just pleasure; it is both literally and metaphorically a sustainer of life, and these old women’s almost obsessive interest is a means of
keeping mortality at bay. When, on an impulse, Janna takes Maudie to the Rose Garden Restaurant for tea and cakes, her unspoken gift to Maudie is more than rewarded:

She ate and ate, in her slow, consuming way, which says, I'm going to get this inside me while it is here! - and then she sat, she simply sat and looked, and looked. She was smiling and delighted. Oh, the darlings, she kept crooning, the darlings...at the sparrows, at the roses, at a baby in a pram near her. I could see she was beside herself with a fierce, almost angry delight, this hot brightly sunlit world was like a gorgeous present. (120)

Maudie eats, perhaps, to feed her cancer; she eats to make up for all the times she could not eat; she eats because she can. The hunger, the pleasure, the fierce delight are expressions of eros, the appetite for life itself. Even when she is very ill and can barely walk, and they repeat the visit, she again eats her way methodically through a pile of cakes, so that Janna 'cannot believe how much she can eat, when I think of that little yellow belly' (212). And when she is dying, shortly before she finally goes into hospital, and they go to visit her odious sister, she eats more than anyone, 'demolish[ing] every last crumb' (218). Which is very much the way she dies, fighting, complaining, refusing to let go:

"Wait a minute," she had muttered, or cursed, or cried, as life went surging on, leaving her behind, but life had taken no notice and had gone on past her (255).

Janna, supportive to the end, does not understand Maudie's rage, her sense of injustice at losing life, but thinks her own incomprehension may be to do with being fifty and not ninety. Understanding, really understanding one's
own mortality is something the body is remarkably reluctant to allow, for too much acceptance might sicken the appetite and extinguish the fire.

The second Jane Somers novel, *If the Old Could...*, shows that young bodies may be as problematic, seem as unfamiliar and remote as the very old - confirming the view that freakishness depends on perspective. In Janna’s niece Kate, we have a ‘mirroring body’ constantly seeking to deflect pain. Janna, who sees an alarming, brisk, self-contained replication of herself in Kate’s elder sister Jill, never really understands or gets through to the unhappy Kate who, for quite different reasons from Maudie Fowler, seems equally unable to cook, bath or pull herself out of passivity and dependency. Though she seems to appreciate firmness and order - she is covertly pleased by Janna’s ultimatums - she responds largely with passive resistance, shielding herself by attempted suicide, drunkenness, comfort eating and plugging in her earphones.

Her eating is a far cry from Maudie Fowler’s simple appetite, and - like Josie’s in *Life-Size* - is largely out of control: she puts all the stew on her own plate, leaving none for Janna; yearning for oral satisfaction, she buys ‘a dozen Mars Bars, six giant packs of potato crisps and some samosas’ (376), eating the whole lot in one evening; on evenings alone with Janna she either wolfs down her food and retreats behind her earphones, or cannot eat the supper Janna has prepared so as to entice her, because she is full of biscuits. When things get really bad, Janna finds her in the kitchen in the small hours of the morning, ‘eating shortbread biscuits with a total avid concentration, both hands at work, one lining up the next biscuit to be consumed, while the other actually fed her mouth’ (472). Such compulsive eating, according to Bunny Epstein, is a sign of anger about denial in childhood:
The compulsive eater symbolically ‘stuffs her anger down her throat’ with food she neither needs nor wants. She does not feel herself to be a whole and separate person. The boundary of self and other is blurred. Metaphorically speaking, many women are starving but they cannot eat and enjoy the feast that lies before them in present time because they are so hungry for the food they didn’t get as children.\[83\]

Full marks for Lessing’s psychological accuracy: Kate attaches herself, limpet-like, to Jill or Janna; she fills her mouth with food and ears with music to seal herself up and deny her pain; she ‘has a great gaping pit or hole somewhere in the region of her solar plexus, all need and craving’ (333).

Yet does Kate not, also, represent something more than one child’s loveless upbringing? She is portrayed entirely through an external mode, so, unlike Josie in Shute’s *Life-Size*, gives no account of her own perception of herself. Janna’s efforts at understanding are no more illuminating, ending, as they do, in defeat. Does Kate represent the ‘generation gap’, the breakdown in communication between old and young in modern society and the unknowability of the other? Or, a child who cannot be explained by parents (or a society) programmed only for successful offspring, is she a prototypical foreshadowing of Ben in *The Fifth Child*, a creature who simply cannot be accounted for by liberal/psychological/ cultural explanations? Whatever her representative burden, she is a creature not in touch with her body, either in terms of being comfortable with fashion or simply of hearing herself. Her earphones prevent both self-communication and contact with the outside.

Kate’s lethargic inhabitation of her body is the antithesis of the vital engagement and receptiveness attempted by Anna Wulf and Martha Quest. As so often in Lessing, excessive eating is a danger sign, though she does not on

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the whole connect this so much with becoming fat as with the danger of being dulled. When she does write about fat it may be presented as positive; old Annie Reeves, for example, because she is fat is ‘comely, does not sag, is all comfortable rolls and curves’ (426). But jolly appearances are deceptive; Annie is starving for want of activity and attention, and all her eating can do nothing to assuage that hunger. Perhaps the most shocking image Lessing gives of the body is Janna’s disabused view of this discontented fat woman’s absolute physicality:

I look at Annie’s gaping mouth, making words, words, and I see it as the opening into a conduit that runs, convoluted and disgusting, to the opening that is her anus and which looks, probably, the same (497).\(^\text{84}\)

She concludes that we are essentially ‘containers of dirt-filled intestines’, a nihilistic state of mind that she resists, but which says much both about the trials of caring for the old and sick, and about the ultimate grotesqueness of the human body as flesh. As for Annie, it is as though her real personality becomes progressively submerged by her misery, distraction and the dissembling appearances she assumes; metaphorically, she becomes buried within the accumulations of her own body fat.

Being fat, and its attendant sluggishness, is opposed in Lessing not so much to thinness as to a quickening of the spirit through the body. Elsewhere, however, the substantiality of fat is more insistently present. Given the social pressures towards being or becoming slim outlined earlier in this chapter, it is not surprising that fatness should in our culture be regarded as generally rather

\(^{84}\) The engagement with Maudie’s bodily processes leads Janna beyond repulsion into a bodily conversation, a mutual connection. Annie’s comfort eating, mirroring Kate’s, is self-centred rather than communicative.
disgusting. Indeed, a number of studies have suggested that fat people are
stigmatized, being held to be somehow responsible for their condition through a
species of moral laxity.85 There is class bias here, too, partly because poverty,
poor diet and obesity frequently go together. This is not the whole story,
however, for popular images frequently combine fatness, the comic and the
working classes. Even in a novel which purports to explode the slimming
business, A Matter of Fat, the working class character, Maureen, is not only fat,
but self-deceiving and without self-discipline, putting her family through misery
each time she diets for a special occasion.86 Fat women, according to Edwin
Schur, are particularly subject to critical judgement. This may have something
to do with women's clothing ensuring that their bodies are more permanently on
show than men's, fatness indicating a failure to please by conforming to shape
and size conventions. It also suggests, in the current climate, a failure of
prudence in health matters, though Mike Featherstone claims that this idea is
somewhat misguided, the mildly overweight tending to live longer than their
striving, performance-driven, narcissistic counterparts.

Comfort eating, with whatever underpinning of deprivation, is likely to
make you fat. Even Kate in If The Old Could... is described as plump. The
danger here, parallel to that of anorexia, is of becoming locked into a vicious
circle, in which the fat becomes blamed as the cause of becoming so. The
heroine of Molly Keane's Good Behaviour, the painfully self-conscious and large
Aroon, decides that if she cannot talk at least she can eat, and turns herself into

85 See, for example: Susan Bordo, 'Reading the Slender Body' in Mary Jacobus et al., eds.,
Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science (London: Routledge, 1990), 83-112; Annie
Fursland, 'Eve was Framed: Food and Sex and Women's Shame' in Lawrence, ed., Fed Up and
Hungry; Mike Featherstone, 'The Body in Consumer Culture' in Featherstone et al., eds., The Body;

a gargantuan eater, indulging her appetite and making herself into a joke so as to
be accepted by her brother Hubert and their beloved Richard, while at the same
time burying the pain of being emotionally excluded by her parents. Eating, for
Aroon, takes the place of all the passions that 'good behaviour' forbids her to
express, and these unexpressed feelings make her swell to ever larger
proportions.\textsuperscript{87} It is fitting that her ultimate, death-inducing revenge against the
mother who begrudged her appetite should occur through the medium of
exquisitely cooked food: rabbit that her mother cannot stomach. Aroon is
cought in a vicious circle of deprivation, eating, immensity and loneliness, but
food for her becomes a medium of power.

Unlike real strength, this power is distinctly ambiguous, predicated as it is
(like the emotional vampire's or cannibal's) on a hollow or hungry centre, and
only expressed in response to external agency. Angela Huth encapsulates the
ambiguous victory of passivity in comfort eating in the short story 'the Weighing
Up'. Here a middle-aged housewife eats for comfort and escape, though her
children exhort her to do something about her weight. She claims she is
content, however, and that her husband does not complain. When his mistress
telephones the wife to spill the beans and precipitate a change, the heroine
refuses to be upset, responding with immovable placidly, in the expectation that
her husband will protect her from the 'complicated' side of things. Only her
discouraged feet, the empty chocolate box and her toast and dripping in bed
suggest that the inside story is different.\textsuperscript{88}


\textsuperscript{88} Angela Huth, 'The Weighing Up' in Susan Hill, ed., \textit{Modern British Short Stories} (London:
So, are copious eating and a fat body ever portrayed as positive? Angela Carter plays with the idea. Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* is splendid: she is of ample proportions; eats, drinks, laughs - and yawns - with gusto; she has 'Elizabethan' table manners and is generally larger than life. Her size, volume, appetite and humour, coupled with her wings, offer a female embodiment that contrasts sharply to both the traumatised abbreviation of the anorectic and the bereft bloating of a comfort eater. Size, here, equals power, and is no barrier to elevation. The monstrous 'Mother' in *The Passion of New Eve* is large and forceful, as large and undimensioned as a maternal archetype, indeed, though like all mothers she loses her power and disappears in the end. And the benign and hearty Uncle Peregrine in *Wise Children* becomes progressively larger as he grows older and Dora's narrative becomes more fulsome.

Hillel Schwartz, in *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat*, spins a delightful utopian fantasy, a 'fat society' in which dinners would be delicious and sociable, children would be well fed when hungry, fat people would dress expressively and be forthright about the body and women especially 'would wear their weight with new conviction'. Such a society would be comforting, more caring, 'less harshly competitive, less devouring', a consumer's society without unsatisfied desire:

In a fat society people would consume for the sake of the company they would keep. Consuming would become satisfying to the degree that it

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89 Leaving aside, that is, the obvious case of Rabelais as discussed by Bakhtin. For further reference to this see Chapter VI.
became social, generous and unburdening (327).

Well, it is pleasing to think so. Casting a retrospective look at this chapter in the light of Schwartz's fantasy, anorexia is illuminated as dystopian, partly on account of the total absence of body fat, but chiefly and more seriously because what little eating does occur is unbearably and obsessively private. The fasting of Lessing's characters is more equivocal. They eat in company, and may or may not break down and fast in company. The resulting efforts and processes, however, are focused at a level beyond the narrowly individual, and directed towards what is most profoundly if obscurely social. It is such eating, social in its widest sense, that forms the subject of my concluding two chapters.

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90 Schwartz's claim that dieting strategies have followed the stages of capitalism is perhaps borne out in the recent upsurge in bulimia, in which consumption and dieting together reach their apogee. See especially his final chapter, 'Fat and Happy?'.

Chapter V

SOCIAL EATING: FOOD AND MANNERS

Up to this point, my perspective has been largely personal. By this I mean that, even when considering what might be called ‘interpersonal’ eating - cannibalism, obviously, but nurturing also - I have focused upon the individual psyche or body, on the effect of eating or appetite on the person, or on how cultural influences or power relations affect the individual. In the final two chapters I want to shift my focus a little to examine food and eating as a social activity. The last chapter will take a speculative look at how eating might be considered as an expression of social and political community. Social interactions around food and eating will be dealt with later in this chapter, in relation to the importance and power of rituals and manners. To begin with, however, I think that food is worth considering in itself as a bearer of cultural, social and interpersonal meanings arising from class, gender, religion, ethnicity, nationality, family and so on.

Food is an essentially social signifier and the framing of its presentation indicative of a variety of relationships. The cocktail party, buffet, dinner or barbecue each indicates a different level of intimacy, and, according to Lévi-Strauss, different methods of cooking are awarded different levels of prestige.  

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1 Claude Lévi-Strauss’s The Raw and the Cooked famously proposes a system dividing methods of cooking according to distinctions between nature and culture, each method being associated with particular occasions or social levels. His analysis has been criticised for unsubstantiated generalisation, and a tendency to universalise without recognising profound cultural and material differences between societies. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology: I (London: Jonathen Cape, 1970); also Stephen Mennell, All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985); and Peter Farb and George Armelagos, Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980).
Food itself is, or has been, constructed as symbolic, significant in all sorts of ways, intentionally (the Eucharist), through custom (harvest suppers and hot cross buns\(^2\)) or by commerce (the ‘ploughman’s lunch’\(^3\)) - the resonances being, initially at least, culture-specific. Not only might raw fish, witchetty grubs or blancmange be repellant to people from cultures where they do not habitually eat such things, the social significance of a particular food is likely to be completely overlooked by outsiders. What, for example, might a convenient Martian make of a cake topped with burning candles or an egg made of chocolate? Some foods are inextricably bound up with class: the English exclusivity of grouse, lobster or venison, the middle-class nicety of cucumber sandwiches and the sustaining comfort of Lancashire hotpot bear only partially on the cost of the ingredients. A ‘mixed grill’ and a ‘fry-up’ may both centre on bacon, sausages and chops, but inescapably connote middle class order and working class informality (complete with recycled leftovers) respectively; the contrived (transnational) egalitarian connotations of MacDonald’s beefburgers with relish and French fries cannot culturally equal the English, historically generated associations of fish and chips and pickled onions.\(^4\)

The socially constructed significance of food is many-layered, and increasingly multi-cultural. Peter Farb and George Armelagos claim that since

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\(^2\) Hot cross buns, according to Farb and Armelagos, have their origin in ancient Egypt, in bread marked with horns for fertility. These horn marks were later modified into a cross, to signify the four phases of the moon - a shape later adapted for Christian use. *Consuming Passions.*

\(^3\) See *The Ploughman’s Lunch,* writer Ian McEwan, dir. Richard Eyre, Goldcrest/Greenpoint/AC & D, 1983, during the course of which it is claimed that the ubiquitous French bread and cheese or paté pub lunch known as the ‘ploughman’s lunch’ is merely an artefact of marketing by the brewing industry and bears little relation to what any real ploughman ever ate.

\(^4\) The ‘waste not want not’ doctrine underlying bread and butter pudding is similarly associated with middle-class values, whereas bread pudding is a more working-class delight. In this case the cost of ingredients may be relevant, for bread and butter pudding includes milk and eggs, adding a richness that suggests choice. The one dish thus connotes thrift, the other hardship. Interestingly, the only one of my own cookery books to contain recipes for both is a Jewish cookbook, which stands somewhat outside the British class system.
eating is something we normally do every day it is a major way in which people define themselves, and possibly the most important channel for the transmission of a culture, given that eating habits are the most conservative of our behaviour patterns, outlasting general manners and even habits of speech. Eating is influenced, they claim, by the whole cultural system: by the means through which a society adapts to and exploits its environment; by social structures created for purposes of order and training the next generation; and by ideology, the world view of the particular society.⁵ The complexity both enriches and complicates eating; a wealth of - sometimes contradictory - cultural baggage helps conventions proliferate and makes it more difficult to know how to behave and to understand any particular eating situation. What is implicitly understood about certain foods, what they signify and how they must be treated, may be vital to a particular gathering of people, especially where the occasion marks a rite of passage or is connected to a religious celebration. It is important that all participants ‘read’ the situation in the same way, that the implicit rules, codes and interpretations are all equally understood.

If the participants in cooking and eating activities must learn to decode the significance of the foods then so must the readers of fiction in which they appear. There is, of course, a potential problem here, not unlike that of the androcentric or bourgeois writer assuming a shared set of values in his readership. Toni Morrison for one confronts this problem head-on, referring to ‘strawberry shrug’ and ‘raised bread’, ‘goobers’ ‘cobbler’ and ‘meal-fried porgies’ without explanation.⁶ She makes no apology for writing specifically

⁵ Farb and Armelagos, passim. The notion of ideologies affecting food and eating connects also with power in Foucauldian discourses and their defining and rule-making characteristics.

and overtly for an African American readership, for whom these (and many other things) do not need to be explained. They may be only partially decoded by white readers, but this is, she suggests, part of the deal: if non-black people choose to read her work then understanding it is their problem. 7

To some extent this is a problem with reading any culture-specific writing (and thus most writing): there is a need for some degree of familiarity with what is being written about if we are to decode the significance of its detail. The contemporary American - and increasingly English - tendency to invoke brand-names (*Coke*, *Hershey bars*, *Guinness*, *Mother’s Pride*) most glaringly illustrates the need for a common vocabulary, but a writer may also trade on an assumed set of significances concerning religion, class, gender, power or other socio-political and cultural factors. The use of *Mother’s Pride*, a brand of packaged steam-baked white sliced bread (whose name has almost become a generic term), might, for example, connote a working-class situation, a degree of poverty (economic or imaginative) or ignorance (of ‘healthier’ food); it could be imbued with specific associations by an advertising campaign; it might have resonances of convenience or laziness, bleakness or taste-deprivation; it could even, in its most up-to-the-minute incarnation, represent the forefront of fashionable anti-foodie-snobbery. And (even if negatively) it suggests all the religious and cultural significances of bread in its various forms. As with branded goods, so with food in general; the assumed cultural ‘meanings’ and associations of foods are combined with specific regional, class or gender significances, and indeed with particular familial or social resonances. It is my contention that, with greater or lesser self-consciousness, writers draw on and

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manipulate all these connotations, so that food is hugely suggestive and revealing in almost every instance where it is described or specified.

Rather than trawl through a wide range of writers for instances to substantiate this claim - for quantity does not necessarily yield validity, begging as it does the question of how many examples it takes to make a convincing case - I propose to take one writer as representative, and will look in some detail at food in Michèle Roberts’ writing. Certain foods recur in her novels: bread, soup, wine, eggs, grapes, lamb, dried fruit, water and fish all have particular weight, lent by various personal, social, symbolic, religious or general cultural significances. Some of these are, as it were, ‘there’ already, such as the Christian associations of bread and wine or the special comfort and indulgence of cakes; some are discovered, teased out and elaborated by Roberts; and some she effectively creates through her poetics.

The foods can be categorised in various ways, according to their associations with class, or childhood or nationality, but I will begin by considering Roberts’ treatment of the food and drink elements of a typical meal. Drinking before meals is only sporadic in her novels, but the *apéritif*, that mainstay of French bourgeois life, occasionally appears, most notably in the hand of the unsuitably worldly curé of *Daughters of the House*. The meal’s overture, soup (described by Margaret Visser as ‘obligatory’\(^8\)) is in many cultures looked upon as particularly comforting, nourishing and health-giving, but

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\(^8\) Visser makes much of the etiquette surrounding soup: ‘The excuse must be very sound if one is to escape eating the soup...soup is a basic foodstuff to our way of thinking, a symbol of love, and often thought of as a remedy for ill health’. It serves to take the edge off the appetite, and therefore to refuse it may be seen as a form of greed. By the same token, says Visser, a host must not over-fill the guests’ soup dishes, for this would look like meanness. She also draws attention to the custom of not drinking wine until after the soup course; this, she says, both ensures that people are ‘fortified’ before beginning on the wine and gives ‘the highly civilized impression that nobody present is anxious to get started on the wine’. She does not comment on how this practice corresponds with the taking of an *apéritif*. See Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 219-220.
Roberts curiously does not make very much of its restorative properties, other than in the ghostly grandmother's recommendation of onion gruel in *The Visitation.* Its comforting function and its power of bringing people warmly together is suggested, if punctured, in the evocatively welcoming meal Léonie prepares for Thérèse in *Daughters of the House,* and to a greater degree in *A Piece of the Night,* where soup occurs literally or metonymically three times: in Julie's difficult meal with her father while her mother is ill; in her spilling herself out like the ladled soup that she presses her women friends to consume; and, negatively, when she learns the family home is to be sold, in her distraught smashing of the soup tureen, symbol of harmony, tradition and the family.

Bread, associated culturally with essential nourishment, is treated by Roberts in various different ways, and so develops a series of connotations. In some cases these are to do with bread as a basic necessity; the story of Meg Hansey in *The Book of Mrs Noah,* for example, has her sending her wages home to provide bread for her brothers and sisters, and the narrator of the book recalls surviving on brown bread and carrots as an impoverished student. In the same novel, however, bread is also associated with convenience, pleasure and

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9 The idea of soup as curative is widespread. Consider, for example, the epithet 'Jewish penicillin' frequently applied to chicken soup. Susie Orbach's combines the restorative with maternal associations in her recipe for anorexic women: 'Golden Chicken soup or Jewish penicillin - a mother's recipe'. See 'A Language all of its Own', in Antonia Till ed., *Loaves & Wishes: Writers Writing on Food* (London: Virago Press, for Oxfam, 1992).

10 The view of bread as the essential food is reflected at large in Western culture, for example in 'Give us this day our daily bread', or 'bread is the staff of life', to 'take the bread out of someone's mouth', as well as in the colloquial usage of 'bread' for money. The Bible is, of course, a major source of the metaphorical and symbolic use of bread, most obviously in the association of bread with Christ's body at the last supper. Farb and Armelagos detail its importance to ancient Egyptians - called the 'Bread Eaters' by Herodotus and others - who made sure their graves were well-stocked with bread or representations of bread. Modern Greeks, similarly, place a great importance on bread, and their folklore emphasises bread's power to protect. They also suggest a sexual connotation, perhaps due to bread's rising during preparation. As Alice Thomas Ellis and Michèle Roberts both point out, 'companion' means someone with whom bread is consumed (Lat: *com =* with; *panis =* bread).

independence, when the Deftly Sibyl decamps to the garden shed to write, taking with her bread and cheese. *In The Red Kitchen* has a 'modernised' nun eating marmite sandwiches in a doubtfully improved and secularised common room; it is the first time this narrator has seen nuns eat and gossip over tea, and the choice of bread and marmite somehow emphasises both a childlike quality and homeliness. These associations confirm the suggested nostalgic pleasures of childhood tea in the garden after school in *The Visitation*, tea which features marmite and cream-cheese sandwiches and chocolate cake. Children's sandwiches can be unpleasant too, as in the 'thin slices of white bread soaked and glued into sandwiches with lemon curd' thrown to Helen by her mother (24), and bread is associated with boredom at long meals by the children in France, when they make grey bread-sculptures while longing to leave the table, in *A Piece of the Night* and again in *Daughters of the House*. However, in both novels jam-soaked *tartines* offer the children comfort as well as sustenance, as the unnerved adult Léonie well knows, in her longing for fresh bread, butter and apricot jam to 'wall off the uncertain future. To shore her up'. The obverse of this walling up is a walling in; the teenage Léonie stuffs her mouth with bread on the day of the Mass for dead Antoinette, to separate herself from Thérèse and Louis, but also to prevent her feelings bursting out. Julie, in *A Piece of the Night*, crams her mouth for similar reasons, 'stuffing her anger down with slices of bread and peanut butter, eaten standing behind the kitchen door...',(83).

If these associations tend to emphasise the personal and the familial, the

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12 *Daughters of the House*, 170. French bread is apparently more comforting than English.

13 Cf. Josie in Jenefer Shute's *Life-Size*, 'eat: stuff myself with everything I could find that was chewy and creamy, gagging as I forced down ever more, blocking in the only way I knew how the banshee wail that inhabited me' (209).
combination of bread with wine unfailingly calls up the religious,\textsuperscript{14} and Roberts explicitly uses the elements of the Catholic Mass, both in relation to its participants (Julie in \textit{A Piece of the Night} taking the 'thin white disc', knowing she 'must never chew it, for it would be the Christ she gnashes and mutilates' (29)), and, more radically, to its creators.\textsuperscript{15} In \textit{The Wild Girl} the 'new rite' of bread and wine, flesh and blood, that Jesus invites the mystified disciples to join in at the last supper is perceived by Mary Magdalene as a union or unification of the spirit and the word, of understanding and wisdom, of female and male.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, as well as saturating the ritual, and therefore the bread and the wine, with spiritual significance, Roberts backdates a politicising of the practice, investing the combined food and drink with contentious significance when she has Mary perceive the prohibition on women offering 'the supper of bread and wine' as running directly counter to Christ's teaching.

Mary's passage through the underworld, her personal marriage of heaven and hell, contrasts a vision of unity to the separation, hierarchy and murmurs of witchcraft promulgated by the (male) disciples. It is their ideas however, which prevail in the world. As the two Marys and Martha travel into exile it is no coincidence that Mary attributes her enthusiastic indiscretion in telling their story

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Margaret Visser suggests other connections between bread and wine, both being culturally 'produced', and in remarkably similar ways: the ingredients are grown, harvested, fermented, rested and controlled. Both are respected, and treated with care but for opposite reasons, bread being a staple and alcohol potentially dangerous. See Visser, 243.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Farb and Armelagos draw the fascinating inference that the decree of the doctrine of transubstantiation by Pope Innocent III in 1215 effectively literalises a hitherto symbolic practice.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Margaret Visser describes the Mass thus: 'All the boundaries are crossed: between individual and group; death and life; spirit and body; meaning and fact; beginning, lasting, and ending; old and new; here and elsewhere; eternal and temporal; linear and cyclical time; host and guest; God and humankind. As a meal, the Mass spans all of the meanings of eating at once - from cannibalism to vegetarianism, from complete fusion of the group to utterly individual satisfaction, from the breaking of the most fearful of taboos to the gentlest and most comforting restoration.' Unlike Roberts, but perhaps like the Church, the boundary between male and female is one she omits to mention. Visser, 37.
\end{itemize}
to Marcus Linnius to being ‘a little carried away by the Holy Spirit, and also, I must confess, by the wine...’ (142). Wine, which in her early life had so disturbed her, ‘smeared on women’s mouths like blood’ at a Dionysiac feast (55), is a token of ecstasy and an unstable communicant. Even so, in conjunction with bread, it continues to symbolise communion for them, and the life of the women and their followers in exile sees a ritualised pantheistic remembrance of Jesus:

We gather together and drink, from a single cup, the strong pink wine we have fermented, and we eat a loaf of the flat unleavened bread we have baked, praying that the Word and the Spirit may be renewed in us as constantly as we have harvested the grapes on the mountainside and the corn in the fields, and so we testify to God inhabiting each of us and uniting us with each other and with the whole of creation. (158)

Inebriation and loss of control are obvious dangers attendant on drinking wine; the mild conflict between Julie Fanchot and her father in A Piece of the Night, when he wants, still, to water her wine reflects adults’ protective concerns about this, and represents the grown child’s struggle for autonomy and equality.17 The Daughters of the house drink red wine with their midnight feast on the roof; unwatered it makes them choke, but they are determined to like it, for this is a rite of passage, pointedly completed with the onset of Thérèse’s menarche. There is little or no drunkenness in Roberts’ novels, and indeed no real heavy drinking, despite wine being frequently in evidence, and sometimes used for comfort. More palpably dangerous is wine in its

17 Children have habitually been allowed to drink watered wine with a meal in France. Visser points out that a little water is mixed with the wine at a Catholic Mass. This, she says, commemorates correctly the manner of drinking in Christ’s time as well as intermingling the symbol of his divinity (wine) with that of his humanity (water). The French colloquial figurative expression ‘mettre de l’eau dans son vin’, meaning to climb down or yield, presumably draws on the same idea.
unconsumed state in *Daughters of the House*; here the hidden wine and cider in
the basement are laden with the associations of German occupation,
collaboration, resistance, secrecy and guilt. The wine becomes a sort of
objective correlative of the hidden Jews; indeed, the imprisonment of the Jews
in the upstairs back bedroom of the house sets them as polar opposites to the
concealed bottles: discovered, taken and, as it were, consumed by the Germans.
Metaphorically and metonymically wine becomes again associated with blood,
with dissension and with religion. Through the co-operation of the villagers the
wine is saved; because, within the village and fracturing its community, the
priest is an informer, the Jews and Henri Taillé are slain.\(^\text{18}\) The public
significance of wine is, it seems, imbued by Roberts with suggestions of danger
and betrayal as much as with the religious associations of communion and
fulfilment.

Other than wine and bread, eggs are the food most inherently laden with
potential for symbolic use. Biologically destined for reproductive purposes, the
egg represents rebirth, new life, the containment of future possibilities. In its
very essence embryonic, it yet suggests, in its unbroken state, completion and
wholeness. It is as discrete an item of food as one could hope to find, yet, at
the same time, one of the most versatile.\(^\text{19}\) Out of their shells, raw eggs are

\(^\text{18}\) The priest is a divisive figure; his domestic seclusion, exercise of authority and opposition to
traditional pagan-flavoured worship and celebration also set him against the rest of the village.

\(^\text{19}\) Alice Thomas Ellis draws attention to the extraordinary transformatory quality of the egg in
her argument from mayonnaise for the existence of God: "It was patently absurd to suppose that
mayonnaise had come about through random chance, that anyone could ever have been silly or
brilliant enough to predict what would happen if he slowly trickled oil on to egg yolks and then gone
ahead and tried it. An angel must have divulged that recipe and then explained what to do with the
left-over whites. Meringues - there was another instance of the exercise of superhuman
intelligence.... As the angel had left in his fiery chariot he must have added, "And don’t forget
omelettes, and cake and custard and soufflés and poaching end frying and boiling and baking..."".
*The 27th Kingdom* (London: Penguin, 1982) 84. She goes on, indeed, to claim that the egg must
have come first - since an angel bearing a squawking chicken would have lacked dignity - and to
speculate with engaging irreverence on the necessity for there having been a trinity of eggs: one to
eat and one of each sex. The frequency with which eggs crop up in Ellis’s novels gives a hint as to
slippery, slimy, semi-liquid but lumpy, suggestive of all that is antithetical to the cool shape of the unbroken whole, and it is perhaps not surprising, given her general preoccupations, that Michèle Roberts should focus on broken eggs (though the adult Thérèse, returning to the house in Daughters, is reassured by the sight of the wire basket of eggs on the marble shelf in the kitchen, a sign of continuity and stability). In The Wild Girl the ten year-old Mary, intoxicated by the rhythm and strength of her mother’s beating eggs on a summer evening, is impelled to join in somehow, and tosses her basket of eggs in the air so that they ‘crack and splatter in a splendid gold mess on the yard’s stone flags’ (13). The rhythm lives on in the slaps of her punishment, leading to her discovering her gift for songs, but the occasion also suggests a transition, a birth, a dramatic rupture, even a mixing together of elements previously separate - all of which could be taken as prefiguring the events to come, and especially Mary’s embracing of mess and contingency.

Such mess is, for Roberts, quintessentially female as well as Dionysiac, and the later travails of Mary explore, through the ‘mess’ of myth and dream, the problem of understanding and embracing a womanhood that includes both female spirituality and sexuality. The Re-Vision Sibyl’s cooking meditation in The Book of Mrs Noah, while she listens to evensong on the radio, puts a more physical gloss on the problem, emphasising the Church’s traditional discomfort with women’s bodies. Imagining the choirboys ‘in frilly white drag’ she senses the chilly misogyny of the male choir:

She breaks egg yolks into a bowl, whips them with sugar and flour, boils them with milk. Beats and beats with her wooden spoon to remove lumps. Lumpy female bodies. Lumpy bellies and breasts. Eggs breaking their enigmatic appeal, their self-sufficiency and the irresistible yet destructive urge to crack them.
and splattering, warm mess of sweetness on the sheets, warm flow of sweat and blood. We can’t have that in our nice Anglican chapel. Only male chefs please. (26-7)

The ‘breaking and splattering’ eggs and ‘mess’ recall the infant Mary, but they also suggest sexual activity and childbirth, rupture and conjunction, breaking up and mingling. Unsurprisingly, it is scrambled eggs that Hattie and her lover enjoy after close and trusting sex in In the Red Kitchen (115). The Re-Vision Sibyl’s earthy categorisation of the inviolate church as antithesis to female ‘mess’ is echoed in this novel, in the image of the enclosed space of the abbey at Fécamp ‘empty yet full as an egg’ (10) - an unbroken one, presumably.

Any food may develop potent associations according to the nature of a particular occasion, or become temporarily imbued with certain characteristics related to a cook’s mood or emotions. At the beginning of The Book of Mrs Noah, for example, the Babble-On Sibyl, still mourning a stillborn baby, perceives the salmon she is preparing as ‘dead’, on a silver ‘bier’, anointed a with ‘home-made chrism’ of mayonnaise (28). From a vegetarian point of view (and this is the prevailing view in this novel), a whole creature is more redolent of death than a steak or a joint. The inescapable (though all too easily ignored) connection between eating and killing is brought into vivid focus towards the end of the novel when the ‘Gaffer’ catches fish for supper. Here it falls to

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20 When they first meet, discovering themselves to be still hungry after the party, they go to a café for fried eggs on toast, which, it might be said, form a sensuous bridge between the potential of an unbreached egg and the intermingled quality of scrambled egg or omelette. (Significantly, he falls in love with her for her appetite.)

21 Interestingly, Alice Thomas Ellis chooses a similar - but different - image: ‘Inside, the church was as clean and clear as a blown egg’. The Sin Eater, 77.

22 See, for many illustrative instances - such as the emetic grief that the heroine Tita unintentionally cooks into her sister’s wedding cake - Laura Esquivel, Like Water for Chocolate (London: Black Swan, 1993). Also made into a film, dir. Alfonso Arau, Mexico 1992.
Noah's wife to kill, gut and prepare them for cooking, not only because this supper involves the taking of life, but because it is a messy, bloody task which the Gaffer quails before, describing it as 'like some hideous pagan menstrual rite' (189). The preparations for cooking thus become something arcane, mysterious and feminine, as well as being associated with death. Roberts is also drawing on fish as suggestive of female sexuality, the smell, mess and menstrual associations adding to mythological and Freudian sexual symbolism.

Fish also has quite strong Christian associations, from the use by early Christians of the Greek word for fish as a mnemonic, to the Roman Catholic practice, under prohibitions against meat-eating on Friday, of eating fish on that day. Fish are heavily featured in the New Testament; numerous parables are based on fish, and there are frequent references to its consumption. In the gospel according to St. Mark, Jesus recruits the fishermen Simon and Andrew to be 'fishers of men', and the gospel also contains the famous miracle (or possibly parable) of the loaves and fishes (which Michèle Roberts reframes as a parable of good housekeeping). In St. John's gospel the story of the risen Christ advising Peter and the other luckless fishermen to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, whereupon they are filled, is followed by a meal of fish cooked on a fire of coals on the beach.

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23 The narrator replies that it is a suitable job for an out of work sadist, thereby reemphasising the vegetarian argument, before the conversation shifts to the possibly comparable task of writing.

24 There is perhaps a connection here, too, with the fact that it is traditionally women who wash and 'lay out' the dead.

25 The Greek word for fish, IXOYC, is used to represent the words Jesus Christ God's Son Saviour. There are Classical associations too, for Fríday was sacred to Venus (just as it was to the fertility goddess Freja, Fríday being 'Freja's day'), both Aphrodite and Ares metamorphosed themselves into fish during the battle between the giants and gods and the fish was held sacred to Artemis. Robert E. Bell, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology: Symbols, Attributes, Associations* (Santa Barbara California and Oxford: ABC-Clio, 1982).

26 I am grateful to Martin Corner for much of this material on fish and Christianity.
In *Daughters of the House*, on the day that Louis returns from the clinic after his stroke, there is mackerel for lunch. This fish, saturated with Christian and sexual associations, becomes embroiled in the most complex cross-currents of power and desire.27 Thérèse half-prepares it; robbed by Madeleine of the chance to get her father’s room ready for him, she imagines herself coaxing him to eat, deciding upon a herb sauce as more original and more tempting to his appetite than mayonnaise. But as she cooks, her thoughts are filled with her aunt, rival for her father’s attention and, Thérèse feels, usurper of her dead mother’s place. The mustard she splashes reminds her of Madeleine’s bright yellow dress and reflects her own fiery and unhappy feelings. In the event, it is Madeleine who looks after and coaxes Louis at lunch, who feeds him and pets him, while Thérèse is driven to enact a revenge on them, and on her mother for dying, by asking the bishop for permission to enter a convent as soon as she is sixteen. For, while Léonie and the others have completed the cooking, Thérèse has been in the woods and it has become the Bishop’s lunch, and the deep sexual significance of the fish (played out in the Electra triangle of Louis, Madeleine and Thérèse) has become overlaid with the Christian and worldly manifestations of the clergy.

The fish, it seems, is inscribed with multiple betrayals: of Thérèse’s desire for her father; of Louis’ hopes for his daughter and Madeleine’s for her niece; of the Bishop’s pretended humility by his greed.28 To underline the connection, it is when the Bishop raises his glass to Thérèse and congratulates her on the fish soup with *rouille* and the poached mackerel in its ‘delicate herb-

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27 The mackerel is, of course, a scavenging fish, which may contain hidden dangers (of food poisoning) for the eater. The French word ‘maquereau’ not only means mackerel but is also (though with an entirely different derivation, from the Dutch word for a courtier) used to refer to a pimp.

28 And, more distantly, of course, there is the betrayal of Christ himself.
scented sauce' that she makes her punishing request. But there is a further and most poignant betrayal over the fish: of Léonie by the whole company. She is wrongfully denounced by the curé as mistaken, muddled and, worst of all, 'half-English' for having spoken of a vision; here, even her mother speaks not a word in her defence, for she is absorbed with stroking and reassuring Louis. After waiting in vain for deliverance, Léonie goes out to fetch the salad.

It could be argued that the food is really incidental to the events here, and indeed nowhere do Roberts' characters explicitly associate fish with betrayal. The pre-existing associations of fish, however, along with Roberts' metonymic manipulation, do lend a figurative depth to the five chapters spanned by the cooking and the lunch, so that fish, sexuality, religion and betrayal become, in effect, enmeshed. The interplay is subtle and suggestive like the food itself, and, significantly, it is only afterwards, when the girls quarrel over the washing up and Thérèse burns her mother's old letters, that accusation becomes overt, as Thérèse cries 'They've betrayed me. I don't want you as my sister. I want Papa' (148).

Not all food is so heavily weighted with feelings as this mackerel, but Roberts both picks up general cultural resonances and renders food significant within her own social - and figurative - schemes. In *The Wild Girl* she affords lamb very much the religious and teaching significance to be expected in the Judao-Christian tradition: following the roast lamb provided by Nicodemus, Jesus recalls the lamb as it had been alive that morning, using this concrete image as the beginning of a lesson about the food of eternal life, that will culminate in the first communion with bread and wine. By the end of the book the Passover lamb has become transformed into an anniversary remembrance of the Lord's death, and he is referred to unselfconsciously by this band of
followers as the 'Lamb of God'. Additional weight is given to the ceremony at this point, for the butchered lamb's skin will be used for binding Mary's book, the paper and the binding (wood pulp and lamb skin) combining in further remembrance of the flesh and the tree at the crucifixion. Roberts embroiders only a little on the grafting of Christian symbolism onto the pre-existing Jewish associations of lamb, to underscore Mary's holistic polemic. For the lapsing Léonie in Daughters of the House, by contrast, Christian connections with lamb are vestigial, the link only most tenuously there; she goes to Mass every Sunday with her husband and children because it was 'what you did'; at home afterwards she sips her apéritif 'while relishing the smell of roast lamb from the kitchen' (19).

Meat in general has less innocent resonances in Roberts' fiction, and is characterised very much in terms of its bodily origin. In The Book of Mrs Noah Jack's wife refuses to allow more death after the flood and will not agree to sacrifice a lamb (curiously recalling - or, biblically speaking, anticipating - the terms of Jesus' lesson on the lamb in The Wild Girl). Her stomach confirms her belief: the meat stew nauseates her 'as though it were boiled up from dead babies' (85). Thus strengthened and confirmed, and with a dream of the harmony of all living things, she separates from the others and takes to a vegetarian life. Later in the novel, The Correct Sibyl recalls being told to eat up her meat by the nuns: 'think of the starving millions who'd be glad of your leftover scraps of gristle and fat. Mortify your body. Spoon up the food that revolts you...' (102). The narrator, Mrs Noah, confesses that reading meat

29 Alice Thomas Ellis, in The Sin Eater, similarly plays upon lamb: paschal lamb; lamb of God; the saint's pet lamb, eaten by a neighbouring prince; and the faintly cannibalistic possibility of roasting a sheep called Virginia Woolf who wanders destructively through the garden.

30 The 'body knowledge' here recalls that of Anna Wulf or Martha Quest.
recipes used to be her form of pornography.\textsuperscript{31} The Re-Vision Sibyl begins to avoid butchers' shops, 'those white-tiled laboratories of death' with their blood smell, cruel hooks, 'sloppy piles of purple liver, dripping red hands fumbling for change in the till' and 'dishes of tripe like white knitting' (130). This last is a poetic image, defamiliarising, even enchanting, but it is also more; along with the hooks, the dripping hands, the reference to meat as 'corpses', peered over by 'terrible women', it evokes the spectacle of public torture and execution, the knitting a product of some Madame Defarge des animaux. Meat, in this book, is inseparable from death and corruption, the endorsed vegetarianism predicated on an empathetic connection with human flesh.

Vegetables themselves are permeated rather with emotional or interpersonal than public or cultural significance in Roberts' novels. Artichokes seem to hold a particular nostalgia for Roberts (see 'Une glossaire'\textsuperscript{32}); they appear briefly, eaten by Hattie and her lover by candlelight following her grief-breaking shopping and polishing, and again in The Book of Mrs Noah, fried in olive oil on the Ark, followed by a discussion of the sadist as gourmet (an idea played with and enlarged in the 'Angel's Wings' story in the novel).\textsuperscript{33} Tomatoes, too, are rendered personal in Daughters of the House, at least in their cooked and stuffed form - though it seems to be the stuffed quality that is important, Thérèse not only hating her puppy fat but bursting with grief and anger at her mother's terminal illness. Stripping the tomato plants is abandoned

\textsuperscript{31} Cf Life-Size, 35.

\textsuperscript{32} 'ARTICHAUTS: Artichokes. Big, fat and green, with closely packed pointed leaves. The inside ones are violet, almost transparent. We eat them, boiled, for supper, pulling off the leaves one by one and dipping them into hot cream before scraping them between our teeth. The heart is the best, mashed up in the cream. Grandpère eats them with vinaigrette.' See 'Une Glossaire/A Glossary' in During Mother's Absence (London: Virago 1993), 131-81.

\textsuperscript{33} This story owes something in flavour to Angela Carter. Perhaps the conceit about angels' wings is intended as a tribute.
by Léonie so as to accompany Thérèse to the cemetery, and tomatoes thus become metonymically associated with death, a connection repeated in the image of the dead rotting 'quietly, like the dropped fruit you found hidden under the leaves of the tomato plants' (107).

The preparation of some vegetables being a necessarily time-consuming business, extra hands may be drafted in to help, and Roberts constructs a web of social interaction around the 'hill of beans' which Rose and the two girls help Victorine to prepare around the kitchen table. The descriptions of topping and tailing or shelling the different varieties of beans are painterly - detailing the 'fresh green smell' of one sort, the 'silky inner case' of another and the pink speckled beans 'like tiny onyx eggs' - and sensuous, with evocations of the pleasure of trickling shelled beans between the fingers and the delicious ways in which they might be cooked (69-70). For Léonie the activity is not only pleasurable on account of the beans themselves, but because she can absorb the conversations of Rose and Victorine. Their talk is largely gossip, but it is hugely important, for it is by means of this food-handling dialogue that they rehearse, process, absorb and come to some kind of understanding of their lives:

While their fingers flew in and out of the earthy heap of beans Rose and Victorine talked. They described village life to each other in intricate detail. They passed it back and forth. They crawled across their chosen ground like detectives armed with magnifying glasses. They took any subject and made it manageable. They sucked it and licked it down to size. They chewed at it until, softened, it yielded, like blubber or leather, to their understanding. They went over it repeatedly until it weakened and gave in and became part of them. Tragedy, disaster; they moulded them into small, digestible portions. (70)

Léonie, silently listening, feels invisible and powerful because the women converse intimately as adults and she is thus witness to a discourse from which
she would normally be excluded. However, she also feels empowered because she, too, is able to increase her knowledge, her piecemeal understanding of the world, in particular those aspects of it that have previously been concealed from her. The food preparation and eating metaphor together give the impression of a nourishing and sustaining ambience, the repeated activities providing both the security of familiarity and the thrill of overheard gossip and digestible portions of adult knowledge.

A similarly enlightening process is associated with the gâteau à la peau de lait which Léonie helps Victorine make, punctuating the cake-making with questions about the bones found in the woods and about Germans and Jews. The cake, 'everyone's favourite' also crops up in 'Une Glossaire' under the entry for 'crème', but in the novel the juxtaposition with the story of the Jews spikes the appetizing description with sinister suggestion. When Léonie weighs the flour there is a full paragraph describing the scales; scales of course connote justice, and the little weights, like children 'herded into line', reinforce the implication of injustice. In case we miss the point, when Léonie asks why the Germans hated the Jews, Victorine balances the cake tin on the palm of her hand, frowning at it. In this context, Victorine's beating of the cream, slapping down of the cake tin, greasing it with rapid strokes and clattering it into the oven all somehow suggest, like background noise, the brutality of what had taken place. Even the name of the cake, with its evocation of making something out of skin, has an echo of Nazi atrocity.

Generally, cake has a special meaning in childhood, as suggested by the idyllic after-school tea in the garden that Helen recalls in The Visitation: tea with chocolate cake from Grodzinski's - the cake being so important that even the shop it comes from is remembered. But cake's associations can be unpleasant
too. Custard comes off particularly badly in Roberts' writing. A crumbling individual custard tart is one unappetising item in the paper bag of tea thrown down to Helen by her mother when they visit her godmother, and in Daughters of the House the slices of custard, 'wrinkled and curdy' like ageing skin, are lumped together with all the whiteness Léonie hates, reminding her of repression, sickness, death. None of the girls, incidentally, eats the custard. Léonie, feeling nauseous, and Thérèse are sent out to play; Helen opts only for the redcurrants and, like Thérèse after drinking the red wine, subsequently begins to menstruate.

Fruit is, not surprisingly, frequently associated with sexuality, and particularly female sexuality, as illustrated by the description of girls or young women as 'fruity', a 'peach', or the colloquialism for loss of virginity: 'losing your cherry'. Roberts draws several times on this connection, using, for example, the glaring symbolism of an apple in The Visitation to precipitate a rewriting of the Fall. This rewriting culminates in a recognition of the desire for a prelapsarian paradise, which in the event turns out to be pre-oedipal. A more literal and more sensually metonymic use of fruit occurs when Helen and Robert eat the strawberries (those genitally-suggestive fruits), which she had forgotten to produce for lunch, as a prelude to their gently going to bed, Helen

34 According to Farb and Armeilagos climatic and cultural reasons suggest that the fruit of the tree of knowledge was far more likely to be an apricot than an apple.

35 See The Visitation, 171-2. Helen's brother, the Adam figure, the fallen masculine self divided from her and needing to be revisited, is rather charmingly called Felix. Their relationship, leading to separation and Helen's ultimate reintegration, is a sort of rewritten felix culpa.

36 So much so that Hardy uses strawberry-eating to simulate rape:
D'Urbeville...held it by the stem to her mouth.

'No - no!' she said quickly, putting her fingers between his hand and her lips. 'I would rather take it in my own hand,'

'Nonsense!' he insisted; and in a slight distress she parted her lips and took it in.

Thomas Hardy, Tess of the d'Urbervilles (Ware: Wordsworth Editions 1993) (1891), 32.
feeling fed by Robert, 'nourished, regenerated...fertilised (144).

Grapes alone, curiously enough, seem to be reserved for rather more negative associations. Twice, in *A Piece of the Night*, grapes are connected with repression. On Julie’s mother Claire’s birthday, Oncle Michel stands on a chair to make a speech, throwing grapes joyfully in the air, but he is quelled by Monsieur Fanchot’s disapproval. Her grandfather disciplines Julie too, sending her to her room for behaving badly at the meal table. She is visited there by her mother who remonstrates with her for not behaving perfectly, consolingly feeding grapes into her mouth as she does so, thereby depriving Julie of both voice and volition. Julie, who must stay in her room while the others go out, wants to spit the grapes out, but she colludes with her own repression by chewing them, for she does not want to make a mess and upset her mother.37

The burden of my discussion of these items of food has been to show that certain foods carry with them a set of generally-established cultural and religious associations and significances and that a writer may impress her own. I should add, however, that these associations may be mutable, that, for example, foods or combinations of foods take certain characteristics according to special occasions. The meat pies, sausages, bacon and ham which the nuns eat for breakfast on Sister Veronica’s ‘wedding day’ in *A Piece of the Night* are special by virtue of the fact that the normal diet of the nuns is frugal and that this occasion is one of celebration. Similarly, with Christmas food: in the Milk household of *In the Red Kitchen*, the smells of boiling pudding cloth and hot sweet punch are inseparable in Flora’s memory from the cheerful holly, ivy.

37 This invokes, perhaps, the ‘grapes of wrath’, as expressed in the Battle Hymn of the Republic, and Steinbeck’s book title. Grapes also recall Keats’s ambiguous fruit. Less identifiable associations also suggest the passive acceptance of pleasure (‘peel me a grape’) and the effect of whole grapes as the antithesis of that of wine. There may be echoes here also of the two characters in these incidents being crushed.
candles and red berries and the wafting smell of pine from the tree. Late in the afternoon, tea consists of 'slices of boiled ham, bread and butter and watercress, custard tarts sprinkled with nutmeg, fruit cake covered with marzipan stuck with sugar roses, mince pies' (33). At Flora's wedding, along with fresh oysters and crab patties, watercress and boiled gammon make their appearance again, cheesecakes closely replace the custard tarts, and the plates, a synecdochial reminder of the Christmas decorations, have ivy leaves around the rims.  

The luxury, in this relatively poor household, results both from the comparative richness of the ingredients and from the inclusion together of dishes which would normally be served as alternatives.

Class is a major factor in determining the social significances of food as well as defining taste. Flora and her sister happily inhale the smell of frying bacon on their way to 'a slap-up dinner' with Mr Potson at the Hannibal Dining Rooms. Rosina eats kidneys and peas and Flora tripe and onions ('Rosina says ladies never eat onions but I don’t care.' (59)), followed by apple dumpling with

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38 In the nineteenth century, oysters were the food of the poor. For a lively decoding of some of the sexual associations of oysters (in Anna Karenina), see Paul Schmidt, 'What do Oysters Mean?', Antaeus, 68 (March 1992), 105-11.

39 Food for special occasions is generally considerably richer than that of everyday consumption. It is also, as Visser points out, frequently dark in colour: 'There is a tendency...to associate very dark food, such as coffee, chocolate, truffles, caviar, and cépes, as well as plum cake, with excitement and luxury. We feel obscurely that such strange dark stuff must be meaningful and ancient' (30). The cook, in The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover, offers a slightly different explanation: 'I charge a lot for anything black: grapes, olives, blackcurrants. People like to remind themselves of death. It's like consuming death, like saying "Death, I'm eating you". Black truffles are the most expensive'.

40 In his introduction to All Manners of Food, Stephen Mennell stresses that taste is not innate but acquired, sometimes in the face of initial revulsion (coffee, caviar, cigarettes). This is an anthropological observation, not a psychological one; approved responses are determined by particular groups, rather than the individual, and include amongst others hunger, pleasure, disgust and (see also Farb and Armelagous) intoxication. According to Lévi-Strauss, methods of cooking are equally tribally determined (an observation borne out, perhaps in class and cultural differences between the 'roast beef of old England' and boiled beef and carrots). Stephen Mennell, All Manners of Food, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Raw and the Cooked. Farb and Armelagous draw attention also to the obvious but not always acknowledged importance of adaptation to local conditions and availability. The rich cream and butter cited by Michèle Roberts as luxuriously plentiful in the Normandy diet is a case in point.
custard and suet roll with butter and sugar. These are good, simple, sustaining meals for working people, redolent of cheerful bluntness and common sense. Flora scathingly contrasts such food with the middle class dinner party fare her patrons will eat: '...while Minny's picking her way through some dainty mess in a French sauce we'll be feasting on a nice bit of boiled beef and carrots' (74). This last is an archetypal English working class dish, as are the suet puddings, steak and kidney pies, mutton chops and treacle tarts favoured by Flora's husband, George (though it must be said not in fact eaten with any regularity by the poorer working class whose diet was meagre and monotonous). Poor people must eat cheap, readily available foods and those who work physically be well supplied with fuel. Hence the popularity of suet and batter puddings, pies, stews, potatoes and bread, which thus become tagged to a great extent as working class.41 When Ben and his friends eat toast and dripping and drink Camp coffee for breakfast in A Piece of the Night, it is not clear whether they are simply poor, or are playacting, deliberately eating a working class breakfast because it is International Labour Day.

For the most part, though, Roberts infuses such food with Englishness as much as with class consciousness. When Julie Fanchot compares the sauces, stocks, wines, eggs and cream of her childhood with the food she experienced at Oxford - pork pies, fish and chips, bread pudding, haddock, greasy sausages - it is the high-minded contempt for food of the Oxford scholars that she remarks.42 The contrast is not so much of class as of nationality and ethnicity,

41 Exclusivity depends on rarity and expense, but also on lack of necessity. Thus the most 'upper class' foods will be the most difficult or expensive to get hold of and will be valued precisely for this reason, especially if they are quite inessential to a healthy diet and therefore truly luxuries.

42 This hardly applies to high table, of course. Virginia Woolf famously and acutely contrasts privileged and penurious academic eating to signal educational (gender) advantage in A Room of One's Own (London: Hogarth Press, 1929).
the richness and complexity of French rural middle class gastronomy compared with English intellectual and institutionalised asceticism. Later in the same novel, however, when Julie returns to England, her thoughts are of eggs and bacon and hot tea: home.

The sense of being at home in a culinary tradition is perhaps the most potent aspect of both class and nationality or ethnicity. It is certainly of fundamental importance to children, an explanation, perhaps, for the nostalgic persistence of the remembered food of childhood (Flora Milk’s Christmases, Julie Fanchot’s tartines, Helen’s tea in the garden). The insecurity and divided loyalties of a bilingual, two-countries upbringing are acutely illustrated in Daughters of the House, in the conversation between Léonie, Victorine and Thérèse over the making of potato soup, gougeres and a cake for supper:

French cakes, Léonie mused: aren’t as good when they come out of the oven as English cakes. No currants and raisins. No icing. No hundreds and thousands or anything.

French cooking, Victorine asserted: is the best in the world! Her blue eyes narrowed to marble chips. She pushed back a long fair curl with one hand. She whacked butter and eggs with her wooden spoon.

Suet pudding with slabs of butter and white sugar, Léonie recited: fried eggs and bacon, fish and chips, kippers, marmalade, proper tea, Eccles cakes.

Thérèse flicked a piece of muddy potato peel across the table. Everyone knows that English food is terrible, she stated: soggy boiled vegetables in white sauce, overcooked meat, I don't know how your mother could stand it, having to go and eat stuff like that. She stopped being really French, everyone says so. The English are just heathens, aren't they Victorine?

Heathens was a word Victorine applied to foreigners. Who were not Catholics. The people in the famous circus, for example, that she was always telling them about.

Léonie frowned very hard so that she would not cry. She concentrated on her potato, gouging out its deep black eye with the
serrated tip of her knife. The potato was called Thérèse. (46-7)

The skill of young girls in applying verbal torture is keenly caught. Léonie’s dreamy speculation, her thoughtful balancing of the one tradition against the other and her dispassionate but judgemental rebuttal of Victorine’s sweeping statement (‘proper tea’) are all nullified by Thérèse’s dismissal of English cuisine, the attack on Madeleine and the imputation that as part English - and thus guilty by association with ‘terrible’ English food, ‘stuff’ - Léonie is simply beyond the pale.

Food, clearly, is a signifier of belonging. Though Léonie might feel herself to be part of two traditions, she is made to feel she belongs to neither, for she is not French (her mother having ‘stopped being really French’) and English cooking is too awful to associate with. When the conversation turns to outsiders - gypsies and then Jews and the old anti-semitic superstitions about blood-drinking - Thérèse announces that Jews were responsible for the crucifixion, that they were ‘as bad as the communists’ and must be prayed for. As Léonie licks cake mixture from the bowl she remembers going to tea with Jewish schoolfriends and eating their ‘delicious food. Bagels with cream cheese and smoked salmon, pumpernickel bread, gherkins, rollmops, challah bread, pastries rich with poppyseed and cinnamon’ (48). Silenced by Thérèse’s assertions, she denies this memory for its connection with her English self and with a despised ethnicity - thus adding her personal betrayal to the history of the Jews.  

Léonie’s denial and self-denial deprive her of richness. The need to be unequivocally included in the family (arguably to oust Thérèse), to be part of the

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44 It is after this conversation that Léonie’s mother tells her about the hidden wine, initiating the metonymy which is to trade Jews for wine.
village, to be French, impels her to deny membership of a larger community, and, indeed, to deny the knowledge offered by the voices of the dead Jews in the back bedroom, until Thérèse’s return forces her to re-examine the past. The irony is that she cannot become wholly French, for she is who she is. As a child even her palpable enjoyment of eating is impaired by her knowledge that it is English eating: ‘She’d never caught the French trick of eating slowly, relishing the food. She gobbled’ (62). When Thérèse returns and Léonie claims to cook ‘just like Victoïne’, Thérèse muses to herself, ‘You think you’ve laid a real French supper... but you haven’t got it quite right. I know that. But you don’t. You grew up in England, don’t forget’ (15).

If the general social significances and associations attached to food are culturally specific and to a large extent ‘understood’, then conventions, taboos and manners surrounding them carry even more significance. When Thérèse doesn’t eat much of the leek and potato soup, roast veal and petits pois that Léonie has cooked, claiming she is used to eating simply, Léonie, ‘her gifts rejected, her control waved aside’, points at Thérèse with her fork, commenting on how thin Thérèse has become, and asking if she is ill. While pointing a fork is not quite as nakedly aggressive as pointing a knife, it is certainly threatening, and invariably considered to be bad manners.45 The fork here recalls Léonie’s toying murderously with the cooking knives while waiting for Thérèse to arrive,

45 Visser makes a great point of the fact that meal times are so hedged around with etiquette precisely because of their potential violence. The shape and sharpness of knives and their disposition at table have been finely developed over a very long period so as to minimise their threat - which is also why forks were developed - so that to point one at someone is not only potentially life-threatening, but transgresses the mass rules of custom. Forks share the prohibition on pointing; they may be less threatening, but incorporate the ‘rudeness’ of having been in our mouths. Visser also cites a Freudian analysis of the knife, fork and spoon which gives the fork the role of male child, resentful of the knife and jealous of the spoon. (This analysis, applied to the incident in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and her Lover when Albert Spica sticks a fork into the face of a young women, adds plausibly to the view of him as an oedipal, ‘cannibalistic’ child). See Visser, 98, 184, 186, 194 and passim.
her mind 'bristl[ing] with knives' (3); her pointing with a fork is aggressive and accusatory, but she nevertheless makes some concession to the proprieties.

It must be remembered that Léonie and Thérèse are _jeunes filles bien élevées_. They may play with their left-over bread at the table, but they obey the bourgeois rules, talking to each other in low voices, never interrupting, speaking when they are spoken to and remaining sitting until dismissed. They chafe at the restrictions and the conventions, fantasising about the freedoms she will indulge in when she grows up: she will eat fast, read at the table, talk loudly and lengthily, lay the table 'her own way, not the French way, and no one would reprove her for putting the forks and spoons face up' (71). There are two pertinent things about this fantasy from the point of view of my discussion. As with the accepted symbolism or public associations of certain foods, so here the humour and poignancy of the fantasy depend upon the reader's appreciation of the conventions, and on the making explicit of rules of behaviour which we are inclined to take for granted. The restrictions under which Léonie suffers draw attention to differing conventions in table-laying and to a locally fierce adherence to these conventions. Seen from the child's point of view, the rules

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46 Dinner-time conversation is of particular importance in Western culture, which has seen a progressive imposition of spatial boundaries at table, with the use of individual plates, upright chairs and rules prohibiting touching, such as keeping the elbows tucked in and not taking items from others' plates. Conversation has thus become the sole channel for expressions of communality and bonding, and hence is hedged round with protocols concerning content, vocabulary, precedence etc. - including the participation or otherwise of children. See Visser 269.

47 There is an autobiographical note here too, as Roberts recalls playing with bread and whispering with her sisters while waiting to be allowed into the garden, and her own English father being disapproved of by his in-laws for 'laying the table with the spoons facing the wrong way round', drinking his wine too quickly and eating butter on his bread at meals other than breakfast. See 'Une Glossaire' 138, 163-4. The use of 'wrong' is revealing; it points up the potency of the conventions, and suggests that they are a manifestation of quite primitive - and territorial - feelings. Alice Thomas Ellis similarly attributes territorial practices to the cook: 'The kitchen was full of women doing things the wrong way', _The Sin Eater_ (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1986), 170; 'Barbara or Kate had left the washing-up brush on the wrong side of the sink and the teapot on the draining board instead of the shelf above the fridge.' _The Birds of the Air_ (London: Penguin 1983), 68 (my emphases).
are restrictive, even oppressive, and this brings me to the second point: instilling a code of manners, especially where the quiet behaviour of young women is concerned, is invariably a means of social control.48

Margaret Visser suggests that rituals are important for practical reasons, such as cleanliness and neatness, but that conformity is also important for reasons of comfort and safety, conformity being less stressful than resisting the mores of a group. Generally accepted manners and customs facilitate socialisation and solidarity, and promote social order as when, for example, hunger becomes related to regular meal times; it may seem ‘natural’ to feel hungry at certain times, but Visser stresses that this is a product of culture, not of instinct. She also claims that food prepared and eaten with familiar rituals helps to reduce stress on occasions of drama or transition, such as weddings and funerals. On such occasions we tend to be very conservative, though she points out that we can be conservative on a small scale too, eating the same every day for breakfast ‘after the little daily trauma of getting out of bed’.49

Good manners, then, ostensibly function to facilitate social ease and order, and are ideally based on awareness of and consideration for others and the notion that if we share the same standards - as with rituals, eating customs and broad food preferences - we feel secure. Manners are highly conventionalised, as anthropology, etiquette manuals and almost every travel book testify, and nowhere is this more true than in relation to food and eating.

48 Hence Molly Keane’s title, Good Behaviour. Polite (exclusive) manners are characterised by the difficulty of what is attempted (sitting very upright, balancing food on the back of forks) and the apparent effortlessness with which it is achieved - effortlessness which actually requires considerable physical control.

49 See Visser 44. Several of Alice Thomas Ellis’s characters deprecate the dreary conservatism of English weddings, inevitably featuring smoked salmon and warm champagne. See The Clothes in the Wardrobe, The Skeleton in the Cupboard, and The Fly in the Ointment.
The conventions, however, work two ways: they may certainly facilitate, ease and comfort, but certain rituals or the requirements of polite good manners are also designed to exclude and to put or keep people in their place - as both *Good Behaviour* and *Daughters of the House* illustrate. In the light of Foucauldian ideas about discourse, I would suggest that the internalised rules of eating behaviour function as an efficient means of maintaining the status quo. By and large, of course, this means the confirmation of an inferior status for women - and still more so for children - but the rules also reinforce other hierarchies, to do with family, community, class and privilege. And, which is perhaps more to the point where Foucault is concerned, the rules and their operation give rise both to intricate manoeuvring and manipulation within the social codes and to assault from without, in order to shift the balance of power.

Power is exercised, so Foucault maintains, in a complex network of 'micro-powers', through the various discourses and discursive practices that manifest themselves in every aspect of social life - food, eating and the complex codes of good manners being no exception. Just as we occupy different positions in different discourses, so the power invested in the numerous activities surrounding cooking and eating is not monolithic, something to be acquired or overthrown, but multiple and ubiquitous, every struggle being both localised and forming part of an interconnecting network. Thus every interaction involves the possibility of a shift in overall power relations, a danger for the unwary and an opening for the opportunist. When both (or all) parties are aware of the struggle for supremacy, it may become a kind of linguistic game, participants manipulating the particular discourse in attempts to gain advantage. There is an element of this in some of Roberts' writing - baiting the Gaffer in

50 *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*. (See footnote 65, Chapter IV).
Mrs Noah, the verbal skirmishes of Léonie and Thérèse - but Alice Thomas Ellis brings such struggles centre-stage. In some cases - often where real appropriation of power occurs - the manoeuvres are tacit, covert, unrecognizable except to the initiate. Rose's sabotaging supper in The Sin Eater is a good example, as are the methods suggested by her characters: tigers' whiskers by Mrs Munro in The Skeleton in the Cupboard (89) and various methods of poisoning by Aunt Irene in The 27th Kingdom (104). The power gained in such cases (or even, sometimes, by imagining them) provides a source of self-satisfaction not always easy to categorise.

Power is not merely oppressive, imposed from above, a means of maintaining a fixed and unthreatening social order, but positive, claims Foucault, since 'it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth', and is inseparable from knowledge. Power and knowledge are mutually necessary, not only for the wielder of power or dominant party, but for whoever subverts power (and thus claims it). The rest of this chapter will consider how the exercise of power is encoded and challenged in the rituals and manners surrounding cooking and eating, and for this purpose will look at novels by Alice Thomas Ellis.

Eating behaviour, says Visser, is 'guarded, enculturated, ritualized, and even taboo-laden' (341); she also notes that research indicates that most family

51 The tea-time battle between Cecily and Gwendolin in The Importance of Being Ernest is perhaps the prime example, and surely underpins the exchanges of Rose and Angela, in Alice Thomas Ellis's The Sin Eater - and many other coded struggles for supremacy.

52 Visser points out that cooking, like sex, has traditionally been considered a mode through which women can publicly express their feelings, rewarding the husband with a special dish, or producing a late or unpleasant dinner as a punishment. Poison, she says, is a peculiarly female weapon in all folklore, whereas men have knives, emblems of the private and the public respectively.

53 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 194. For a lucid and detailed account of Foucault's thinking, see also Alan Sheridan, Michel Foucault: the Will to Truth (London: Tavistock 1980).
quarrels happen over meals. Both statements firmly connect eating behaviour with strife. Many of Ellis’s characters openly exploit food and eating rituals for aggressive purposes, playing a behaviour ‘game’ with its own rules and boundaries, manipulating the fine social distinctions and conventions of English culture. Class, snobbery, ethnicity and nationality are specifically, sometimes quirkily, invoked, as are questions of duty, responsibility and morality, especially in relation to the status of being a guest or being a hostess or cook. The rituals and requirements of different meals or occasions (breakfast, tea, dinner parties, picnics, weddings) offer opportunities for numerous different challenges to, enforcements or transgressions of what might in the most general sense be called the social order, and specifically to the prevailing values of late twentieth century middle-class Britain.

The ‘understood’ quality of manners is of tremendous importance to both their operation (including their hidden functions) and their subversion. If it is, for example, a solecism to drink wine with the soup or eat with fingers, everyone must share the acceptance that this is so, both for the application of the rule and for its breaking. Embarrassment thus becomes significant both as a disciplinary tool and as a weapon of the rebellious. Ellis’s game-players, who frequently use impeccably good manners as a front for being diabolical, seek to create embarrassment in their victims, out-doing them by a fastidious conformity to accepted etiquette, by parody - or by flagrant transgression, reinventing the rules for themselves and carrying this off by sheer force of personality.54

Rose, in Ellis’s first novel The Sin Eater, is the most obvious - and the

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54 The one taboo they invariably break is the injunction not to behave oddly or draw attention to another’s oddity (a solicitude eccentrically evident in the many versions of the etiquette story of a host or hostess who drinks the water in the finger bowl so as not to embarrass a guest who had ignorantly done so).
most devious - example of such social and cultural manipulation. She is

...greedy and clever and cynical, qualities essential to a good cook, and
sometimes she used her ingredients like a witch, as social comment, to
do mischief, or as a benefice (17)

This is a revealing sentence, since it offers an explanation for Ellis’s use of
Rose’s game-playing (social comment, wicked and satirical fun, endorsement of
certain values or relationships, such as a mother’s care for her children). Apart
from the food itself, Rose’s chief weapons are theatricality and parody.
She prepares ‘prawn cocktail, steak and pretty little chips, and an antipodean
thing called a pavlova’ (102) for a Midlands client of her husband’s, a ‘nice man’
who doesn’t realise he is being parodied and mocked; in Ermyn’s eyes at least
this counts against Rose. Worse still, perhaps, Rose gives boiled eggs to Cousin
Teddy when his head is bandaged following an accident, so that he appears,
metonymically, to be cracking his own skull. Most ambitiously, she organises a
faintly anachronistic plebeian post-cricket-match tea complete with sandwich
spread, meat and fish paste, sausage rolls, crisps, ‘assorted’ biscuits, swiss rolls
and tea from an urn, and only regrets her action when the ‘gentry’ arrive, for
whom she would prefer to have provided:

55 Cf Aunt Irene: ‘...she was an artist...she needed an appreciative audience, and since her
skill lay in cooking and housekeeping people weren’t merely her audience but in a sense also her raw
materials, to be disposed and manipulated as the fancy took her’, The 27th Kingdom, 14.

56 Ellis’s use of food, though in a manner quite unlike Roberts’s, is potent. The pre-cricket-
match dinner, a planned sabotage, achieves its effect both through a linguistic voodoo (‘out for a
duck’) and a disingenuously lavish meal, with excessively rich ingredients: ‘While there were many
ways of killing a cat, the easiest was to choke it to death with cream: it involved no coercion, no
show of force, and even looked like kindness.’ The Sin Eater, 99.

57 Ermyn notes Rose ‘staging elevenses’ and identifies the ‘theatricality’ of her housekeeping,
surmising that ‘Rose was pretending, but Rose did it so well’. She also concludes, ‘Rose was not a
philanthropist’, 94-6.
an Edwardian tea on the lawn, white cloths and the Crown Derby to frighten Angela, or a thirties tea on the terrace with a cake disguised as a tiny cricket pitch and little rolled sandwiches with flags describing their contents. They would never see the point of the tea in the pavilion.

Her motives are hinted at: an outsider by virtue of her Catholicism, her Irishness and the finer gradations of class (she is the daughter of a vet), she confirms her exclusion from and sense of superiority to the secular and class-bound English (Ermyn condemns her for 'superbia') by, witch-like, 'making' people behave like caricatures of themselves, so exacerbating and illuminating the most unlovely aspects of English manners. The negative, repressive, self-selecting, exclusive effects of such manners are thus highlighted, as is the potential for their subversion.

Rose's chief individual victim is the odious, middle class, self-serving Angela, whom she contrives to mock, anger or discomfort on every eating occasion. On Angela's and Henry's arrival Rose provides tea in slightly vulgar 'drawing room' cups, together with cucumber sandwiches: 'Angela gobbled up several, unaware of malice: they suited her style to perfection' (30). The following morning's breakfast sees the use of thick white china, provoking Angela because of Rose's perversity and because they put her in mind of a 'lorryman's caff'. Such instances are accompanied by a constant but subtle baiting, about class, religion, nationality, permissiveness - general subjects, but each of which pertains directly to Angela, who in the end is reduced to reacting

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As with Lydia in Unexplained Laughter, the results of her action seem to be more important than motive, suggesting the detached comment of a comedian - or novelist - of manners. Peter Conradi calls Ellis a 'dangerous secret 'dandy'-wit', in the tradition of Wilde, Saki, Waugh and Muriel Spark. Peter Conradi, 'Alice Thomas Ellis: Kinder Kirche und Küche' in Sarah Sceats and Gail Cunningham, eds., Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century (Harlow: Longman, 1996).
with childish exaggeration, as she feels her command of the situation slip:

‘What do you do for an encore?’ asked Angela getting up in a flounce. ‘I can smell something burning. Are we ever going to eat? I’m starving, and you all just sit here talking nonsense.’ (117)

Angela is uneasily aware that Rose is goading her, but does not take full measure of the parody and pastiche, nor, with her limited understanding, does she have the wit to play Rose at her own game. The purchase Rose achieves, and her unfailing ability to manipulate Angela’s responses, reside precisely in this gap; Rose’s detachment permits her to see and play upon English middle-class mores without herself feeling controlled by them, whereas Angela is fully defined by her class-bound lifestyle. Rose’s combination of wit and unscrupulousness nevertheless require, theatrical as she is, an audience that has some grasp of what she is up to (a condition which applies equally to Ellis’s readership). The young visitors ‘getting out of hand’ in the pavilion, for example, are ‘beyond Rose’s competence, insulated by naïveté, safe from all her wit’ (158); they do not understand the nuances of ritual, tradition or expected behaviour, and so cannot read the cricket tea as we and Ermyn and one or two of the older middle-class visitors do. The common ground here is missing; these young people are unembarrassable.

At the other extreme, Phyllis, the family retainer, and Rose engage in a game which they both understand, a contest indeed in which Phyllis ‘tacitly agreed the boundaries’ (56). The struggle for power here is perhaps more predictable, though it is cloaked in the complexities of Welsh resistance to the English conventions of domestic employment. Phyllis devotes her energies to diverting as much good and luxurious food as possible from the Captain’s
kitchen into the mouth of her unlovely grandson, Gomer. Rose steers a course between preventing this and fatally insulting the housekeeper. Phyllis, though quick to take offence, is impervious to embarrassment, and Rose is notably both cruder and less successful here than in her battle with Angela. When Phyllis defensively offers Gomer more bread at breakfast, for example, Rose politely suggests, ‘More cake?’ (55); such sarcasm merely results in Phyllis issuing the ‘obscure warning’ that Gomer must be kept fed. So long as Phyllis remains useful and Gomer is not too dreadful, it is implied, the contest will continue evenly, the more so because Rose and Phyllis are kindred spirits, evidenced by their laughing together in the kitchen at night ‘at a joke they in no way shared’ (175), and by Rose’s retaliation in kind when she takes the hidden teabread Phyllis had made for Gomer and offers it around (187).

Mutual game-playing is a common form of middle- or upper-class power struggle, acted out through the medium of ‘good’ behaviour or polite manners, and it is apparent in several of Ellis’s novels. Lydia does it, in *Unexplained Laughter*, as does Lili in the trilogy, in which Mrs Munro is also tempted to; Kyril, in *The 27th Kingdom*, is annoyed that Valentine will *not* play. In the same novel, Aunt Irene and her appallingly genteel char Mrs Mason engage in a sort of running warfare, Mrs Mason, like Angela, being at pains to demonstrate that she is middle class (impoverished maybe, but ‘not designed by nature or

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59 It is also tellingly apparent in *Good Behaviour*. It does not feature very much in the writing of Roberts or Lessing or Carter, however, probably because they do not much focus on the upper-middle-classes - nor, indeed, write comedy of manners.

60 Lydia baits Betty because of her homeliness, vegetarianism and humility. But part of Lydia’s game is also *not* to play: when Dr Wyn invites her to show off to April, ‘she, as it were, took her personality, folded it up and sat on it’ (*Unexplained Laughter*, 57). Lilli’s whole life is revealed in *The Fly in the Ointment* to be a delicate balancing act of manipulation, challenge and transgression, while Mrs Munro reveals her unexpressed desires to shock Syl’s oversweet girlfriends, and vicariously enjoys Lilli’s outrageousness in their shared drinking sessions. Valentine is as immune from Kyril as the young visitors are from Rose: ‘It looked as though Valentine wasn’t going to play his game, didn’t know the rules - didn’t even know there was a game’ (*The 27th Kingdom*, 28).
nurture to be a char' (16)), and Aunt Irene that she is above class (though 'she had foreign blood and her distant connections were possibly quite extraordinarily grand' (30)):

Mrs Mason was having a little snack when they got back home. She had put a lace tray cloth on the end of the oaken kitchen table and chosen a Spode plate and matching cup and saucer to place her biscuit on and drink her tea from. She behaved with grotesque politeness, putting down her biscuit after each nibble and her cup after each sip and folding her hands in her lap like a child pretending to eat and drink.

Aunt Irene felt like pulling out the tray cloth and jumping on it. She ate because she liked eating, not as a demonstration of manners: sometimes she put her elbows on the table and waved her fork to emphasise a point. Now she took a biscuit and bit it with her right-hand teeth, keeping her mouth open and causing crumbs. (35)

Even the language used to represent Mrs Mason’s actions is genteel: the ‘oaken’ table and ‘placing’ of her ‘little snack’ and the fact that she ‘nibbles’ and ‘sips’, while Aunt Irene is described in much more robust terms. The battle represented here is between two displaced women whose relationship is hardly at all defined by the respective roles of employer and domestic help. Mrs Mason loses no opportunity to inconvenience or annoy Aunt Irene or enhance her own position (telling the tax man she is Aunt Irene’s ‘housekeeper’, for example), just as Aunt Irene does everything she can to distance herself from Mrs Mason, such as deciding to cook a daube rather than cold food for her party, because Mrs Mason has suggested ‘a cold table’ (“Cold table” indeed! It sounded so hideously refineed’ (98)).

What underpins these manoeuvres is a lively sense of class, or of ‘caste’, as Ellis puts it in relation to Angela. It is this sense, of course, that Rose in The Sin Eater is set deliberately to offend:
I expect he [Michael] had rickets. So many upper-middle-class kiddies did, because their nannies fed them on rice pudding and boiled cod. (51)

Part of what Ellis is drawing attention to is a singular lack of awareness displayed in upper-middle-class manners, the mindlessly arrogant assumptions that allow a young girl visitor to demand, ‘Well, I want something to eat....Where’s the little man with the goodies?’ (85), or an Angela to claim complacently, ‘I think it’s marvellous how class distinctions have completely gone’ (107). Such attitudes bespeak a smug and self-deceiving perception of social structures as fundamentally unchanging. Angela’s mother can play at slumming by eating jellied eels at a street party without losing any of her own social prestige, because of a profound confidence that an increase in equality will not require her to relinquish anything of her own privilege and position.

In the same way, Angela is certain that there is a special, ‘proper’ way to treat servants: ‘Angela wondered if there was any tactful way she could explain to Rose how not to speak to servants. That was the trouble with people like Rose. They never quite learned how to behave’ (140). Angela’s attitude is vaguely, and complacently, liberal-paternalistic: ‘My Mrs T....hardly ever misses a day. She’s marvellous with the children and they adore her,’ and ‘Phyllis wouldn’t stay here if she wasn’t devoted....She’s been with Father so long’ (31). These

61 Ellis particularly mocks people who pretend to ignore class divisions. In The Other Side of the Fire, for example, Claudia, described as being of ‘that brief generation which hesitated to display its prejudices openly’, is shocked by Evvie’s calling the vet common, though, claims Evvie, ‘Only because you think it’s common to say common’ (54). When Claudia meets the vet, who both asks ‘What’s your poison?’ and passes a comment about the dog which implies that ‘any female creature displaying errant behaviour stood simply in need of a good fuck’, she decides mentally that he is ‘indubitably common’ and takes care to avoid contact with his polluting fingers as he hands her a drink (143).

62 She is a sort of inverse May Quest; Mrs Quest cannot afford to slum because of her fundamental insecurity (despite the bigotry) and because, in terms of the white population, she is poor.
are formulaic statements which reinforce a set of received views; with a
perception of social structures and power relations as static, it is easy enough to
conform to socially-determined precepts and actions which reinforce the status
quo. It is only at Rose’s rule-breaking eating occasions that conventions cease
to protect, and Angela’s class-bound behaviour slips, most notably in a very
hungover state at breakfast when, forgetting to maintain her distance, she
squashes Gomer, ‘as tiredly cutting as if he’d been one of themselves’ (134).

A one-sided distance is essential to the maintenance of class distinctions,
so that if the upper classes condescend to socialise, the lower orders must
nevertheless know their place. An appreciation of this attitude is apparent in
Rose’s plan to break with the tradition of an exclusive pre-cricket match lunch:

Jack and Gomer should join them and they’d eat in the kitchen, and as
lunch was a more formal meal than breakfast they’d have it standing up
to prevent any awkwardness. It would seem natural and democratic, and
Angela would loathe it. (141)

Like her apparently arbitrary dinner-time sabotaging of the home team, Rose’s
lunch-time attack on class barriers can be interpreted in the light of her cooking,
used for ‘social comment, to do mischief, or as a benefice’ (17). Not only does
this lunch antagonise Angela, it also reveals the pettiness, falsity and sheer
stupidity of class-bound manners. Jack and Gomer, smartly dressed in their
whites and aware of the special occasion but nevertheless quite comfortable,
are blithely impervious to both Angela’s acid observations and Michael’s

63 ‘Upper-class people have always tended to feel that they could treat the lower classes to
very intimate views of their physical selves....masters and mistresses might be unembarrassed to be
naked in front of the servants, for instance, or to have them witness excretion or copulation;
embarrassment, being a sign of consideration, regulated behaviour only before one’s equals or
betters.’ (Visser, 320)
patronising efforts to be sociable. Again, a failure to 'read' the conventions renders them ineffective (though not, of course, for the reader, who is led by the narrator to see the faults and absurdities of all concerned).

Clearly there are class battles going on in Ellis's writing, but they are by no means clear-cut. It is often her working class characters, and specifically cleaning women, who are the most perceptive and full of sense - and who are equally the most robust cooks. The watchful Phyllis, diligent dispenser of pastry, corned beef, bacon, eggs, fat tomatoes, bread and cakes for her son and grandson, is the first to identify Michael's relationship with Gomer. In The 27th Kingdom, Mrs O'Connor, who makes ferociously strong restorative tea, efficiently doses the Major's DTs with concentrated orange juice, recommends hangover remedies and recognises Aunt Irene's horsemeat stew with a down-to-earth common sense and generosity, is also the first person to perceive and revere Valentine's miraculous powers. Edith, in The Other Side of the Fire, who despises Claudia's purposeless lifestyle and fancy food, and provides for a husband who demands traditional working class food (three meals a day, all prompt and all with meat, not forgetting Yorkshire pudding on Sundays), is the only person to realise that something is going on between Claudia and Philip. Her perception is powerful; Claudia reacts by cooking 'bangers and mash' for lunch, as though metonymically influenced for the moment by Edith's plain cooking and ungarnished self.

The 'immaculate white' of Gomer's and Jack's clothes contrasts with the hot colours of the pink ham, crimson beetroot, and scarlet tablecloth, a contrast which suggests the red and white of battle (blood and bandages and the Red Cross), indicating not only the match and its injuries but also the more subtle conflicts taking place within the household.

There is undoubtedly an element of stereotyping in Ellis's working class women - the clever char with a heart of gold - but this is offset by instances of criminal behaviour, malice, stupidity, appalling taste, involvement in the game-playing, and the fact that nobody is immune from Ellis's satirical and ultimately misanthropic eye.
Edith displays the same hearty contempt for Claudia that almost all Ellis's working class characters express for the ineffectual middle classes, and she is triumphantly delighted to see a fall in standards when Claudia buys a frozen shepherd's pie: '[Edith] grinned with the contempt of a whore who sees the vicar's wife plying for trade on the same street corner as herself' (100). There is a kind of complicity, however, between these working class characters and the more raffish and rebellious middle-class women: Rose and Phyllis in The Sin Eater, Aunt Irene and Mrs O'Connor in The 27th Kingdom, Mrs Munro and Mrs Raffald in Skeleton in the Cupboard. Mrs Raffald, like Mrs O'Connor, is capable and kindly, and looks after Mrs Munro, reminding her not to do too much and bringing her breakfast in bed with aspirins and reassurances when Mrs Munro is hungover, weary and stressed as her son's wedding becomes imminent. Mrs Raffald is also the one person with the good sense to send Syl off to the pub when the wedding is cancelled. There is a singular equality in the relationship between Mrs Munro and Mrs Raffald, though it has taken time for Mrs Munro to lose her acquired snobbery, appreciate 'the middle-aged quality of common sense' and recognise the value in the fact that Mrs Raffald 'was solid and unpretentious and she didn't give a damn what people thought' (113). There is a mutuality, too, in the looking-after, as Mrs Munro makes tea or coffee for them both, and they chat in the 'companionable' kitchen, in between Mrs Raffald's cleaning and Mrs Munro's methodical preparations for Syl's suppers. It is an equality and an intimacy that Mrs Munro recognises would be deemed shocking by the prevailing manners of middle-class Croydon:

I reflected that Monica would die on the spot if she could hear us: the mother of the groom discussing the bride's family with the
charwoman. (54)

The prevailing standards and behaviour of any particular group may give rise to snobberies and awkwardness. The partially reformed Lydia, in Unexplained Laughter, supposes that it is 'the constraints of formality, the manners and mores of different groups that caused alienation', and this gives perhaps a more useful insight into Ellis's power struggles than an analysis which focuses solely on class. The suspicions and hostilities between Welsh and English in The Sin Eater and Unexplained Laughter are a case in point. Awkwardness, embarrassment, social unease may be fabricated by various kinds of snobbery, by deliberate actions or by unacknowledged undercurrents. They are also sometimes a result of general social or cultural expectations, and, where eating is concerned, may even be said to be embedded in the occasion itself.

Afternoon tea is potentially the most awkward English eating occasion, and certainly one which writers have frequently exploited for maximum social unease. The tea prepared for Margaret by Mrs Munro, to which Lili turns up, is a wholly uncomfortable occasion in each of their narratives. Both Mrs Munro

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66 Like many of Ellis's characters, both Mrs Raffald and Mrs Munro express a preference for funerals over weddings, the ostensible reason here being that 'the food's generally better' (53), though I suspect the underlying reason has more to do with the author's distaste for clichéd conventions (it is the smoked salmon and vol-au-vent weddings she largely targets), and for the institutionalised subjection of women to men whom she largely represents as stupid, heartless or simply irrelevant.

67 And mirror, to some extent, the French/English tensions of Roberts's Daughters of the House and A Piece of the Night.

68 Oscar Wilde again springs most obviously to mind. Jeremy MacClancy sketches a brief history of the changing patterns and content of afternoon tea, which seems to have been at its formal height at the beginning of this century, and to have gradually shrunk in form and content, largely reverting to its function as a children's meal, other than for the wealthy leisured classes. It is also an occasion predominantly associated with women, which may be one reason why Kyril, in The 27th Kingdom, should declare a hatred of afternoon tea.
and Margaret are simply going through the motions and neither wants to be sociable; Lili’s presence paralysingly recalls her ‘fling’ with Mrs Monro’s husband; and all three are bored by each other, by themselves and by all the unspoken acknowledgements, feelings and undercurrents that impede the flow of conversation. Even Lili’s desperate parapraxic claim, ‘the dog was fucking my foot’ fails to ignite the occasion because she is so mortified by its oblique reference to the past that she immediately becomes deliberately boring so as not to speak again about sex (60). Lili, whose idea of being ‘good’ is that of the *jeune fille bien élevée*, sitting with ankles crossed and being gracious, crooking a little finger while drinking tea and making no crumbs (102), is one of Ellis’s transgressors, but her power is expressed through her sexuality, her half-Egyptian ethnicity and her willingness to behave outrageously, rather than by a Rose-like manipulation of the eating conventions. It is hardly surprising therefore that Lili should announce to Monica that she *hates* tea.

Teatime is, however, a complex occasion, and its awkwardness more than individually contrived. Ermyn, in *The Sin Eater* muses that the Devil presides over the tea table, since it is a less necessary and thus less convivial event than supper (48) - and the pavilion tea certainly becomes hellish. In many ways afternoon tea is the most public and artificial of meals since its function has more to do with social intercourse than nourishment, and its rituals of tea-pouring, cake-passing and polite conversational exchanges are hardly conducive to intimacy. Thus Aunt Irene’s conventional friends in *The 27th Kingdom* hold the view that eating with ‘original’ people is only permissible at tea time. Even where children are concerned, tea is the most public occasion, the time at which they may eat with friends, which is why Ermyn’s bleak childhood teas in *The Sin*
Eater set her insistently apart, rendering her almost dysfunctional. When she arrives at the Plâs she sits, significantly, 'just out of reach of the tea-table, so that they all had to shift slightly to see her' (35). Similarly, if conversely, Claudia in The Other Side of the Fire finds tea time an occasion full of nostalgic loss, with its memories of banana sandwiches and buttered toast, though 'sometimes she had wondered whether it was her own childhood that she mourned, or the childhood of her children' (122).

The awkwardness of teatime is a compound of convention, social construction, deliberate manipulation and family history. While Ellis does not pay more than passing attention to its traditions, rules of behaviour and etiquette, a general familiarity with these is presumed. Mrs Munro’s ultimate desire in The Skeleton in the Cupboard to 'ride across the boundaries which separated the done from the not-done thing' (127) presupposes a thoroughly inculcated understanding of which is which. What is 'done', approved, is conventional, the proprieties depending once again on class, ethnicity, nationality, family and the traditional rituals of the occasion itself.

In British culture the occasion with the most widespread and deeply embedded rituals and traditions, some religious, some commercially-induced and some culinary, is Christmas. The core traditions - the cards, the tree, the presents, the Christmas dinner - are common to Christians and the irreligious, and despite variations are surprisingly consistent. The eating of a roast turkey or other large bird with traditional trimmings, followed by a dark, fruity and spicy pudding, is by now so well-established that mass-catering, from schools to hospitals to works canteens, almost always features a 'Christmas dinner' in late

69 Perhaps this, too, accounts for why Helen's bag of tea, thrown down from the window by her mother for her to eat by herself, is quite so unappetising. The Visitation, 24.
December, vegetarians feel constrained to prepare some sort of festive ‘roast’ in imitation of the fowl centrepiece, and even transplanted versions of British culture (such as migrants in Australia) continue to provide such wintry feasts however inappropriate to local conditions.

Obviously, there are variations, according to class, region and family traditions. The meal may be eaten in the middle of the day or in the evening, or, because of the exceptional nature of festivity, it may drift into some unaccustomed meal-time, such as three o’clock in the afternoon. *Hors d’oeuvres* may precede the main course, a variable number and kind of trimmings accompany the roast bird, and mince pies, trifle, cheese and biscuits, fruit and nuts supplement or follow the steamed pudding. Similarly a whole etiquette of festive behaviour accompanies the meal, a compound of social and family traditions dictating who should carve, who be served first, how children should behave, when crackers should be pulled and so on.\(^7\) And as with the ceremony of the main meal of the season, so with the whole Christmas occasion, from ritualistic shopping to tacit expectations of over-indulgence.

It seems that the combination of Christian remembrance with pagan celebration of the winter solstice has become gradually altered and overlaid - to the point of cliché - with commercial excess, greed, inertia and individualism, and this is at the core of Alice Thomas Ellis’s *The Birds of the Air*.\(^7\) Not only is the religious element of Christmas largely overlooked, she suggests, but the egalitarian carnivalesque of pagan tradition is reduced to the hollow gestures of

\(^7\) The Milk family Christmas, referred to earlier, is a perfect example of this mixture of cultural, family and even children’s traditions.

\(^7\) Ellis has a Catholic agenda which is not part of my concern here. However, she also sees Christmas in quite secular terms as a time at which ‘the year’s accumulated ill-will seemed always to find expression’ (*The Birds of the Air*, 123). There is certainly nothing of the charm and nostalgia Roberts evokes - though a similar regard for modest and simple celebration may well underlie both representations.
cocktail parties, with their social and emotional manoeuvring, family politics and petty drunkenness. Social intercourse here is simultaneously forced and restricted, by legally-sanctioned custom, internalised cultural expectations, commerce and, once again, the fine discriminations of class.

Christmas involves extensive sets of expectations which cannot possibly all be met, and which place particular burdens on those who cook or entertain, and both the expectations and the burdens are clearly evident in this novel. Barbara organises two Christmas gatherings: pre-lunch drinks for a few of Sebastian's undergraduates, and a party for his colleagues. Both occasions represent aspects of her 'duty' to her husband. The first is part of the 'relentless hospitality' shown to unfortunate or unpopular students who have not gone away or home, who are 'black, miner's children, acned or similarly disadvantaged' (11) - and holds no pleasure for any of its participants. The party for Sebastian's colleagues is for Barbara underpinned with anxiety and apprehension about her son Sam's looks and behaviour, but she must feign enthusiasm, introduce people, humour her husband, look after newcomers and the isolated, orchestrate the eating, not mind about the academics' indifference to her food or the gap between their manners and her mother's - and thus her own - standards. On top of this, she witnesses the uncharacteristically 'playful, lascivious act' of her husband Sebastian's 'placing a piece of turkey with his fork in the damp red mouth of the wife of the Professor of Music', thus learning

72 Strictly speaking, Sebastian's and Barbara's party is not a cocktail party, since wine and whisky are served, and the food that is on offer is rather more substantial than canapés. However, the ethos of their party is so much in keeping with the superficial, self-seeking, cliquey connotations of the 'cocktail party' that no other word will so well convey its peculiarly dreadful flavour.
through food of his extramarital affair (25). Expectation, ritual and duty here clash with shock and transgression; amidst the sharply satirised exchanges, through which Sam promenades like a mute Greek chorus with his tape recorder, Barbara strives to dissemble, to perform her expected part, to be like everyone else who 'seemed to be having a lovely time' (35). Significantly, perhaps, she conflates infidelity with rudeness, gasping at her own temerity in pretending that a guest's smoke is responsible for her tears: 'Oh, she thought, I wasn't brought up like that. I was brought up to be faithful and polite' (34). Barbara is paralysed by an inability to divorce her feelings from the rules of behaviour she has thoroughly internalised, and it falls to her son, who as a rebellious teenager has not succumbed to 'good manners', to disrupt the party by suddenly replaying the hugely amplified tape recorded conversations of the guests, thus loudly and rudely expressing his mother's feelings through his own distress.

A number of factors apparent within this party recur on Christmas day, including preconceived expectations of what the occasion will be like. Ellis provides an unstable mix. Mrs Marsh is determined to have a traditional 'family' Christmas with snow and everyone being cheerful and nice to each other, a foolishly unrealisable - but culturally endorsed - fantasy. The family circumstances are particularly inauspicious: Mary, mindful of the Christian birth associations running counter to her current preoccupations with death, simply doesn't care about the occasion; Barbara is fully prepared for Mrs Marsh's

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73 Farb and Armelagos note that in many societies sharing food represents an intimacy comparable to or even greater than that of sexual intercourse. Ellis makes the connection elsewhere also: Claudia plans erotic meals for Philip in The Other Side of the Fire, and in The Sin Eater Angela cooks Edward breakfast, flirtatiously calls on him to help her cook the fish (I) and generally fusses over and defends his appetite. Lessing, in The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five, uses food-sharing to show the greatest intimacy.
expectations, but, still stunned by the knowledge of Sebastian’s infidelity and perpetually anxious about Sam’s non-conforming adolescent behaviour, is tranquillized; Sebastian, like Mary and indeed Sam, wonders rather desperately how he will survive the few days; Sam, uncomfortable in his own skin, is preternaturally sensitive to the pain and discomfort of others, but is unable to cope with both this and his own misery, and is inclined to manifest his inability disruptively.74

Mrs Marsh, ‘brave as an officer’ (20), is propelled - by loss, by a sense of motherly duty, awareness of social position and by a total absorption of cultural expectations - to pursue her ideal of benevolent Christmas. Mindful of the proprieties (neatly illustrated by her regret at having told Dennis - who is duly shocked - that they have not yet had lunch at four o’clock), she is almost overwhelmed by the logistical impossibilities of organising such a disparate, disaffected and increasingly inebriated group of individuals through the lunch, tea and evening drinks she has planned. Despite the authority vested in her as senior member of the family, mother and hostess, she has no power at all. Even her power to influence is undermined; her parenthetic advice to Barbara, in the moments before lunch, to endure her life by focusing on its good parts, ‘pick[ing] the raisins out of the cake’, is misunderstood and reinterpreted as encouragement to promiscuity (110). There is a parallel here with the limits of Rose’s power being defined by the innocent disregard of those who do not understand the ‘game’; the force of conventional manners relies on their internalisation, and their general acceptance. Thus the very sad (Mary) or the very drunk (Barbara) may be immune to constraints policed by embarrassment.

74 He feels ‘furiously sorry’ for his mother (52), and even momentarily so for the Chief Inspector, acutely recognising his social unease.
The social dysfunction resulting from a combination of unexpressed negative feelings and a general expectation of conformity to polite good manners is so acute that Mrs Marsh is reduced to coercion:75

Mrs Marsh announced that lunch must now be served. 'Mary,' she called peremptorily, 'come and sit down.' (110, my emphasis)

She makes people stand up so that she can pull their chairs to the tables, 'gamely' coaxing and directing, but wishing she could simply clap her hands to disperse these 'untidy' people. When it comes to serving the food, she decides to dish it out in the kitchen, muttering that they can 'have what they're given' (115), rather than pass dishes and gravy in her sitting room. After learning of his infidelity to her daughter, she even takes the peppermill from Sebastian to demonstrate how it should be used, calling him 'Professor' and grinding 'a liberal quantity of black pepper' on his sprouts (117) in a childishly transgressive act of judgement.

These apparently decisive actions are, however, like Barbara's ineffectualness, a function of Mrs Marsh's disempowerment and frustration at her inability to control events. She worries about the quantity of wine being consumed, and frets that the dinner might not be finished before Dennis and Vera arrive for drinks. As a result, she serves the pudding in a spirit more chivvying than generous:

She dumped glass bowls in front of everyone, splashing a few spots of freshly melting brandy butter on Seb's cardigan. He dabbed at

75 Everybody expects everybody else to conform, even if they grant themselves licence. Like children or adolescents (such as Sam, who prefers his parents to behave 'sensibly'), they indulge themselves in the comfortable expectation that other people will continue to behave predictably.
it, tutting, instead of ignoring it as a proper man would have done. (120)

She even neglects to offer the Stilton and biscuits, deciding that they would make too many crumbs and rationalising to herself that everyone has had enough to eat anyway, hardly a common concern when it comes to a feast, Christmas or otherwise. The kitchen, too, is beyond her control, cluttered as it is with part-filled dishes and glasses and the disordered evidence of Evelyn's slovenly helping. She is, predictably, exhausted: by the cooking, the anxiety, the attempts to keep control, the responsibility. For she feels 'responsible for all these people' (127); not only are some of them her family, but she is their hostess, their temporary provider, and thus owes them a duty of care. Aunt Irene, in *The 27th Kingdom*, similarly articulates such a feeling: 'once you'd fed people you had admitted responsibility, like saving a life' (53).

Responsibility is clearly connected with power, though the two may operate independently, and indeed conflictingly, and I wish to end this chapter with a brief consideration of their relative operation in connection with food. One of the ways in which patriarchal - and governmental - power has traditionally been exerted, for example, is through making women feel responsible for others' needs, as daughters, as wives, as carers, as mothers. Morality may thus be invoked, to put it crudely, as a tool of oppression. While Ellis's novels display a lively sense of morality, her feisty heroines are at pains to distinguish true goodness from socially approved and regulated behaviour, and

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78 It is notably always Hunter who comes to the rescue, his status as outsider (not a family member, homosexual and uninvolved emotionally) enabling him to retain and even gain power from practically every exchange.
thus to duck a disempowering, conventionally ascribed responsibility. Their self-conscious manipulation of the roles of guest, hostess and cook, and their disruption of expected manners represent a refusal of the burdens a Mrs Marsh unwittingly takes upon herself and a rejection of the controlling effects of conventional good manners; their interest is rather directed towards empowering themselves.

Lydia, in *Unexplained Laughter* is just such a heroine, eschewing responsibility for her guest, Betty, who herself takes on the cooking and cleaning in a spirit of 'looking after' the lovesick and jilted. This is not because Lydia cannot cook (we learn later that she makes the 'best bread sauce in the world with a great deal of butter, nutmeg and black pepper' (95)) but because she is repelled by Betty's earnestness, the idea of two women fussing over the food, and by Betty's lack of fastidiousness over breakfast - in short by the intimate presence of another woman. While she recognises that Betty is really much nicer than she is, and believes it to be unfair that such goodness is taken for granted (while normally 'nasty, selfish, attractive' people such as herself are hugely thanked when they behave kindly), she nevertheless indulges her own spite and the exercise of power, and, in true Ellis game-playing fashion, baits and manipulates her guest. Here, power and responsibility are split: Lydia wields and seizes power; Betty assumes responsibility. Thus Betty automatically takes on the cooking, even to preparing the picnic unasked. The one occasion on which she demurs is in the preparation of Lydia's pheasant, a

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77 The same could, I think, be said of some of Roberts's heroines and certainly of Lessing's. While Carter's women are certainly averse to disempowerment and conventionally restriction, their devotion to goodness is rather more questionable.

78 The inevitable strains of living with another woman - however temporary - are also explored by Michèle Roberts in *The Visitation*. 
refusal which, given a lack of any such request from Lydia, underscores her assumption of responsibility.

Lydia is aware of goodness, from common humanity to the fierce unworldly innocence of Beuno, 'not for human consumption' (82). The trouble is, behaving badly is more fun. It is also more empowering. This is why Lydia cannot resist the idea of staging a picnic near the priapic rock drawings of Dr Wyn. She is, however, quite ambivalent about the picnic, almost immediately deciding to make it a 'nice picnic', though 'in the spirit of the penitent who intends to do the wicked thing she had first thought of but will also do something pleasant to make it slightly less reprehensible' (111). Having manipulatively invited the Molesworths, she becomes contrite, wishing she had not conceived of the picnic at all, and when she sees Beuno she realises that she can have the picnic 'without putting her wicked plan into operation' simply by changing the location slightly (114). Her ambivalence deepens when Finn returns, her picnic mischief-making seeming 'more sadly trivial than wicked' by comparison with the prospect of engaging in battle with him (127). If Lydia's attempts to be good represent responsibility and her succumbing to mischief-making a pursuit of power, then power and responsibility can be seen as fluctuating throughout her approach to the picnic. 79

The etiquette of picnics is quite unlike that of other meals. Normal rules are effectively reversed as people sit on the ground and eat with their fingers in an atmosphere of general informality; the possibilities of gaining power through parodic manipulation in the Rose manner are therefore limited. The event is still

79 Betty, by contrast, is all responsibility, making quiche and cake, boiling eggs, mashing sardines and slicing bread, and tweaking and prodding at Lydia's conscience. Lydia quails in the face of such diligence and, feeling weary at the very prospect of buttering bread or wrapping things up, retires into the role of reluctant impresario.
orchestrated, however, at least to begin with, and Lydia decides upon and takes credit for the venue: 'Several people complimented her on the beauty of the surroundings, because it was her picnic and so for a while Wales was her dining-room' (139). After an obscurely snobbish observation at the expense of the Molesworths, who would prefer not to walk far from the cars, and an announcement that everybody must carry something, Lydia heads off away from the rock drawings, in a concession to goodness and responsibility. When the party is seated on the ground by a pool, she even makes an effort to keep a desultory conversation going, though Betty has to come to the rescue by producing the food.

By the time the food is eaten, Lydia has relinquished or lost power over the picnic, for it is while she is quarrelling with Finn that the group disperses a little and Dr Wyn and April go for a walk in the direction of the rock drawings. A vestigial sense of responsibility makes Lydia cry 'Hell', and ask Finn to make them come back, but it is too late. Lydia's original abandoned plan is now fulfilled so successfully that she is even inclined to feel sorry for the doctor 'who so clearly wanted to kick hell out of someone and could find no excuse' (145). Almost imperceptibly, however, she regains control by 'mercifully' releasing him with the announcement that it will soon be time to go. Ever adept at engineering slight shifts of power to her advantage, she stifles the possibility of a relationship between Finn and Betty by blessing them and smiling knowingly. Finally, just as she unfairly gains credit for being kind because it is a rarity, so she is unjustly successful in forestalling any conversations about her between Finn and Betty on their drive home, simply because an easy moment's sincere warmth at parting secures Betty's 'absolute allegiance' (152). Power, it is clear, has nothing to do with merit.
While the previous chapter focused on a consideration of the literary use of food and manners as signifiers in a social context, I want, by way of conclusion, to think about ways in which eating might be deemed to relate to social function and some idea of community, by which I mean the relationships within and between social groups of various sizes, from family and friendship groups to class, ethnicity or society at large.

As should be clear by now, my argument emphasises the essential importance of appetite, food and eating. It is perhaps worth pausing at this point to rehearse very briefly the perspectives from which this importance is acknowledged. Food, and indeed eating, may be regarded as signifying systems subject to complex and detailed decoding. More elementally perhaps, food - or at least feeding - is at the core of Freudian and Kleinian theories of psychic development, not only from a purely personal point of view, but relating also to the entry of the individual into culture. From an anthropological perspective, food may be seen to mark stages of social development. By this I mean the social marking of individual or group maturation, exemplified for instance by rites of initiation, something the British tend to associate (wrongly) only with distant and primitive cultures. There is in fact plenty of evidence that our society is

1 The phrase 'social eating' is necessarily vague in a chapter that seeks to understand what food and eating may signify in a larger context. In the previous chapter I used this phrase largely to refer to questions of convention and of manners; here, however, it functions as a kind of shorthand for the more difficult because less obvious function of food and eating in relation to society as a whole.
itself deeply tribal; consider, for example, public school and military initiations, 'coming out', body piercing and tattoos or drinking the yard of ale. The fact that this culture tends to perceive only others as tribal suggests there is something patronising in the formulation. Rites of passage of one sort or another are almost all marked by food and/or drink, from the first staying up to 'grown-up supper' through to the funeral or wake. From a slightly more sociological viewpoint, I have touched on the social construction of taste and psycho-social influences on appetite or appetites. In terms of power relations, too, the activities surrounding food exhibit a highly complex and potentially subtle series of interactions. To these perspectives could be added the scientific and medical, the historical, political and philosophical.

The approaches of different disciplines, with their varying starting points relating to private and public life, are often difficult to reconcile, and may even be considered mutually exclusive. Indeed, this accounts for my separating different theoretical insights rather than attempting to incorporate them into a single perspective. I do, however, have a desire for a comprehensive view. On one hand what I have been arguing is convergent: food and eating are, in effect, universal signifiers, calling up the essential in terms of survival, embodied at the core of the psyche, framing the movement of the individual in society and providing the locus for fundamental expressions of need and desire and the play of power relations. All these elements are, I would claim, evident in both the fiction that draws upon theory or centres self-consciously on gastronomy or gluttony, and that which incorporates appetite, food and eating to less obvious

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2 See also Farb and Armelagos on initiation (73).

3 It is worth recalling that Angela Carter makes powerful use of an anthropological perspective on 'primitive' eating rites in both Heroes and Villains and Dr Hoffman.
intent. On the other hand I embrace the spirit of divergent thinking; at all costs I want to do justice to the complexity of the subject by not reducing it to an oversimplified argument. In moving, finally, towards a more uncertain, expansive and challenging view, I am arguing for an approach to the subject that gives space, and due weight, to its variety, complexity and self-contradiction, an approach that explores boundaries in fiction which are also, perhaps, at the margins of theory, an approach encompassing disciplines rather than espousing them.

Setting aside for a moment the question of reconciling specific theoretical positions, I want to consider how we can think about food and eating in relation to society at large. Since the disciplines share to some extent the linguistic codes and rhetoric of food and eating, rhetoric might itself provide a suitable compass, and indeed my entire thesis is in part an exposition of the discourses of food. As an overall theoretical focus, however, ‘rhetoric’ is both too large and too imprecise for my purposes. The trouble is, narrower, more specific perspectives on rhetoric have limited scope. Mary Anne Schofield, for example, argues that Anita Brookner uses food as a form of female dialogue, thereby offering ‘just one example of the encoding language that women have adopted in order to be able to talk to one another’. She proposes a model of gender-based food language, meats being masculine, vegetables feminine, and suggests

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4 Although it is a somewhat nebulous term, I use ‘society’ advisedly, intending it to represent something wider than the individual’s immediate circle, and less specific than class or nation. I deliberated for a long while about what entity to name here. ‘Social groups’, while they - as will be seen - function synecdochially (since no-one can relate to ‘society’ as such) seems inadequate for a larger vision. ‘Humanity’ on the other hand sounds grandiose, and presupposes an essentialism that my overall argument seeks to deny.

5 Schofield takes as her starting point the claim by Kim Chernin in The Hungry Self that ‘an obsession with food is an attempt to provide a ceremonial form by which women can enter culture’, by moving away from the nourishing mother into self-definition as cook and provider. See ‘Spinster’s Fare: Rites of Passage in Anita Brookner’s Fiction’ in Mary Anne Schofield ed., Cooking by the Book: Food in Literature and Culture (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989), 61-77.
that through her heroines Brookner explores the possibility of a new rhetoric, a language of food applying specifically to the female, manifested through initiatory cooking rites. Thus girls become women, making a space separate from, if perforce within, patriarchy. This is a potentially general principle, and has some resonances with other women's writing of food (Michèle Roberts' *The Book of Mrs Noah*, for example), but its restriction to women's communication with each other, and its privileging and celebration of the private sphere is, I think, limiting as a model for examining social eating. It is not, for example, a thesis that could be applied to Lessing and Carter, who tend to be less separatist and more interested in society as a whole, as a larger entity and something that involves men.

If it is to be truly useful and enlightening, a model or analysis of social eating must, I think, be inclusive. At the same time it must not be so general as to be anodyne. Perhaps in the end the truest approach is to construct a general or societal perspective through the specific, looking at particular, representative examples of what might constitute social eating. How, for example, do food and eating relate to the identity or cohesion of a certain group and the links between that group and its society? How indeed are food and eating instrumental in the formation of identity in a particular society and what role do they play in socialisation? What is the cultural place of ritual or the social implication of cooking? Is there a significant interrelation between food and eating and class and ideology? And are such questions answerable in other than relative terms, given that food and behaviour depend very much on contexts of period, ethnicity, gender, gastronomic and behavioural traditions, religion, ideology, nationality and cultural systems?

The rest of this chapter will respond to some of these questions in the
light of texts - both realist and non-realist - by Doris Lessing and Angela Carter, texts in which concepts of community and communion are to some extent put to the test through food and eating. A suitably simple and obvious way of starting is to look at a group in relation to the wider society in which it is located. Such a contextual view can be peculiarly revealing; for example, Angela Carter’s Bristol novels (Shadow Dance, Several Perceptions and Love), though often considered as fables or romances, can, as Marc O’Day points out, clearly be related to the 1960s when they were written. Not only is there the circumstantial detail of junk shop culture, pubs and coffee bars, but the emphasis on youth, the vampiric devouring, mutual suspicion and self-destruction, the predatory hunger coupled with passivity and fear of engulfment might all be taken for metaphors of 1960s’ politics and social change. Carter herself claimed both specificity and purpose; for all their non-naturalistic qualities, her early books are recognisably placeable. She wrote of Shadow Dance that it ‘was about a perfectly real area of the city in which I lived. It didn’t give exactly mimetic copies of people I knew, but it was absolutely as real as the milieu I was familiar with: it was set in provincial bohemia’.

In the same interview she claimed that the novel has ‘some role and responsibility in helping to explain experience and making the world comprehensible’. The world in this case is specifically English, provincial, ‘bohemian’, early 1960s. Its strange, alienated sub-group of society, marked by a culture of ‘eat or be eaten’, reliant on instant coffee and aspirins, sugary cakes and tea, is apparently quite separate from wider contemporary society other

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7 John Haffenden, Novelists in Interview 78-96 (80,79).
than through the largely critical Greek Chorus of similarly alienated acquaintances at the local pub. The group, such as it is, does not connect through food at all, the only social eating taking place when Emily cooks for Honeybuzzard and Morris, and this is an act of love to which Morris is incidental. Their lack of real connection or cohesion (the ‘eat or be eaten’ of vampiric exploitation) and anarchic marginality function to further marginalise and ultimately fracture the group. Since Carter endorses the view that ‘you are what you eat’, we can assume that an infantalising diet saps the marrow and indulges a sense of megalomania, and that - as the metaphor itself predicts - vampiric behaviour is self-perpetuating.

Like Carter, Doris Lessing holds a view of the writer as powerful (‘an instrument of change for good or bad’) and responsible to his or her society:

If a writer accepts this responsibility, he must see himself, to use the socialist phrase, as an architect of the soul….one must have a vision to build towards, and that vision must spring from the nature of the world we live in.

As with Carter’s fiction, however, illumination, explanation and informing vision can be elaborated without need of restriction to literal realism, even if many realist devices are employed. In other words, neither Carter nor Lessing writes escapist fiction; their novels and short stories squarely confront what it means to be alive (and especially female) in late twentieth century Western (and

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8 Indeed, the communicative aspect of eating together is deliberately reversed by the ostracising of Morris in the pub and the café after the tragedy of Henry Glass (see Chapter 7).

9 ‘It is to a degree true that, as we used to say in the sixties, you are what you eat’, Haffenden 80.

especially English) culture.

The dystopian scenario of *Memoirs of a Survivor*, written in 1974 and set in an indeterminate future, probably in London, outlines a society progressively fragmenting into (often literally) cannibalistic groups. The dynamic within and the interaction between some of these groups is indicative both of progressive social collapse and of the importance and strength of residual (and future) socialisation. The unnamed, rather detached narrator, apparently an erstwhile member of the bourgeoisie, chronicles what happens in the street outside her window, inside her flat and in a symbolic metaphysical realm beyond its walls, encompassing both psychoanalytic and visionary projections. Her narration suggests she embodies much in the way of 'old' values, particularly a proper sense of individual and social responsibility which seems to have disappeared in this disintegrating world. Thus when Emily is brought to her by a stranger, without explanation, she takes on the responsibility for this young girl and her cat-dog companion, feeling she has no alternative.11

Outside in the street, the narrator sees tribal groups form and reform, gather and leave, the travellers distinctive because 'they had relinquished individuality...individual judgement and responsibility' (33). The groups of young show the way to their more isolated elders, devising new ways of behaving in the face of a disintegrating society; they learn how to forage for supplies, they connect in experimental and shifting alliances, burn fires on the pavements and roast meat of dubious origin. Here, new rituals are evolved, new tastes formed

11 The most impressive thing about Hugo is not his hybrid status but the quality of his devotion to Emily. Though it is she who does all the providing, he repays her with the faithfulness and attention of a 'delicate and faithful lover'(72). The suggestion of emotional integrity and instinctive knowledge as inherent qualities of animals (which recurs in *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*) contrasts with the unsocialised savagery of the child gangs, and later of Ben in *The Fifth Child* (London: Paladin, 1989).
and incorporated by the shifting groups of the changed society. The tribes or gangs or groups are larger than the sum of their members; when it comes to moving on, it does not matter which individuals join the leaving tribe, and those remaining on the pavement simply accumulate another crowd to replace the subgroup which assembles and departs, with a trolley or cart of root vegetables and grain, and perhaps a last minute bleeding parcel brought by some self-conscious youths.

Inside the flat, Emily’s passage through the phases of adolescence - compulsive reading and eating, self-starvation and clothes-making, foraging and contriving and cooking, all under the watchful guardianship of her cat-dog Hugo and the narrator - is connected with the development of the groups outside, and the narrator speculates about peer influence, surmising that a gang is ‘bred of the passion to be like’ (49). Slowly but surely, Emily reinvents herself to join the pavement society, as life in the city worsens, services disintegrate, food becomes more scarce and law and order must increasingly be self-imposed.

These groups become, in effect, primary social units, their communality superseding accustomed modes of interaction:

...any individual consummations were nothing beside this act of mingling constantly with others, as if some giant rite of eating were taking place, everyone tasting and licking and regurgitating everyone else, making themselves known to others and others known to them in this tasting and sampling - eyeing each other, rubbing shoulders and bodies, talking, exchanging emanations. (74)

12 The narrator points out that some of the children even seem to prefer what to her are 'unappetising' meat substitutes, commenting that 'we learn to like what we get' (90). Taste is undoubtedly adaptive.

13 Emily's self-reinvention suggests some parallel with Carter's view that much of how we are is socially created or constructed, but that women can be (more) pro-active in the creation of their own identity. See Chapter II above, and also Lorna Sage's comments on the BBC Omnibus programme.
The suggested cannibalism of this ‘communal feast’ hints perhaps at the savagery of society, but the universality and equality of reciprocal eating - or rather tasting and regurgitation - indicates mutuality rather than exploitation. 14 This mutuality lies, I think, somewhere between the deathly spirit of cannibalism which is certainly evident in the disintegrating society of Memoirs, and which I have outlined in chapter II (exemplified by the Count in The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman or Buffo in Nights at the Circus) and the lover’s desire for total union with the beloved proposed by Freud. 15 In Memoirs, any such desire is tempered with suspicion, functioning not as an individual and private sensation, but writ large onto a collective psyche. 

Against this ethos, Emily’s wanting time alone with Gerald is an anachronism, retrogressive, possessive, individualistic. Yet they do come together in a family-like group, when Emily joins Gerald after he gathers children from the streets and installs them in a house. For a while at least, Gerald and Emily are the household’s parent figures. This household, or organised commune, is of a piece with pockets of life all over the city, reverting to the pre-industrial, reinstating privies in gardens, composting sewage for growing vegetables, keeping pigs, setting up workshops for making household goods and furniture. 16 The narrator’s visit reveals much about this small community, its

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14 The link with behind-the-wall scenes of oral deprivation - the unfed baby, the infant so chastised for tasting excrement - also suggests that unsatisfied hunger (desire) will be satisfied notwithstanding repression, just as the starved children of the underground illustrate how deprivation breeds hunters and cannibals.

15 Lessing too touches on the deathly spirit of destructive carnivorousness and cannibalism opposed to visions of wholeness, in Briefing. See, for example, the Fall from innocence in the first killing of a beast, the Bacchanalian blood-drinking women or the apes and Rat-dogs eating corpses from the battle of the city. Doris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971).

16 These communities clearly draw on the utopian ideal of self-sufficient hippy communities of the late 1960s and 1970s, as parodied, for example in the Soybean Community portrayed by Lisa Alther in Kinfolks (London: Chatto & Windus 1976). Their degree of self-sufficiency sets them
focus on food and self-sufficiency and its relation to the environment. As the narrator, Emily and June make their way to the house, some young men with guns call to June; when she goes to them they give her a dozen pigeons. Further on, Emily pulls up plants from old railway lines for use as herbs in the commune’s kitchen. These two incidents suggest a connection with both physical environment and other groups in the area. The house itself is spotless and efficiently organised, the children who cook and do the garden responding quickly and obediently to Emily, whose distress at being seen as an authority figure prompts the narrator to explain that such obedience is only to be expected, for the first thing we learn is to be a ‘good baby’ and to recognise our place in the structure. Even where official structures are breaking down, it seems, the socialisation process itself breeds a pecking order which frustrates attempts at change, notwithstanding efforts to the contrary; ‘We decided it wasn’t going to happen’ (113), says a disappointed Emily. For good measure, Lessing has the narrator add that there has always been conflict between the hierarchies bred by socialisation and desires and resolutions for democracy (113). Emily, however, cherishes a view of herself as serving the situation by passing on knowledge and information, rather than as someone in charge. Back on the street, the dilemma is partially resolved as all turn to her for the knowledge and practical help that she freely dispenses.

apart, however, from such groups as the Benefits-supported squatters of The Good Terrorist and the alternative lifestyles of current New Agers.

17 These young men, having visited the Ryans, whose ‘hugger-mugger’ life in the old days was viewed as feckless and irresponsible, ‘all enjoyment and sensation’, had become almost part of June’s family. Lessing makes a point about class here: the Ryans are more easily able to adapt to an unpredictable, inconsequential lifestyle than the middle classes, who cannot accept that ‘respectability, property and gain’ are no longer the measure of personal worth.

18 The learning of the child beyond the wall as to what it means to be a ‘good’ baby - stifled, quiet, undemanding - reinforces the suggestion that the old models established a society of passivated adults, reluctant to make a fuss or to strive for equality and change.
Running like a counterpoint to what goes on in the household and public domain is the narrative of the 'personal' realm which the narrator discovers beyond the wall of the flat. Here there is both explanation and possibility. Something like rebirth is suggested for, despite the dilapidation and degradation of the house, the gardens are full of the promise of peace and fruitfulness, and the symbolic egg suggests futurity. In this realm the narrator witnesses formative scenes of a composite childhood: hers perhaps, Emily's, Emily's mother's. There are clear allusions to Freudian and Jungian psychology and suggested links between upbringing and nurturing (or the lack of them) and the disintegrating world outside. The maternal disgust towards and punishment of the baby for eating excrement may be compared with Gerald's despair at the casting of a first murderous stone by a four-year-old member of his gang of small savages. The crying generated by the punished baby goes on echoing, not only in the dreamlike world behind the wall, but bleeding into the narrator's everyday life as well; the natural human impulse towards epistemological omnivorousness has been stifled and the need for emotional nourishment denied with a callousness bordering on cruelty here, and a link is suggested between the traumatising effect of this and social break down.

19 It is indicative of the narrator's social conscience that she sets herself to do what she can to clean, restore, repaint, reorder the decaying house. As a solution, patching up is inadequate, as the accelerating degradation behind the wall and Emily's battles to sweep up against a swamping tide of leaves suggest. The real possibility the novel offers is that of beginning again with new ways of thinking and being.

20 Repressive factors in the development of a 'good baby' are suggested. The childhood scenes - placed, as Kate Fullbrook notes, right in the period during which Freud was putting forward his theories of infant sexuality and psychic development - recall again Martha Quest's 'nightmare of repetition', the reinscribing of frustration and inhibition on generation after generation. The suggestions of apocalypse at the end of this novel, The Four-Gated City and The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 offer possibilities of breaking the cycle. See Kate Fullbrook, Free Women, chapter 8: 'Doris Lessing: The Limits of Liberty'.

21 Lorna Sage writes: 'The emptying city and the emptying inner space correspond; and the new barbarism without is overwritten by the transcendence of the personal within'. Lorna Sage, Women in the House of Fiction, 19-20.
effectively shown two opposing explanations for social dysfunction: at one extreme an infant traumatised by excessive discipline, at the other a gang of children brutalised by a complete lack of socialisation.

The fact of general social breakdown is not to say the ‘savages’ do not have a group identity, however, even if it is solely based - dedicated as they are to sheer physical survival - on fighting and eating. Though defined almost entirely in terms of negatives, the children do have characteristics in common (youth, desperation, fierceness, amorality and so on) through which a group identity and even a rudimentary sense of solidarity emerge, suggesting at least a residual (if parodic) socialisation. When they are first introduced they are shown without parents, family or civilising influences, living in the (literal and metaphorical) underground, surviving by stealing and fighting, and united only by the need for protection in numbers. An emblematic do-gooder who offers them food has to run for her life. Their entry into Gerald’s smooth-running community is wholly destructive; they snatch at the food, rampage and destroy, drive everybody out and colonise the place overnight, so that they are discovered in possession in the morning, scratching among the half-cooked rats that they resemble. The commune, with its principles of co-operative feeding and mutuality, is destroyed.  22

Gerald’s and Emily’s attempt to impose discipline on the rampaging small children is met only with fierce attack. Gerald, who will not relinquish responsibility, seeks them out after they have fled.  23 However, he surrenders

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22 The child gang has no structure, is simply a collection of individuals, with no common purpose save personal survival and primitive dominance. Significantly, their trashing of Gerald’s house is described as an irreversible destruction of the organic.

23 He insists that not saving them would be tantamount to blaming them, for what is clearly society’s failure.
himself to their mores and when he and two children, bringing supplies to Emily and the narrator, stay to eat a meal, it is evident Gerald does not attempt to ‘correct’ their manners; his mute appeal to Emily claims that she could help to civilise them, but she recognises the compelling force of the group which has incorporated Gerald; there is no doubt here that the group is more powerful than the individual. Lessing is quite unsentimental concerning both the limitations of the individual and the effectiveness of liberal humanist ideals in the face of social, political and psychological realities. Eventually, indeed, for all his sacrifice, Gerald is shown to be as vulnerable to attack by the group as anyone, insider or public at large; his despair renders him ‘different’ and the volatile gang pelt him with stones. Finally coming to share Emily’s apprehension of the danger of getting sucked into amorality and cannibalism, Gerald abandons the gang and suspends his idealistic struggle.

Yet the children are not ultimately condemned, either by Gerald or the narration. These children of anarchy, who have not been ‘good babies’ or learned a place in the social hierarchy, are as much victims as wreckers, and notions of original sin or inherent evil are as inappropriate as Rousseauesque ideas of essential innocence. Yet it is perhaps a kind of innocence, or at least potential, which remains; at the transfiguring end of the novel, Gerald’s hesitation on the brink of ‘another order of world’ is resolved, as he stands hand-in-hand with the four-year-old criminal, by the arrival of ‘his’ children at the last moment, running after him and with him, into the future.

To summarise the social action of the novel, the breakdown of society at large is mirrored in the breakup of family (Gerald’s first household), directly attributable to a release of savagery (Gerald’s second gang of children).

24 A point that applies equally to the amoral Ben in The Fifth Child.
occasioned by society's failures and characterised by a lack of group coherence and mutual care or co-operation. This is a logical development from the burglary of the narrator's flat by June and others of the first household; as Emily explains, this robbery is a kind of compliment, attributing to the narrator the generosity of non-attachment. The child-gang, by contrast, despite accompanying Gerald on pleasant visits to the flat, could as easily kill and eat Hugo, or even Emily, as bring presents: there is no behavioural norm.

It is worth pointing out that the children's savagery and cannibalistic behaviour is dystopian rather than primitive. All the anthropological writing I have looked at suggests the most precise and rule-bound rituals for cannibalism. The whole point here is that this group is the product of negative socialisation. This is why the children are portrayed as so young; like some wolf-children, they have been taught nothing, have learned only how to survive. The fundamental interpersonal and social act has been withheld from them: they have not been fed. They are deprived and unnourished, physically, psychically and socially, to the extent that they are unable to accept food (attacking the do-gooder who tries to feed them) or to function as social beings. The 'old' society has its faults, but its representatives and descendants care for each other: the narrator and Emily look after and cook for each other and feed and care for Hugo; Gerald has a deep sense of commitment; even the rigid and unloving mother figure behind the wall provides the minimum to instill a

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sense of responsibility. This is perhaps why the moving on from ‘this collapsed little world’ at the ending of the novel includes all these representative figures as well as the children yet to be socialised; the glimpsed scene towards which they move may be something like the earlier behind-the-wall image of people working together to bring a dull carpet to life, a vision of social harmony: ‘there was no competition here, only the soberest and most loving co-operation’ (70).

Lessing develops her interest in the metaphysical in two more novels which end with characters transcending their physical selves: *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* and *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*.28 In these ‘space fiction’ novels the idea of social eating has, I think, implications that link the interpersonal and societal perspectives I have been outlining here with desired advancement towards transcendence of the physical as a means to communion, discussed earlier in Chapter IV. As Kate Fullbrook points out, whereas the modern world’s ‘deep ideological orientation [lies] towards recognising only individual experience’, Lessing’s interest tends rather towards collectivity, and what the central character in *The Sirian Experiments* calls ‘the group mind, the collective minds we are all part of, though we are seldom prepared to acknowledge this’.29

The inculcation of individuals into some sort of collectivity constitutes the process of socialisation (so truncated in *Memoirs*), part of which - as my

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27 It is both the strength and downfall of the ‘old’ society that the mental habits it produces resist alteration: ‘There is nothing that people won’t try to accommodate into "ordinary life". It was precisely this which gave that time its peculiar flavour; the combination of the bizarre, the hectic, the frightening, the threatening, an atmosphere of siege or war - with what was customary, ordinary, even decent.’ *Memoirs of a Survivor*, 20.


29 Kate Fullbrook, *Free Women*, 165.
discussion of taste in the previous chapter indicates - leads to the social construction of a series of appetites and preferences. Whether people eat a main meal at ten o’clock in the morning or four in the afternoon, or simply eat whenever the need is felt, and whether the meal consists of raw flesh or cooked porridge, is entirely a matter of social convention. For people within a particular social group its conventions seem to be natural or normal; it is only in comparison with those of different societies that specific customs begin to appear peculiar.\footnote{One of the ways in which we habitually define ourselves is, of course, in relation to the ‘other’ and this is nowhere more evident than in questions of food. See Visser, and Farb and Armelagos.} In The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five Lessing sets up three different sets of convention concerning food, to reflect the differences between the societies of each Zone. Indeed, the food itself is different: the people of the matriarchal Zone Three, peaceful and telepathic, eat little, of a light, almost wholly vegetarian diet\footnote{Their diet, where possible consisting only of fruits and grains, does not involve even the killing or uprooting of plants: this is empathetic and ideological eating.}; Zone Four, being a military society, features mess catering, heavy drinking and meat-eating; and the nomadic fighting tribes of Zone Five live on dried food and the milk of their mares. Whereas Lessing creates no evident demarcations within each zone as to who eats what, the contrast between the vegetarian and carnivorous, for example, reinforces each zone’s discrete identity.

Along with their kinds of food, so Zones’ mores vary. Zone Five is the most unsocialised, anarchistic, immediate in the satisfaction of physical appetites, without sexual ceremony or communal meals; Vashti and her Zone Five warriors are impulsive and childishly indulge their desires, characteristics graphically reflected in Vashti’s ‘dismantling’ two chickens and ‘rummaging in
her chicken carcasses for titbits and licking her fingers in a way which both shocked and tantalized her bridegroom’ (255). An energetic spirit of excess is manifest; the wedding feast lasts for a week and includes platters with whole sheep or calves or even two or three beasts, ‘as if the whole valley was one vast offering of food’ (260). Such eating is more a matter of ritual than the satisfaction of hunger; the purpose of feasting and sacrifice is for the occasion to be magnificent and unforgettable, a ceremonial to establish precedents and recall the grandeur of similar events in history. By comparison with such brio, the disciplined eating of Zone Four appears without spirit or imagination, the deadening victory of an aggressive rationalism; Zone Four controls passions and animality with laws and regulations, military routines (camp kitchens) and the force of internalised custom, an internalisation Al·Ith discovers in her surprised desire to lick her baby. The heavy food, patriarchal authority and emphasis on animality and the passions in Zone Four are seen as primitive, undeveloped and boorish by the buddhistic society of Zone Three, where the ascetic, the aesthetic and the empathetic are combined in both eating and social behaviour. Here there is great sympathy with the natural world (they commune with their animals and send messages by tree) and an automatic hospitality born of a detachment from desire which goes hand in hand with their asceticism. Zone Two is peopled, if that is the right word, by the wholly disembodied.

Just as the stifling of (metaphorical) omnivorousness in Memoirs is

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32 Ben Ata’s marriage to Al·Ith, ‘Queen’ of Zone 3, by comparison, is heralded by no feast or celebration, and it is only after much suspicious and hostile circling, verbal sparring, discussion, rape, sleep, mountain-gazing and wary comradeship that they sit to eat their first - and separate - foods together.

33 This recalls Schofield’s idea of the language surrounding food being a distinct form of communication between women (see page 242); here, however, the communication, itself a form of nourishment, is between all creatures in a feminised realm, and remains largely unverbalised.
shown to be crippling, so closed frontiers, geographical, cultural and culinary, encourage a sense of absolutism in the Zones about what should truly be seen as conventional. The project of breaking down the borders, set in motion by the Providers, is a momentous one, characterised in the realized colloquialism that they do not even breathe the same air. It is highly significant for my argument that Ben Ata and Al·Ith do not eat together for a considerable time, and that it is not until she is pregnant that they eat the same food. Furthermore, when Ben Ata tastes the food she has desired, ‘a delicacy of her country made of honey and nuts’ (119), he rolls his eyes in disbelief at its doing her and his future son any good. As Margaret Visser points out, it is often the small ethnic differences that are most disturbing, perhaps because we are unprepared for them (so, for example, the visiting women of Zone Four are nonplussed by the fact of breakfast in Zone Three). It is not until Al·Ith and Ben Ata have reached a considerable degree of intimacy, figured in almost perpetual mutual nakedness, that they find they can no longer conjure separate foods and are supplied with stewed beans and bread from the officers’ mess, which they eat together with hungry relish.

The union is not easy, however, and - taking place as it does entirely within Zone Four - neither does it effect a wholesale transformation in the relations between the zones. Indeed, Al·Ith is effectively made a scapegoat by Zone Three, being blamed for the malaise which is to be cured by the marriage,

34 ‘The really dramatic “ethnic” behaviour we consciously apprehend at once, and so can “make allowances” for; everyone has heard of the chances of having to eat an eyeball, or smash glasses after the toast. But the smaller, less noticeable signs can catch us off our guard and rob us more insidiously of our sense of security....Tourists quite commonly... come home really jolted by, and unable to forget, the Egyptian manner of pouring tea into a glass until it slops into the saucer.’ Visser, 19.

35 A meal of stewed beans with bread makes a nice compromise between the light fruits and grains of Zone Three and the heavy meats and proteins of Zone Four.
marginalised once the marriage is effected and ultimately exiled. What does happen is evolution rather than revolution; just as small differences may be more disturbing than large ones, so apparently marginal shifts begin to dislodge the stasis which had produced sterility. Al·Ith's sojourn in Zone Four, as well as initiating movement between those zones, allows her to realize her yearning for Zone Two, eventually paving the way for like-minded followers. As might be expected, Zone Two is at the furthest point of the scale from animality, representing an ideal for those who 'were candidates for Zone Two before they knew it’, feeling themselves to be ‘fed on husks’ by the hollowness of life in Zone Three. Interestingly, though, it is not reaching the summit of entry to Zone Two that is shown to be the triumph, but the opening up of the possibility to do so. Al·Ith is, in this sense, representative. The reformation wrought through her acceptance of responsibility and the sacrifice of one group's contentment to the higher good of growth and change result in 'a lightness, a freshness, and an enquiry and a remaking and an inspiration where there had been only stagnation' (299).

The gradual retreat from physical embodiment illustrated by increasing references to Al·Ith as thin, worn, burnt out, 'a wisp of a woman' (293), is repeated in The Making of the Representative for Planet 8, only here it is more overt, radical and inevitable, since there is no alternative but death. Refraining from eating for a higher social purpose, connected with the acquisition of

36 Al·Ith is herself changed by entry into Zone Four, because she is affected by her context right from the start: 'Do you know that as soon as I cross into your land I cease to be my real self? Everything I say comes out distorted and different. Or if I manage to be as I am, then it is so hard, that in itself makes everything different.' (125).

37 Al·Ith's comment when she learns of the Zone Four punishment for gazing towards Zone Three is revealingly ambiguous; telling Ben Afa that it never occurs to them to look beyond their borders, she says 'We are too prosperous, too happy, everything is so comfortable and pleasant with us...’ (95). It is precisely her unexpected apprehension of the cosiness and complacency of her own people that drives Al·Ith to explore the borders with Zone Two.
telepathic abilities in *The Four Gated City* and *The Golden Notebook*, is in these books developed into a transcendence of the physical body itself. Just as Al·Ith's culminating disembodiment can only be achieved after she has forged a communion with another society - suggested most intimately, I would argue, in her eating with Ben Ata - so the transfiguration of Planet 8's representatives, again figured through food and its lack, results from the exhaustion of resources and their combined efforts to provide for the dying inhabitants.

I should say a word here about the status of the representative and its relation to social eating. Social eating is not simply a question of group function, but refers to the (political) relation of individuals or groups to larger groups or society at large, and this must almost inevitably be by way of representative figures. While it might be argued that many if not all of Lessing's characters are in some sense 'representative', in her space fiction novels the individuals bear a notably public or social burden. The metaphorical or even mythical dimension of these narratives confirms the importance of characters' roles in and on behalf of their society. In *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* in particular, there is an almost total lack of individual characterisation, the inhabitants being named according to whichever function gives them their identity at the time: Masson the builder, Pedug the teacher, Marl the Keeper of Herds.38 Even the narrator, Doeg, 'Memory Maker and Keeper of Records', is undifferentiated in terms of sex, family or age; individualism is subordinated to the importance of the person's role in society. Thus the 'representative' of the title is an extension of this social function: a compound social being.

This social or group being is only achieved, however, through the most

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38 A change of function, e.g. from builder to teacher, would thus entail a change of name from Masson to Pedug.
extreme circumstances detailed in the novel.\textsuperscript{39} As in the Marriages' Zones, the inhabitants of Planet 8 are forced by external circumstances to abandon their perceptions of life as fixed, immutable; as Canopus says, there is too much 'earth' in their conception and they need to learn that there 'was nothing that did not move and change' (26). As the ice comes and the crops fail, so their diet and way of life are forced to adjust, as they crowd together 'with so much less of food and pleasantness' (22). The light diet of 'fruit and cereals and vegetables' so reminiscent of Zone Three gives way to cheeses and fatty meat; their bright clothes are replaced by heavy coats and skins; slowly the people become coarsened, 'thickset, and with a greasy heavy look, so that it was hard to remember what we had been once. Even our skins seemed to be dulling into the prevailing grey, grey, grey that we could see everywhere...' (55).

The social harmony of their once stable and egalitarian planet is subjected to severe strain. Initial co-operation in the face of crisis (the building of the wall, the breeding of new animals) gives way to a sense of alienation:

...we were not at ease with even the smallest and most ordinary and often-repeated things in our daily lives, from the putting on of the heavy coats to the preparing of the fatty meat which was our staple food....There seemed to be nothing left to us that was instinctive and therefore joyful, or ordinarily pleasurable. We were foreign to ourselves as much as to our surroundings. And therefore groups, and crowds, sank easily and often into silences. (49)

The alienation is social; 'groups' and 'crowds' sink into silence, feel uneasy in

\textsuperscript{39} The extremity of the circumstances is essential. In her 'Afterword' to The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 - though she suggests that the connection is as relevant to The Sirian Experiments as to this novel - Lessing writes of her fascination with the British expeditions to Antarctica led by Scott in the early 1900s, on account of the 'social processes' of the time in comparison with those of the present, and because the driving force of the expedition and its engagement with extreme conditions was 'an attempt to transcend themselves' (176).
their skins, are sapped of joy. The bemoaning of a lack of ‘instinctive’ joyful or pleasurable behaviour suggests that learned social responses have become inappropriate, that a change is necessary to adapt to the altered circumstances.

In fact the shift in behaviour over the society as a whole is a negative one. Sharp increases in crime and violence are reported from various parts of the planet: casual looting, murder, battles over shelter and food riots become commonplace, and indeed Doeg horrifies himself by his ‘instinctive’ (but recalled) gesture in snatching Johor’s red fruits. Along with the violence goes a decrease in caring, because of the cold and misery and the fact that death seems almost welcome: ‘One less mouth to feed....It would be better if children were not born at all....when a species begins to think like this about its most precious, its original, capacity, that of giving birth, of passing on an inheritance, then it is afflicted indeed’ (57). The stasis of Zone Three recurs with depressive interest.

The extremity of the circumstances and the poverty of social response expose the society’s cherished beliefs. According to Jeannette King, it is the ‘deification’ of Canopus that is revealed as faulty. The people regard Canopus not only as their ‘maker’ for having brought them to the planet, but as their rescuer in promised removal to Rohanda; in awaiting rescue they become passive and as King puts it, ‘abrogate all responsibility for self-help, neglecting the present as they seek escape in their dreams of heaven’. Their reliance on deliverance is mistaken, for Canopus only sends food and shelter, and in the

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40 Farb and Armelagos detail how the normal social fabric is disrupted in time of famine, initial alarm producing increased co-operation which subsequently gives way to competition and aggression as taboos progressively disappear, until exhaustion finally breeds apathy. See ‘Epilogue’ to Consuming Passions.

41 Jeannette King, Doris Lessing, 86.
end, with the greatest reluctance, they are forced to abandon their expectations. Similarly, the sacred, inviolate ‘ocean’ is eventually harvested for the sake of the starving. Just as their eating practices are adaptive, so in the end is their ideology, and the sense of ‘solidity, immobility, permanence’ which had prevailed when the planet seemed stable is revealed as chimerical. Slowly, the representatives, at least, begin to feel perceptual movement: on their journey around the planet they huddle together to eat their ‘tasteless and disagreeable dried meat, or roots of the half-frozen rushes’ and to doze

as if we were one organism, not many - as if our separate unique individualities had become another burden that had to be shed, like unnecessary movement. Yet we were in movement...alone of our peoples we felt some kind of restlessness...‘ (64).

It is, of course, these representative figures who are able to carry the spirit of Planet 8 forward into the future. But first they have much to learn, which they do in long slow conversations with Johor, through wordless communication with each other as a group and through feeding their fellows and helping them not to die:

Both kinds of us, the people of Planet 8, the represented and the Representative - endured. The thought in our minds was that they were being changed by what we were forced to do; that we were being changed by their being made to stay alive when they would so very much rather have drifted away from our common effort into death. (137)

The Representatives come to understand that they are none of them alone but are part of the whole, just as individually they are collections of atoms. Notwithstanding the inevitability of death they feel there is no choice but to go
on pulling the last creatures from the lake and chasing the blue plants of the summer to feed life into the starving. It is only when they face what they know is 'the end of the planet' and realise that they have gone beyond the need to eat that they wait and watch and begin to understand what Doeg had long ago known would be 'some new possibilities of growth' (73). Social eating, it might be said, was the busy enactment of social being, a condition figured ultimately in the metaphysical transformation of the Representatives into the Representative,

...like a shoal of fishes or a flock of birds; one, but a conglomerate of individuals - each with its little thoughts and feelings, but these shared with the others, tides of thought, of feeling, moving in and out and around, making the several one. (159)

What Lessing explicitly sets up in her Canopean empire is something she undertakes again and again: an exploration of what it means - for the individual, the group and society - to be a social being. Whether in fantastic, mythical or realist settings, cooking, feeding and eating outside pre-determined and culturally sustained frameworks (e.g. family) are in Lessing's writing invariably connected with questions of social responsibility. Indeed, providing or sharing food might be said to be the principal enactment of social responsibility. When she returns to a solidly realist mode, in The Diaries of Jane Somers (published just after The Making of the Representative, in 1983 and 1984), the provision of

42 'I felt myself being drawn across the ice to the edges of the pond, my hands out, my mouth filled with need, already tasting the crunching salty freshness - but I was brought to a halt before I took one up off the ice and bit into it. And others too, like myself, stumbled towards the food, but stopped, and we were all thinking of those starving in their ice houses, or going about their work, starving.' (139)

43 See footnote 64, Chapter IV, page 165.
food is clearly indicative of the assumption of responsibility. Here, as I have outlined in Chapter IV, the protagonist Janna’s first triumph is to overcome the reluctance and even repulsion she experiences when faced with the aged and sick, through her unlikely friendship with the lonely, poor and irascible old Maudie Fowler. Her relationship with Maudie is contrasted to philanthropic initiatives; before Janna meets Maudie she has tried and rejected visiting the old on Sundays with ‘cake and sympathy’, and later several times resents the suggestion that she is a ‘Good Neighbour’ with the assertion, ‘I am Mrs Fowler’s friend’ (46). As a friend, she is set against all the perceived enemies who have official functions: ‘Council Women’, Home Helps, doctors, District Nurses, people who might put Maudie into a Home - the idea of which reverberates throughout the book as both a threat (for the old) and a tempting solution (for the young and the hard-pressed). 44

Through her friendship with Maudie, Janna becomes aware of other old ladies, and begins to look after, visit and buy food for them too. 45 She shares their tea and cake. Unintentionally but inevitably she is drawn into dealing with the Social Services on behalf of the women she befriends. These are not easy relationships; differences in age, fitness, class and money make for unbridgeable inequalities and minefields of potential offence. Janna recognises that ‘to involve oneself with the infinitely deprived means you take on a weight of guilt. They need so much: you can give so little’ (229). The little is incremental,

44 The question of Old People’s Homes in particular gives rise to speculation about how it is that we value ourselves as a society, if social perceptions of the old rely entirely on criteria of usefulness/uselessness.

45 Both Janna and the old ladies are in some sense ‘representative’, at least of their time and class. Janna’s actions, specifically distanced from institutionalised middle-class do-gooding (generally given a hard time by Lessing), raise doubts as to the effectiveness of public services in catering to personal needs (Meals on Wheels and Thermos tea as against cakes and conversation, a nice piece of fish, a companionable glass of Scotch).
however; Janna continues to visit and care for each of her old women right up to the time they die, which in the case of Annie Reeves spans a period of more than five years.46

In *The Good Terrorist* the connection between the provision of food and responsibility is more complex and more difficult.47 Here Lessing explicitly examines relationships within and between a marginal social group and its society. It is even perhaps misleading to refer to the squatters as a group, since much of the novel has to do with the problematic nature of the collective and its boundaries; clearly it is difficult to reconcile aspirations for cohesion with behaviour which is essentially anti-social, disruptive. What defines the constitution of this group is an open question: does it consist solely of the revolutionaries, in which case Jim (the squat’s original resident), Philip the builder, and the more conventional Mary and Reggie never really belong, or does involvement with the domestic arrangements of the house constitute the unifying factor, in which case the inactive Bert, Jasper and Faye become marginal? Or, should they simply be defined by who eats together? Alice, who with her overwhelming desire for a family is the driving force behind the development of the squat and the coming together of the inhabitants, is the only one with an ideal of coherence.

The group’s difficulty in cohering is vividly illustrated in the conflict over take-away food, which rapidly becomes the focus of discussions on regularising the squat. Alice argues that the additional cost of rates and services can be offset by cheap communal cooking and eating instead of buying take-aways and

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46 Janna is notably less successful with the young. Though she does her best to care for her infuriatingly disordered, comfort-eating, passive niece Kate she is finally unable to get through to her, a failure which presages the arrival of Ben, the *Fifth Child*.

eating out, which as Pat points out 'costs the earth' (31), but such a shift in living patterns involves an infringement of autonomy which strikes at the heart of the deliberately uncommitted relationships of the group. Faye's barely-controlled response to the proposal, asserting a childish resistance to any kind of incorporation, voices a profound if unacknowledged truth about all the members of the group:

> 'Just a minute, comrades,' said she. 'Suppose I like take-away? I like take-away, see? Suppose I like eating out, when the fancy takes me? How about that, then?' (31)

'When the fancy takes me' is all important: not only do the individual squat members jealously guard their personal freedoms, they act, by and large, according to little more than whim.

Alice's cost-effective view prevails however, endorsed as it is by Pat's confirmation from her previous experience and by the unusually expressed loyalty of Jasper: 'Alice is good at feeding people cheap' (31). But she of course has her own hidden agenda. Driven by childhood rage and misery, she seeks to (re)create the family she feels she was denied, now placing herself in the powerful maternal position, mothering not only Jasper but Jim, Philip, even the stray cat - and quieting her own doubts and misgivings:

> Oh yes, all this love and harmony was precarious enough, Alice was thinking as she sat and smiled; just one little thing, pufff and it would be gone. Meanwhile, she put both hands around her mug of coffee, feeling how its warmth fed her, and thought: It is like a family, it is. (249)

Like the rest of the group, Faye is split: even as she asserts resistance and autonomy she is wholly dependent on the motherly Roberta. Each member of the group displays a thoroughly childish, self-centred refusal to submit herself or himself to a common good - in fact to take proper responsibility - such is the long list of personal agendas.
The shift she engineers has not only economic and emotional dimensions, but class ones too. As Faye points out, Alice's domestic standards are distinctly bourgeois, and her dealings with the authorities demonstrate a confident manipulation of middle class discourses. She is nutritionally and hygienically well-educated, worrying about cholesterol and health hazards, and opting always for the healthy, 'good' alternative. However, her fastidiousness distances her from the very people with whom in theory she wishes to identify, as when, for example, she sits in Fred’s Caff, saying 'dutifully' to herself that the customers are the 'salt of the earth', for she is repelled by the fact that they eat cholesterol-laden food, look pallid and greasy and read the Sun or the Daily Mirror. In the end she takes comfort in the notion that they are 'only lumpens', road workers or even self-employed and thus not the men who would 'save Britain from itself' (47). Her middle-class fastidiousness is echoed, and perhaps parodied, when she and Jasper, Pat and Bert, after a visit next door, return to the kitchen where they had recently eaten 'an assortment of take-aways, which they had brought in separately [to]...consume together' (185), and come upon Mary and Reggie in the kitchen, 'eating properly off plates. The mess of pizza fragments, uneaten chips, beer-cans, papers, had been swept into the litter bin' (188).

Just as the cohesion and identity of the group is never properly effected, so its relationship with the world of authority - establishment and revolutionary - is woolly and ill-defined, an irresolution equally figured through eating practices.

49 Jeannette King draws attention to the gulf between the revolutionary theory of this branch of the CCU and their living practices, arguing that they show little understanding of individual members of the working class, including the members of the squat and the homeless young mother Monica. She points out that (apart from Alice) they are disinclined to work either for money or for the common good, and take refuge in paternalistic attitudes towards the 'ordinary people' who cannot appreciate what they, the revolutionaries, are trying to do for them. See Doris Lessing, 93-106.
Unlike, for example, the truly resourceful group surrounding Emily and Gerald in *Memoirs*, these petty anarchists establish no counter-capitalist or 'alternative' system; far from becoming the norm, cheap nourishing food is obstinately associated solely with Alice: ‘her’ soups.\(^{50}\) It is only when Roberta is away that Faye ‘offered to show Alice an economical vegetable stew and it was very nice, and they all enjoyed it’ (277). Significantly, Faye does not actually cook the meal, but shows Alice how to make it. When, eventually, someone other than Alice brings in ‘real’ food, it is Caroline, a ‘good daughter of the middle classes’ (309), who cooks for Alice with secret and almost professional relish, which along with her brisk taking of sugar in her tea - ‘a gesture that announced self-determination’ (270) - suggests a distance from the group as a whole which is borne out in her decisive rejection of the bombing plan when it becomes clear the others are careless of casualties.

Despite Alice’s efforts, the group only temporarily holds together, since the private needs of its individual members - even when acting in the name of ideology - are privileged over its collectivity. Significantly, eating out and the bringing in of take-away food continue alongside the provision of Alice’s soups. Alice too eats elsewhere: she scrounges from her mother, raids the fridge at her aunt Theresa’s, takes Jim out to celebrate his job with fish and chips, takes tea at the Savoy on a spree with Pat, follows breakfast at Fred’s Caff with a move to another café where she feels more at home eating wholemeal buns and honey. Indeed, it is Alice who suggests going to a café when it becomes difficult to talk in the house (115) and happily agrees to go out for a cheering-up meal with Jasper when they have run out of money. Each foray against

\(^{50}\) It is significant that Alice should specialise in soup, given the connotations of soup outlined in the previous chapter. Here, there is also the shadow of the soup kitchen.
'society' is marked or celebrated by eating commercially prepared food. Towards the climax of the book, when the bombing is being planned and executed, the 'comrades' celebrate their choice of target by going to the local Indian restaurant, go out for tea followed by the cinema after reconnoitring the target, and wind up with supper again at 'their' Indian restaurant. And when they have installed the explosives in the car they go, despite the recognition that they are noisy and noticeable, to an all-night café for a meal together: "To hell with it," had said Jocelin, and "Fuck that," had said Bert' (369).

How, then, do the group's eating practices characterise them and reflect their connection with society at large? This 'Communist' anarchistic opportunist group, themselves rejected in many ways, both reject and exploit what they reject; they consume the edible products of the society they condemn with only sporadic and ineffectual efforts at a culinary separatism which might express independence and solidarity. Their heedless inconsistency, their failure to assume responsibility and think through what they are about, is consonant with Dorothy Mellings' disillusioned view of them as spoiled children (348), 'running around playing at revolutions, playing little games, thinking you're important...’ (354), and Caroline’s dismissal of their action and analysis as ‘amateur’. What the house offers as a symbol of the social body is never developed; only Alice, Pat (who leaves) and Philip (who is not of the group, and dies anyway) strive to make functional. Social eating, the other group currency, is either a one-way transaction, in which Alice cooks (though in the early days Philip does once provide croissants and coffee) and the others eat, or a value-free commercial purchase which does nothing to reinforce a sense of working together towards something they all believe in.

There is, it must be said, nothing 'natural' about social eating, for, like
taste and appetite, consideration for others is a social, even political, construction; the commune’s impulse towards heedless personal satisfaction is largely indicative of the unevolved state of their consciousnesses, whether seen from a psychological, social, political or mystical point of view. However, utopian communion is not really in question here: an ‘ideal’ model of social eating would be overly prescriptive, totalising, bland and - in the profoundest sense - unrealistic. For Lessing, it seems to me, displays a robust recognition of social struggle, of deprivation, intractability and that in humans which is inimical to society.

This hard nub of the unsocialisable is explored in The Fifth Child, when a harmonious and smoothly functioning social group is invaded by the unsocialised in the form of Ben, the fifth child, who shatters Harriet and David’s romantic idyll of family, setting child against adult, father against mother.51 There are numerous indications of Ben’s ‘otherness’ even before his birth: the ‘impossibility’ of his conception, the violence of his inter-uterine movements, the listless irritability and distress of Harriet and her appetite, which is:

enormous, insatiable - so bad she was ashamed and raided the fridge when no one could see her. She would interrupt her nocturnal peregrinations to stuff into herself anything she could find to eat. She even had secret cashes like an alcoholic’s hoards, only it was food: chocolate, bread, pies. (54)

In this family of plenty (albeit partly sustained by the grandparents), where it is

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51 This is not a realist text, although Lessing includes much realist detail within the fable. Isabel Gamallo describes the novel as a tale of ‘ancestral Gothic’, drawing attention to Lessing’s use of many of the narrative features of Gothic fiction, such as descriptions of the house, the ‘cyclical and ceremonial’ time framework, the invasion of the uncanny, and the exploration of archetypal female psychological fears (e.g. of giving birth to a monster - cf. Ellen Moers on Frankenstein). Isabel Anievas Gamallo, ‘Magic, Fable and Neogothic Romance in Doris Lessing’s The Fifth Child’, a paper given at the 1995 ESSE Conference, Glasgow.
characteristic for everyone, together around the large table, to be supplied with liberal helpings of food, such unnecessary secrecy and gorging are anti-social, suggesting alienation, even perversion.

An appetite which is socially shameful and yet which may not be denied foreshadows Ben’s resistance to socialisation through the training of eating habits. Ben, indeed, resists from the first, emptying his mother’s breast in seconds, roaring always for more, biting - literally - the hand that feeds him. Significantly, his first words are not ‘Mummy’ or ‘Daddy’, but ‘I want cake’ (83). As he grows he acquires a facade of normality, learning by imitating his siblings not to talk with his mouth full or eat with his mouth open, but this is mere semblance, ‘the energetic animal movements of his jaws confined behind closed lips’ (115). Ben’s superficial conformity does not extend to the absorption of socially endorsed food preferences and eating practices instrumental in the construction of social identity, as is revealed when his mother finds him squatting on the kitchen table, grunting over an uncooked chicken he has torn apart. His Shakespearean response to her scolding is merely ‘Poor Ben hungry’.

Ben is incapable of eating socially, communicatively, as his uncompromising ‘I want cake’, ‘I want milk’ suggest; his strong survival instinct and devouring, single-minded satisfaction of appetite relate to a more primitive, empathy-free, non-communicating order of being. Variously described as ‘neanderthal’, a ‘throwback’, an ‘alien’, the infant Ben is identified with a

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52 Shakespeare, King Lear III iv. Edgar, in his guise as a madman, repeatedly apostrophises himself as ‘poor Tom’, as in ‘Poor Tom’s a-cold’ (line 144).

53 Ben’s inability to perceive narrative - that fundamental act of communication and means by which we construct identities, both social and individual - is, apart from food, the most telling device Lessing uses to indicate his inability to become socialised.
positive lack of human development or enlightenment, both individually and
socially. While his siblings patiently instruct him in what is expected, in
reality they progressively withdraw, at first in looks and conversation and finally
by physical removal, until the family unit simply disintegrates. The great
smooth table, with its palpable history of feasts and family, is scarred and
darkened by the atavistic shadow of the unassimilable predatory individual. Not
surprisingly, perhaps, Ben is associated with the ‘barbarous eighties’ - and, as
Harriet’s final speculation suggests, offers a gloomy prognostication - for
Lessing’s writing nudges always from the simply private towards the public and
the representative, and wider historical, political and social implications are
always part of the picture.

Yet Ben does achieve an enculturation of sorts. The first group to offer
him some kind of acceptance do so for money. Unemployed, hanging out at
‘Betty’s Caff’ and devoting themselves to motor bikes, they form a marginalised
and alienated subgroup of working class culture, and though they treat him as a
pet and call him names, he does, through them, acquire some skills: ‘Half a plate
of chips, half price big plate of chips... Shut the door, because it is cold... Eat
with a spoon, not with fingers... Hold on tight going around corners...’ (118).
Their recognition of him and their tolerance exist precisely because they are
themselves marginal; as Harriet acknowledges to herself, ‘people understood
very well - that is, if they weren’t experts, doctors’ (110), for such ‘experts’

Elizabeth Maslen gives due credit to the degree of Ben’s significance, describing him (like
Alice Mellings) as, ‘both threat and victim... whose deficiencies, as they have to be termed in the
context of contemporary society, reach back to the roots of human society and act as a fabular,
dystopic challenge to all concepts of the progress of civilization’. Elizabeth Maslen, Doris Lessing,

The connection is direct: it is precisely because Ben is not incorporated by the family group
that it is destroyed by him.
cannot and will not accept that Ben lies outside their terms of reference.

Unsurprisingly, the 'uneducable, the unassimilable, the hopeless' (144) gravitate towards Ben. As with the children of Memoirs, a group identity is constituted by the negatives or absences they hold in common. They all play truant, watching television for hours, raiding the fridge or bringing in fast food, or roaming off as a gang in the town or to the seaside. Not merely unemployed and marginalised, this group is unemployable, and probably criminal, living only for their own thrills and pleasures and quite outside the norms and strictures of their society, 'an alienated, non-comprehending, hostile tribe' (154). As their anti-social behaviour grows bolder, so their taste expands to encompass 'foodstuffs that originated in a dozen countries. Pizzas, and quiches; Chinese food, and Indian; pita bread filled with salad; tacos, tortillas, samosas, chili con carne; pies and pasties and sandwiches...’ (154). Through their eating, they are metaphorically drawn towards the only society they could belong to, a nomadic, polyglot underworld, peopled by the unassimilable and overlooked, those whom Society can neither label nor incorporate, who can eat ('Give me cake.' 'Bring me Coke.' ) but never share, never cook.

Like Gerald's gang of children in Memoirs (to whom, with Gerald, Emily, Hugo and the narrator, the future belongs), these social misfits do form a social group of sorts, even if it is defined by negatives. But equally, like that of the chaotic squatters of The Good Terrorist, their eating never realises what might be seen as its radical potential, except inasmuch as it cuts across boundaries, subverts custom and contributes to the collapse of order. Perhaps, in both cases, the social or political import lies not so much in what these subgroups establish as in what they subvert. Neither the inhabitants of Alice's squat nor Ben's gang can offer a cohesive, let alone coherent, alternative to the
established, habitual social patterns of consuming against which (among other things) they rebel. Instead, their peculiar, anti-Social versions of social eating exert a disruptive, iconoclastic pressure. Social eating becomes so, and becomes political, not by dint of communion and solidarity, but by refusal and rejection.

An assumption implicit in much of my argument, especially concerning *The Good Terrorist*, is that when people come together for a collective purpose (eating) there is potential for some sort of radicalisation. The juxtaposition of shifts and changes with social eating (especially the all-women ceremonies) in *The Marriages* and the frequency with which the comrades eat together in the ‘Children of Violence’ novels suggest as much. Radical potential must, however, depend to some extent on circumstances; the quip ‘let them eat cake’ would be unlikely to inflame a mob with full bellies, and the effects of eating are themselves frequently soporific. Equally, the traditions, rituals and celebratory nature of much social eating are almost by definition inherently conservative.

The question of radicalisation is, therefore, problematic. However, since Angela Carter’s self-proclaimed stance is radical, if not subversive, I want in the concluding part of this chapter to look at her final two novels as a way of exploring the political significance of social eating. Given Carter’s use of

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56 The situation is a little different for the characters in *Memoirs*. Here, the very real possibility of starvation itself acts as a radicalising force; the gang of small children, whose lives are filled with hunger and fighting, come together simply for ‘protection in numbers’, but their collectivity grants them visibility. Their subsequent actions against the ‘haves’ are unsuccessful inasmuch as they confirm their own exclusion and deprivation, but they serve to further strengthen the identity of the gang, and ultimately gain them the care if not the control proffered by Gerald.

57 The rejection in Ben’s case is further complicated by the fact that it is his refusal to adapt to social being that results in his being incarcerated, drugged and starved. As a result he becomes both (slightly) more malleable - since he can now be threatened - and more alienated.

58 I do not mean to suggest here that Carter politicises only social eating. Clearly, her cannibalistic, vampiric and sexual eaters are highly suggestive political figures.
non-realist modes, this is by no means a straightforward matter of looking for socialist suppers, though Lizzie’s communistic mutterings in *Nights at the Circus* (like the sabotaging effects of the *bombe surprise*) do offer a sort of dialectic. With varying degrees of subtlety and obliqueness, this novel suggests several means by which social or communicative eating can be politicised: through the encouragement of solidarity, when the eating together leads to subversive activity, or because social eating is associated with some sort of perspectival shift in time and space.

Solidarity in Carter’s writing tends, on the whole, to be female, though it is not exclusively so, and neither are all women included. Ironically, the traitorous women who eschew sisterhood are often themselves cooks: Saskia in *Wise Children*, for example, or the drunken cook at Madame Schreck’s house of freaks. Here the ‘freak’ women look out for each other, the capable and loving Fanny taking responsibility for feeding Sleeping Beauty and preparing food for the other women when the drunken cook is comatose, most notably sending Toussaint out for a piece of pork on Fevvers’ last day, as well as organising the women’s - and Toussaint’s - flight. Though equally oppressed, Toussaint is distinguished from the women by his refusal to take part in the *tableaux vivants* and by his lack of a mouth, an absence emblematic of his silenced oppression, which prevents him from eating other than by means of a tube through his nose. He is thus both with the oppressed women and not of them.

At Nelson’s brothel there is still greater expression of solidarity, though not so much in the face of occupational oppression as against ‘the horrors of the outside’ (26), including, we must assume, those of masculinity. The house is decidedly and wholly female, even down to its dog and fecund cats, so that ‘a sub-text of fertility underwrote the glittering sterility of the pleasure of the flesh
available within the academy' (39). Interestingly enough, there is no mention at all of food or eating among all the sex and industry, until Ma Nelson's death; it is over the funeral baked meats that the harsh (masculine and religious) external world breaks in, in the shape of Nelson's unforgiving Nonconformist elder brother. Though he upends the pork pies and vintage port in righteous rage as he gives the women notice to leave the following morning, it is they who have the last laugh. After a final valedictory bottle of port and piece of fruitcake, the women give Ma Nelson a heroic send-off, by setting fire to the house.

The women's solidarity persists until 'the fire had fairly taken hold' (50), at which point they disperse to their separate new lives. Thus the only occasions on which this group of women are seen to eat together are the funeral, at which their solidarity is defensively triggered by attack from without (inflaming their grief into full-blown grievance), and the farewell snack which, echoing the previous communal eating and recalling their shared past, precipitates their collective act of reprisal. Not only does their eating as a group express communion and solidarity, it leads directly to insurgent action.

Subversive solidarity is similarly generated over food in the Siberian ('House of Correction') panopticon, as first Olga Alexandrovna (touching the guard's gloved hand that holds her breakfast) and then all the prisoners and guards breach the distinction between guard and guarded and the boundaries between prisoners. Notes and drawings are secreted in bread rolls, glances exchanged through grilles, touches and caresses sneaked in exercise periods. When the prisoners and guards unite against the surveillant Countess, they equip themselves, not forgetting bread and sausage, setting off to found the

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59 The panopticon, designed by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century as part of a package of prison reforms (which were not adopted), is discussed at length by Foucault in Discipline and Punish.
republic of free women.

The Panopticon is watched over not only by the Countess but by a clock that told the Moscow time that was not the time of these latitudes and this clock regulated their risings, their feedings, registered every slow minute of incarceration and sometimes the face of this clock seemed indistinguishable from the livid face of the Countess. (212)

The space and time in which the women are located are brought together under control, parcelled up like the black bread, broth and porridge the prisoners are fed, morning and evening. The united women’s act of liberation results in the destruction of the clock, the symbolic stopping of regulated time, so that they move from the global, regulated world of the panopticon into regional, unmarked time and the local anonymity of the taiga.  

According to Anthony Giddens, modernity is characterised by a disconnection between time and space (and place) and the ‘emptying’ of both. This he contrasts with pre-modern societies, in which time-reckoning required socio-spatial markers: "when" was almost universally either connected with "where" or identified by regular natural occurrences.

In other words, clocks permit a measuring of time unrelated to the activities that fill it. Space is similarly ‘emptied’, the modern dislocation between space and place,

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60 I can’t help thinking that Carter chose to refer to the area in terms of its vegetation particularly because the word ‘taiga’ echoes her favoured trope of the tiger in connection with femininity and especially female sexuality, not only in this novel but in short stories such as ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ (The Bloody Chamber) and ‘Lizzie and the Tiger’ (American Ghosts and Old World Wonders).
foster relations between 'absent' others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction.\textsuperscript{61}

Thus any particular locale may be shaped by social or political influences geographically far removed. The panopticon futuristically embodies precisely these modern dislocations, with its 'emptied' space and Moscow time. The breaking of the clock suggests a 'refilling' of time, for without such a 'timepiece' the hours will have meaning only in relation to what fills them. Similarly, space is 'refilled' by its reconnection with place, a reconnection for which food and eating form a suitable vehicle.

Where the panopticon is concerned, such a 'refilling' is clearly and intentionally political. The appropriation, or reappropriation, of time and space inevitably represents an arrogation of power, but where this is associated with eating - a thoroughly embodied activity - something of the 'filled' quality of pre-modern social time pertains.\textsuperscript{62} Time and space, occupied with the present activities of eating, thus expand to accommodate comradeship, collaboration, radical discourse, sedition. In \textit{Nights at the Circus} Carter deliberately invokes a pre-modern time frame, describing New Year's Eve 1900 at the end of the novel as 'the cusp of the modern age', of which the Siberians (and, she suggests, most of the world's inhabitants) remain blissfully ignorant, 'the whole idea of the twentieth century, or any other century at all, for that matter [being] a rum

\textsuperscript{61} Anthony Giddens, \textit{The Consequences of Modernity} (Cambridge and Oxford, Polity Press/Basil Blackwell, 1990), 17-21. These crucial changes, Giddens argues, provide the conditions for the 'disembedding' of social relations and organisations from their immediate contexts, a precondition, it seems, for the globalisation and fragmentation of contemporary life. In terms of eating, both the traditionally-accepted mealtimes (however much these alter over time) and relatively local content are equally disembedded - hence, perhaps, the whole 'fast food' (empty time, any space) revolution. For further discussion of this, see my conclusion.

\textsuperscript{62} Just as theorising of the body aims to resist the fragmentations of postmodernism, so food and eating might be a way of resisting the dislocations of time, space and place, for it is difficult to imagine the satisfactions of a virtual dinner - unless for a virtual stomach.
And, more specifically, there are episodes in which time and space are themselves shifted, as though they somehow cannot contain their content.

The clowns’ supper is one such occasion, prefiguring both Buffo’s last supper and the clowns’ departure. Over the fish soup and black bread Buffo expounds on the nature of the clown, a sermon that gives way, with the help of vodka, to a dance:

It seemed that they were dancing the room apart. As the baboushka slept, her too, too solid kitchen fell into pieces under the blows of their disorder as if it had been, all the time, an ingenious prop, and the purple Petersburg night inserted jagged wedges into the walls... (124)

The radical content of the clowns’ supper threatens the disintegration of time and space, asserting the potential to invoke the end of the world, a reminder that collectivity and subversion are not of themselves a good.

But the major section of this novel in which time, at least, is shifted or appropriated is in Fevvers’ initial narration. As she and Lizzie and Walser sit in her dressing room, she tells her story, accompanied by champagne and then tea, and punctuated first by eel pies with mash from the local pie shop and later by bacon sandwiches from the all-night cab-stand. As Lizzie makes the first cup of tea, Big Ben strikes midnight for the second time; as she brings in the bacon sandwiches and makes more tea, it strikes for the third. The tea-drinking, eating, storytelling thus take place in a piece of suspended time, somehow

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63 She does this, less overtly, in other novels too. Most of Heroes and Villains takes place in a highly localised, timeless space; various episodes in Dr Hoffman, such as Desiderio’s living and eating with the peepshow owner or river people, take place in a space outside time, and in The Magic Toyshop Finn cries ‘There goes the time’ as he breaks the cuckoo clock during their festive final breakfast.
achieved between Fevvers and Lizzie and Ma Nelson’s stopped clock, itself, according to Fevvers, ‘living proof that time stands still’ (48). This is story time, carnival time, larger-than-life time, an occasion for unsettling Walser’s innocent New World certainties, and setting in motion a train of events in which all have to revise their ideas.

Walser does not eat, either the pies or the bacon sandwiches, reservedly describing English food as ‘an acquired taste’ and ‘the eighth wonder of the world’ (22). He is also (mildly) adversely affected by both the champagne and the tea. He both withholds himself and is located by the women as marginal to Fevvers’ discourse. The eating focus is on Fevvers’ large and uninhibited feasting, which serves both as a statement of Cockney solidarity (eel pies, food of the cabbies) and as a challenge to Walser. But the main significance of the episodes relates, I think, to the interplay between the storytelling, the food and drink and gender politics. Much of Fevvers’ narration during this night has to do with sisterhood and with female surmounting of adversity. Walser is inveigled or hustled into the suspension of disbelief and criticism. The two additional hours of night appropriated by the two women are filled with their story. Even the space is brimming with accoutrements of a generic femininity, or the means by which it might be constructed: frilly drawers, coloured silk stockings, corsets, billets doux, pots of rouge, powder, cold cream.

64 Indeed, Fevvers originally describes the clock as ‘the sign, or signifier of Ma Nelson’s little private realm...on which the hands stood always at either midnight or noon...for Ma Nelson said the clock in her reception room must show the dead centre of the day or night, the shadowless hour, the hour of vision and revelation, the still hour in the centre of the storm of time’ (29). The ‘sign or signifier’ (deliberately lacking a ‘signified’?) is, it seems, transferable to Lizzie’s and Fevvers’ equally special realm.

65 ‘Oddly enough, in spite of the mess, which resembled the aftermath of an explosion in a corsetière’s, Fevvers’ dressing-room was notable for its anonymity...not even a framed photograph propped amongst the unguents on her dressing-table...no lucky mascots...neither personal luxuries...Nothing to give her away.’ (14). The space also has a political dimension in the form of Lizzie’s pamphlets.
The time and space annexed by Fevvers, by the clowns, by the whole world of shows and circus is, of course, the time of carnival. *Nights at the Circus* is a thoroughly carnivalesque novel, as many commentators have pointed out, and Fevvers herself embodies much that accords with Bakhtin's analysis of carnival: association with popular culture, the subversion or reversal of the expected, overblown bodily function and above all the play of an inclusive, 'profoundly universal laughter'. Carter herself had apparently not read Bakhtin, at least until after she wrote *Nights at the Circus*, but her feeling for the traditional, subversive and affirmative aspects of carnival is undeniable.

*Wise Children* is, if anything, still more inclusively carnivalesque, and there are few intimations of what happens when the carnival is over. I will return to this point, but I want first to consider the significance of Wise Children's carnival. According to Bakhtin, carnival is essentially opposed to 'official' culture, and 'belongs to the borderline between art and life', two characteristics evident in Carter's choice of circus and music hall. Bakhtin also claims that laughter effects a destruction of existing false hierarchies and the creation of new connections (specifically rooted in the body) in order to

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67 'Propp and structuralist theory in general were certainly part of her own early reading. After *Nights at the Circus* people assumed that Bakhtin on the carnivalesque was too, but not so: she eventually read him because he was invoked so often by readers.' Angela Carter interviewed by Lorna Sage, in Malcolm Bradbury ed., *New Writing* (London: Minerva, 1992), 188.

68 I should stress that Carter's carnivale, both here and elsewhere, resembles the inclusive carnivale which Bakhtin escribes to the Middle Ages, accentuating corporeality, flux and regeneration, as opposed to the more limited 'aesthetics of the beautiful' of the Renaissance or the emphasis on subjectivity and alienation of Romanticism and Modernism.

embrace fundamental realities.\textsuperscript{70} As a trope for the expression of heresies, the undermining of legitimacy and the making of radical connections it appears ideal.

Carnival, says Bakhtin, has a characteristic peculiar logic of the "inside out" (à l'envers), of the "turnabout", of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings.\textsuperscript{71}

Such a logic informs the deliberate evocation of carnival - including its subversiveness and emphasis on food, drink, bodies, sex and death - manifest in Wise Children, with its disingenuously artless pursuit of truth through a dizzying play of oppositions, doubleness, substitutions and the transgression of boundaries.

The novel is filled with contradictions and reversals, and the set piece feasts, the formal 'social eating' organised by those at the top of the hierarchy, are always undermined: the party that culminates in the burning down of Lynde Court; the sabotaged Hollywood Elizabethan engagement celebrations; Melchior's 100th birthday party with its unforeseen revelations.\textsuperscript{72} Other oppositions contribute to the pattern: the themes of legitimacy and illegitimacy, the putative and disputed paternities, pregnancies, the opposition between


\textsuperscript{71} Rabelais, 11. All the elements listed in this quotation are easily identifiable in Wise Children, from the alternating humiliations of Tiffany and Tristram to the crown-play between the Hazard brothers.

\textsuperscript{72} It is not only Bakhtin who is evoked here, of course, but Shakespeare, in both the narrative content (the film etc.) and in terms of plotting, coincidences, revelations and other romance characteristics, as well as textual allusion to almost all of his plays (in 'Angela Carter's Curious Room', Omnibus, Carter says she wanted to include references to every Shakespeare play, but fails to get every single one in - 'but then I would, wouldn't I? I'm only a girl...')
theatre and music hall and the very polarities of negation and affirmation. Theatre is in decline and music hall diminished to crude revues, yet the whole culture of show business expressed in the twins’ motto, the ‘joy it is to dance and sing’ is here associated with renewal, multiple births and continuity. This renewal combines with the decline to produce an oxymoronic combination typical of what Bakhtin describes as the ‘pregnant death’ of grotesque realism, ‘always conceiving’, the aged body in proximity to the newborn, one body emerging from another.

One character almost singly embodies carnival in Wise Children, and this is Uncle Peregrine, characterised as ‘not so much a man, more of a travelling carnival’ (169). Of a generous physicality, growing ever larger as the book progresses, Peregrine is associated with eating, drinking, a profligate sexuality and repeated evanescence. He blows in on a wind full of butterflies, reverse echo of the wind called up by Buffo’s Clowns; he claims that ‘Life’s a carnival’ (222) and is described as ‘the heart and soul of mirth’ (92), embracing the whole cast:

for, although promiscuous, he was also faithful, and, where he loved, he never altered, nor saw any alteration’ (208). 73

He is, in short, a man of limitless and generous appetite, the source of crème de menthe and Fuller’s walnut cake, who draws cream buns from Grandma’s cleavage on the seafront at Brighton. His gargantuan size is not only a product of Dora’s desire, but an indication of largeness of function. The erotic force of Uncle Peregrine offsets all the negating and entropic influences at work in the

73 Cf. ‘...love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds,/Or bends with the remover to remove.’ Shakespeare, Sonnet CXVI, ‘Let me not to the marriage of true minds’. 
novel, including physical decline, so that he remains a potent redhead at a hundred years of age. This towering, Falstaffian figure stands for and emphasises the comprehensiveness of carnival, which through him encompasses all appetites - murder, incest, poisoning, cruelty, gourmandism, as well as 'laughter, forgiveness, generosity, reconciliation' (227).

Carter follows Bakhtin here in embracing both negation and affirmation:

Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter). This is a profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world.74

Carnival is thus inclusive, and its subversive, democratising and regenerative functions are irresistible.75 However, Bakhtin clearly states that this is only true during the carnival. Carter herself insists on the limitations of carnival, puncturing her romp through 'Pantoland' with the reminder:

The essence of the carnival, the festival, the Feast of Fools, is transience. It is here today and gone tomorrow, a release of tension not a reconstitution of order, a refreshment...after which everything can go on again exactly as if nothing had happened.76

She makes much the same point in an interview, even to criticising a popularising of Bakhtin that (over)emphasises the subversive:

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75 'While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part.' Rabelais, 7.
It's interesting that Bakhtin became very fashionable in the 1980s, during the demise of the particular kind of theory that would have put all kinds of question marks around the whole idea of the carnivalesque. I'm thinking about Marcuse and repressive desublimation, which tells you exactly what carnivals are for. The carnival has to stop. The whole point about the feast of fools is that things went on as they did before, after it stopped.  

Significantly, Carter does not allow that anything might be changed by the carnival; on the contrary, in her view things go back to being exactly as they were. From this rather conservative perspective, the carnivalesque in Carter may be seen as in fact less subversive than her other writing, for the sting of the aberrant is drawn by legitimation or acceptance by the powers that be, and a sanctioned feast of fools has no real potency. By this token, carnival's embracing of plurality, its very inclusiveness, is ultimately affirmatory rather than subversive. Marina Warner argues persuasively that Carter's 'comic disguise...staged a kind of retreat, a retreat brought about by the climate of the Thatcher hegemony', that humour in these circumstances is a 'last-ditch stratagem, even an admission of defeat', despite what she calls the 'heroic optimism' in the assertion of joy in Wise Children. Warner's argument depends, however, on a particular view of humour and its function; loosen a little the totalising tendency of carnival, translate 'heroic optimism' into heroic defiance and the comedy - satirical, puncturing and rebellious as it is - takes a harder edge.

77 'Angela Carter interviewed by Lorna Sage' in Bradbury ed., New Writing, 183.

78 This accords with Foucault's view of the defusing of dissent by inclusion, the piecemeal progression of which, from the times of coercion to those of inscription and internalisation, he traces in both Discipline and Punish and Madness and Civilization.

79 Marina Warner, 'Angela Carter: Bottle Blonde, Double Drag' in Lorna Sage ed., Flesh and the Mirror, 253-4. Elaine Jordan, too, implicitly in her essay, 'The Dangerous Edge' in the same volume, and explicitly in her address to the 'Fireworks' conference on Carter (York, September 1993), takes the view that Carter's earlier, riskier fiction is more radical as well as more disturbing.
For, despite its prevalence, carnival is not the only frame within which food and eating might be examined, and it is worth considering finally whether the novel's overall championing of the illegitimate is politically relevant and whether whatever might be called social eating in Wise Children in any way radicalises the spurned and marginalised. The eating habits of the 'illegitimate' certainly seem to be endorsed as a traditional, nostalgia-inducing, diet of the impoverished: the Chance sisters ingest bread and dripping and jam, Grandma's odorous cabbage, crumpets, poached eggs at Joe Lyons, sausage rolls and Scotch eggs as young hoofers, bacon and bacon sandwiches as adults - and they drink cup after cup of tea, as well as gin.

When Uncle Peregrine swoops into the picture, the food takes an extravagant turn, as it does on the Brighton beach picnic, with ham and chicken and foie gras and champagne. But when the eating occasion takes place in a highly 'legitimate' and public space, an element of discomfort is introduced, for example at the Chance twins' birthday meal at the Savoy Grill:

...there we were, us girls, done up to the nines, little navy suits, gloves to match, red hats with big brims down over one eye, nice shoes, nice handbags, trying to look as if [Grandma] didn't belong to us, and Peregrine, at ease, as ever, enjoying every minute, the bastard.

The waiter hovered: 'for the first course may I suggest oysters, caviar, smoked salmon...' 'That sounds quayte nayce, thanks very much,' she said so she had all three, washing them festively down with crème de menthe, lifting her pinky like a dog lifts its leg as she raised her glass....We could have dropped through the floor. (94)

There is a certain deflating of waiterly unctuousness here, but it happens at the expense of a poignant lack of solidarity. This is, perhaps, part of the point. As I suggested earlier, the big 'legitimate' public eating occasions are without
exception subverted: the swan-centred party at Lynde Court by the building’s immolation; the birthday party for ‘Darling Buds’ (bloody duck, syllabub, Harrods birthday cake) by the cake-destroying tantrum of the spurned Saskia and Imogen; the ‘Elizabethan’ wedding feast in Hollywood by many factors, including an excess of garlic in the marinara sauce. Even the final birthday party does not run as planned by Melchior and his third wife, subverted both by Saskia’s catering, and the series of comic revelations and resolutions.

Indeed, the only group which seems to establish or confirm its sense of coherence in eating together is the English colony in Hollywood, who have teaparties instead of sex, and calmly eat their kippers and toast with Cooper’s Oxford marmalade when Daisy Duck arrives to drop her bombshell. Since this is a distinctly upper-middle class group, there is no question of radicalisation here. Social eating, it seems, is political in this novel solely through its celebration of the illegitimate, at home in their own (impoverished, South London, working class) sphere, or when its effect is subversive, puncturing the intended patronage or power-wielding of the rich and privileged, and going some way to reducing the odds of material inequality. As with Lessing’s misfits, the implication is of a politics of refusal.
CONCLUSION

In some ways, my discussion has taken a fairly conservative line. Attempting to relate fictional representations of food and eating to pre-existing explanations of human behaviour - whether in terms of psychoanalytic theory, the history of manners or socio-political analyses - almost inescapably privileges continuity over change, even when context is taken into account. The more essentialist theories (and here I particularly have in mind the psychoanalytic) clearly produce their own difficulties, not least the temptation to make sweeping generalisations about people’s fundamental relationship to eating. But even the more dynamic theories I have invoked (Foucault’s unstable power relations, for example) serve to endorse the idea of food as a language, eating an exchange.

A large part of my argument has been devoted to suggesting just this, for it seems to me most of the novelists I have looked at use food and eating as communication in one way or another. I have suggested implicitly throughout the discussion that eating conventions, traditions and rituals, nostalgia and sheer human insecurity serve to reinforce existing patterns when it comes to food. By the same token, ‘aberrant’ appetites are measured against what is generally taken to be some kind of social norm, whether they are predatory or insatiable or severely repressed. Both the food that is consumed and the behaviour surrounding its provision, preparation and eating, relate sufficiently to what is known, understood and expected for us to decode what is significant about their use or about any and many deviances from the norm.

In this way (as well as providing ‘conversation’ within fiction) food and eating become a mode of communication to the reader. This, I hope, my
argument has elucidated. There is, however, a problem on the horizon, one which lies with contemporary life and those who write of it. Doris Lessing is effectively the only writer considered here to have written explicitly about the massive cultural changes currently involving food and eating, to have characterised what Anthony Giddens refers to as the 'discontinuities' of modernity. Lessing's characterisation of Ben's gang towards the end of The Fifth Child centres not only around their 'hanging out' in parks and cafés and cinemas and their indiscriminate consumption of television, but on their eating habits, which enact the late twentieth century shift from more or less formal meal times to 'grazing'. Ben's gang eat, simply, when they feel like it, drinking beer from the can and consuming 'take-away' straight from the paper or the cartons, with no concern for meal-times or any idea of conventional middle-class 'good' manners.

Their eating is - in Giddens' terms - marked by its lack of differentiation, in time, place and content. Part of the point Lessing is making here has to do with Ben's belonging not to his family but to an unnamed, even unrecognised underworld of the unassimilable that is truly international - and this too is a feature of modernity as portrayed by Giddens. But on a more general and mundane level, Lessing characterises what have been profound changes in our eating habits in the last few years: the attrition of family mealtimes and the slow disappearance of the dining table, the increased tendency to eat at different hours and in different places, the prevalence of snacks and 'fast food' and the rise of what in marketing parlance is now referred to as 'leisure eating'.

1 Giddens suggests not only that the sheer pace and scope of change has produced a 'new and distinct type of social order', but that such change is constant, our knowledge that 'there is no stable social world to know' itself contributing to the world's 'unstable or mutable character'. Anthony Giddens, The Consequences of Modernity, 48, 45.
Clearly this poses problems for the notion of food as a currency or language and eating as an exchange. Once food is internationalised it begins to lose many of its specific ethnic or cultural associations, such as those discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly, more or less constant eating, without form or ceremony, allows none of the complex and subtle interactions and power plays that are possible in situations of shared cultural training and expectations. The logical progression of such globalising changes in food content and eating habits is on the one hand a homogeneity of choice and on the other a reversion to 'uncivilized' or unsocialised manners and an expectation of instant gratification.

Only the future, of course, can tell whether food and eating generally will move in this direction, or indeed what writers will do with it. Given the developments of the past, however, (the comparatively recent invention of the fork, for example, or the emergence and then demise of afternoon tea) it seems highly likely that whatever new forms of eating emerge, they will soon develop their own sets of customs. A hierarchy of fast food outlets will no doubt somehow become known and fashionable people will appear at particular places. Neologisms and arcane rituals will be devised by fast food devotees and patterns in New Eating behaviour will be documented by sociologists and anthropologists. Unless by some strange chance social behaviour should fundamentally change, the discourses of food and eating will become modified, will shift to incorporate global foods and the New Eating, and power relations

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2 A similar thing can be seen to be happening already, with the year-round availability of practically all fruit and vegetables: strawberries are no longer special when the English can eat them at Christmas; mangoes lose their tropical associations; green salad can accompany every meal; courgettes and mange-tout peas become boringly mundane. What has to happen next, of course, is that new varieties must be bred to tempt consumers' jaded palates: capitalism has taken root in the market garden.
will simply, swiftly adapt, slippery and implacable as they are.

And writers? In this culture at least, they will, of course, continue to use food and eating to explore and convey philosophical, psychological, moral and political concerns probably not so very different from those I have outlined in this thesis. Whatever the scale and scope of future lives, there is little doubt that people will continue to hunger, to struggle for control, to eat, to feed each other or to starve, that food and eating, however different, will remain essential in people’s lives - and whatever people will do, writers will use. This, really, is the import of my thesis: food and eating are at the core of lives, inscribed in psyches, embedded in culture, vehicle and substance of social interaction, enmeshed with the relationship of the self to the world. For writers and readers alike, such a resource seems almost immeasurable.

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Works by Doris Lessing


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