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**F.O.O.D. (Fighting Order Over Disorder):**  
**An Analysis of Food and Its Significance in the Australian Novels of**  
**Christina Stead, Patrick White and Thea Astley.**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Humanities  
James Cook University  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to find a correlation between food as symbol and food as necessity, as represented in selected Australian novels by Christina Stead, Patrick White and Thea Astley. Food as a springboard to a unique interpretation of the selected novels has been under-utilised in academic research. Although comparatively few novels were selected for study, on the basis of fastidiousness, they facilitated a rigorous hermeneutical approach to the interpretation of food and its inherent symbolism. The principle behind the selection of these novels lies in the complexity of the prose and how that complexity elicits the “transformative powers of food” (Muncaster 1996, 31). The thesis examines both the literal and metaphorical representations of food in the novels and relates how food is an inextricable part of **ALL** aspects of life, both actual and fictional. Food sustains, nourishes and, intellectually, its many components offer unique interpretative tools for textual analysis.

Indeed, the overarching structure of the thesis is analogous with the processes of eating, digestion and defecation. For example, following a discussion of the inextricable link between food, quest and freedom in Chapter One, which uncovers contrary attitudes towards food in the novels discussed, the thesis presents a more complex psychoanalytic theory of mental disorders related to food in Chapter Two. The peripatetic nature of the mind and body and how this relates to food are reflected in the following chapter, which considers the nexus between dietetics, numerology and lexicology. A unique methodology is promulgated to examine how binaries such as black/white, reality/illusion and day/night are constructed, and how these relate to the significance of food in colonisation fiction. The final chapter relocates food to the corporeal through an examination of food in art and

considers how this representation relates to defecation. Ultimately, the argument underscores the significance of food in literature, by showing that in their many facets references to food are a multi-interpretative tool for producing an aetiological and phenomenological discussion. To conclude, food is from somewhere, it is a commodity, and in literature food is going somewhere.

## **STATEMENT OF SOURCES**

### **DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education.

Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>A</i>	<i>The Acolyte</i>
<i>AS</i>	<i>The Aunt's Story</i>
<i>BLHF</i>	<i>A Boat Load of Home Folk</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Drylands</i>
<i>DG</i>	<i>A Descant for Gossips</i>
<i>FG</i>	<i>Flaws in the Glass</i>
<i>FL</i>	<i>A Fringe of Leaves</i>
<i>FLA</i>	<i>For Love Alone</i>
<i>LD</i>	<i>The Living and the Dead</i>
<i>MMO</i>	<i>Memoirs of Many in One</i>
<i>PWS</i>	<i>Patrick White Speaks</i>
<i>RC</i>	<i>Riders in the Chariot</i>
<i>V</i>	<i>Voss</i>
<i>Viv</i>	<i>The Vivisector</i>
<i>VP</i>	<i>Vanishing Points</i>

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Food is not a physiological object in literature, but a unit of imagination that in turn is generated less individually than socially, within a framework of power relations”*  
(Nicholson 54).

*“Both emotional states and food and eating practices threaten self-containment and the transcendence of the mind by forcibly reminding individuals of their embodiment”*  
(Lupton 31).

*“You need only pick up on early work such as Seven Poor Men of Sydney, a book that has too much expressionism in it the way a meal may have too much chilli, a book in a nightmare style, to feel the energy leaping off the page”* (Craven 6).

The purpose of this study is to reveal how the representation of food in the fiction of Christina Stead (1902-1983), Patrick White (1912-1990) and Thea Astley (1925-2004) is inextricably linked to quest, satire and art. Overarching these three elements is the imagination, whereby food acts as a stimulus not only to the physical senses but to the creative faculty of the mind. In other words, in analysing the multiple representations of food and all its accoutrements, I aim to argue that the imagery of food exposes the writer/reader to the fecund potential of the imagination by the mode of “metaphor that represents a further step in the process of association” (Spence 915). The instability of the imaginative process also feeds into the central argument of this thesis, that order and disorder can function as correlatives. Literally order is in [dis]order. Although food as stimulus to the imagination is the overarching concept central to this thesis, I will argue further that food is an inextricable aspect of travel and quest and, congruent with that link, I will debate the relevance of mythological quest and its association with food. Drawing on the travel and quest motif alongside myth, I will also argue that a search for a sense of self is evident in accounts of food in the novels to be discussed. To conclude my thesis I will

examine the representations of food and its relevance to the arts, namely painting and music, and discuss the ameliorative aspects inherent in all art.

All three authors systematically disorientate the senses through the literal presentation of food juxtaposed with enigmatic metaphor and analogy. The paradoxical nature of living and the paradox of sustaining life are examined through food. Anguish is often accompanied by a notion of disorder and abandonment of what constitutes the self in a society that demands rationality.<sup>1</sup> The irrationality inherent in the organic nature of food and by implication the body and mind is explored through its consumption and its symbolic value.

Food is a liminal substance; it stands as a bridging substance between nature and culture, the human and the animal, the outside and the inside (Atkinson 11). As Barbara Santich wrote in her paper extolling the virtues of studying gastronomy, largely drawing from Brillat-Savarin's *The Physiology of Taste* (1825), "gastronomy is the reasoned understanding of everything that concerns us in so far as we sustain ourselves" (171). She justifies the study of gastronomy by drawing parallels between pleasure and enjoyment on the one hand and knowledge and information on the other. Such parallels could also be drawn in justifying the topic of this thesis.

In his historical analysis of food and eating Stephen Mennell identifies the anthropologists Mary Douglas and Claude Lévi-Strauss, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the semiologist Roland Barthes as key researchers into the study of food and all its accoutrements. The social scientists' theoretical approach is largely structuralist.<sup>2</sup> Such a theoretical approach clearly establishes that taste, and therefore food, are cultural constructs controlled by a socially constructed agenda (Mennell 6-7). However, the static nature of

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<sup>1</sup> See Carole Counihan's contention in *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999) that, "[f]ood is a product and mirror of the organisation of society on both the broadest and most intimate levels. It is connected to many kinds of behaviour and is endlessly meaningful. Food is a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena" (6).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1975).

structuralism is limiting and does not encompass changing tastes and societal development that are relevant to this study. Nevertheless, as Jennifer Gribble states, Stead would probably have concurred with Barthes' notion of narration and narratives as surrounding and shaping humanity before humanity possessed such concepts. I will argue however that Stead concentrates on the ways in which individuals shape a "cultural atmosphere and heritage" (Gribble 1994, 5). Clearly, the nineteenth and twentieth-century novelists Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Joyce and Lawrence influenced Stead, White and Astley in various ways, in particular the way that they perceive the "personal and public life as inseparable" (5). Their insightful philosophical observations of Australian society and culture convey a clear understanding of ideologies and cultural influences wielded by the hegemonic powers that shape Australian society (Lidoff 1982, 10).

From both a personal and public perspective there is no argument that food is an integral part of the existence of humankind. However, the diversity of the representation of food in literature and its impact on the reader is worthwhile investigating. Indeed food philosophy is a burgeoning field, and as Elaine Martin pointed out as recently as 2005, "[o]nly recently has food been proposed as ... [an] enigmatic key – and one, that like Bergson's laughter, transcends the rational" (27). Such observations support the contention that my topic, food as a literary trope in Australian literature, an aspect which has not yet been explored in depth, offers a new way of interpreting the oeuvres of Christina Stead, Patrick White and Thea Astley. In this thesis I explore how the symbolic and literal depiction of food "transcends the rational" in the writing of the three selected authors. Through an analysis of their texts I envisage establishing a corollary between the diverse ways in which they depict food. I also offer a comparison and a contrast of their fiction through the diverse representations of food within four chapters.

In Chapter One, “Food and Quest,” I argue that the representation of food is central to the travel and quest motif. The chapter is broken into three sections: the first, “Quest for Love” discusses Christina Stead’s *For Love Alone* (1945) under the heading “Anorexic Love,” and Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves* (1975), which is reviewed under the banner of “Cannibalistic Love.” The second section, “Quest and Freedom” offers a brief overview of transcendental freedom and how the concept relates to food and characterisation in *The Aunt’s Story* (1948) and *Voss* (1957). The third section, “Meroë and Sydney: Sweet, Dry and Bland” explores *The Aunt’s Story* and *Voss* in detail, and lays the foundations for Chapters Two and Three. The structure of these two novels is similar in that the narrative is enacted in three phases, a Hegelian triad, the final of which is a coda to the main action. This third section of Chapter One is broken down into sub-headings that are then re-visited in the chapters on each of White’s two novels. Thus, in conducting a close reading of portions of *The Aunt’s Story* and *Voss* that relate to food and its consumption, I elucidate how the representation of food in these novels exposes the complexity of the human condition. In other words, food in its many guises is a psychological puzzle that can be solved through textual analysis.

In Chapter Two, “Food and the Mind,” I examine the notion of food and its link to psychological disorder through a detailed analysis of the central section of *The Aunt’s Story*. I explore the notion that the eponymous aunt, Theodora Goodman, displays symptoms of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) through a sequence of sub-headings, a structure that reflects Theodora’s “fragmented alters”.<sup>3</sup> These “alter personalities” and the symptoms of DID are signified through food analogies. Fundamentally, this chapter is an

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<sup>3</sup> White was fascinated by psychoanalysis, but according to David Marr *Patrick White: A Life* (Australia: Random, 1991), he claimed “psychoanalysis ... is a dark cave into which I’d never venture for fear of leaving something important behind” (151). Rather than personally venturing into that “dark cave” I posit that White peers into it through the imagination.

exegesis of the incredibly complex central section of *The Aunt's Story* through a close reading and examination of the myriad of minutiae comprising the food symbolism.

Chapter Three, "Food and Myth," explores the holistic relationship of food to the physical, psychological and societal factors encountered by the characters through a detailed analysis of White's *Voss*. Under the sub-heading "Des[s]ert Exotique" I explore how White undermines the Christian narrative framework upon which the novel is constructed (Beston 1971, 208). In so doing, White, as I contend, explores the creation of myths and how they affect and continue to produce Australia's conceptualisation of its society and culture.<sup>4</sup> Approaching my analysis from the theoretical position of Roland Barthes, I view myth as an ideological construct, and argue that in *Voss* White subverts the leading myths upon which Australian society and culture are constructed, whilst concurrently offering a critical historical narrative. Indeed, the paradoxical representation of history in Australia is located in the structural framework that upholds society. That framework is grounded in existence, for which food is one essential element. Congruently, the myths explored in *Voss* are largely signalled through food, both literally and symbolically. By identifying and interpreting these signifiers, this section offers a unique interpretation of *Voss* and elucidates how the iconoclastic aspects of the text are positioned through food. The explorers' trajectory into the "des[s]ert exotique" of the Australian interior is enacted through food, even to their deaths. In this way, I contend that food symbolises the social, psychological, physical and spiritual dynamics of *Voss* and underpins the subversive elements of the text.

Chapter Three concludes with "*Terra Nullius*," where I explore the contentious concept of *terra nullius* through an analysis of dietetics, lexicology and numerology

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<sup>4</sup> The host of symbols in many of White's novels, but in *Voss* in particular, are redolent of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Penguin, 1996). Frazer's study contains a wealth of food and eating symbols predominantly in relation to food and its consumption.

(Phillips 457). The complexity of debate that surrounds the colonisation of Australia, I contend, is reflected in the complex interpersonal dynamics of Voss' party, which in turn relate to the complex structure of the novel. Yet the refractive potentialities of complex characterisation are counter-balanced by the portrayal of the Indigenous people. Nonetheless, their characterisation is not overtly simplistic; indeed White portrays both sides of the racial spectrum of white/black with equanimity and, I suggest, proffers a symbiotic relationship between the explorers and the Indigenous communities they encounter. Furthermore, I argue, he portrays the complexities of colonisation synchronously with the complexities of all humanity.

In Chapter Four, "Food and Art," I contend that the artist – identified here as writer, painter and musician – is forever on a quest for a sense of self. In an oppressive and alienating society, a sense of self too often incorporates antithetical notions of what constitutes a balanced approach to mortality and belonging. This section examines White's *The Vivisector* (1970) and draws upon Astley's novels, *A Descant for Gossips* (1960), *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968), *The Acolyte* (1972), *Vanishing Points* (1992), *Drylands* (1999) and short stories, "The Salad of the Bad Café" (1981) and "Travelling Farther North: David Williamson You Must Have Stopped at the Border" (1982).

So, in this thesis, through the interrogation of novels produced over more than half a century, I present an interpretation of the three major novelists' insights into Australian life in the second half of the twentieth century as well as the historical periods the novels depict. In addition, I argue that the imagery inherent in the depiction of food is a meaningful vehicle for conveying subtle and insightful nuances. In other words, I examine the multifaceted representation of food in the three authors' oeuvres, from abundant wedding feasts to mere pickings, through to imagery such as similes and metaphors. Indeed, the novels selected elicit the "transformative powers of food" (Muncaster 1996, 31)



through imagery, and through a milieu in which their characters relate to each others' lives through the communal partaking of food. The modes of eating and their cultural and sociological implications vary enormously, not only in the novels selected, but also in the representation of class, gender and interracial structures with all their inherent complexities. Despite the egalitarian façade of Australian culture, all three Australian authors' oeuvres uncover the multitudinous layers of invidious discriminations. Their biographies, particularly those of Stead and White, offer similarities in their alienation from, and often disgust at, Australia, both during their lifetimes and in response to the violence they interpreted in the British colonisation of "the great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions" (PWS 15). Conversely Stead, White and Astley felt a deep attachment to Australia and it is that dichotomous element that offers a further way of examining food in their literature. They also, I argue, through the many manifestations of food, question the ameliorative and restorative powers of social integration.

A number of challenging literary and cultural insights emerge from this examination of food in Australian texts. First, the dichotomous representation of food in literature offers a way, as I contend, in which humankind can reinscribe the unfamiliar or the unpleasant through the familiar. This mode of familiarisation exposes the writer/reader to the fecund potential of the imagination through the "metaphorical abundance offered by the employment of food and eating within the text" (Muncaster 1996, 31). This thesis sees this exposure to the fecundity of the imagination through food imagery as offering an empathetically optimistic and redemptive view of humankind. Food as metaphor also offers an insertion into the place of the imagination, the inner life, and directs the reader/writer to a closer proximity to the inner being. Indeed, as White writes of his character Waldo in *The Solid Mandala*, "[he] displayed a keen interest in botanical detail, but relied too heavily on imagination of a highly-coloured order" (44). White's recourse to writing was largely a

result of his inability to paint, and he claimed that he could see what he wrote (Marr 139). Helen Hewitt has already given a wonderfully detailed analysis of White as “a painter manqué,” but a similar theoretical approach could certainly be applied to a detailed analysis of food in the novels of Stead, White and Astley (1). In other words, the multifaceted complexities inherent in food and its symbolism offer an insight into the complexities of narrative and meaning. As White – *chef manqué* – wrote in a letter to Geoffrey Dutton, “haste is disastrous to fiction and cookery” (qtd. in Marr 462). This thesis too, savours every word.

Secondly, as I have already mentioned, it emerges from the analysis in Chapter One that food is inextricably linked to travel and quest. The diversity of emotional and psychological experiences examined in the representation of food deserves extensive examination. As Don Anderson pointed out, in Homer’s *Odyssey* feasting as ceremony was so important that Ulysses and his comrades feasted prior to lamentation for their dead men.<sup>5</sup> So, whilst largely drawing on Stead’s *For Love Alone* and White’s *The Aunt’s Story* and *A Fringe of Leaves* for this chapter, I also interpret their fictions in the context of wider epistemological and sociological analyses.

Thirdly, through a consideration of these wider contexts another corollary between Stead’s, White’s and Astley’s fictions emerges. They offer a satiric perspective on Australian society and culture, a perspective that sometimes expands to encompass British and European civilization. Satire, of course, is replete in Horace, the Roman poet, who also used food imagery to convey his satirical observations, for example “*Ut turpiter atrum/Desinat in piscem mulier formosa superne* – So that what is a beautiful woman on top ends in a black and ugly fish” (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 385). As this quote illustrates, the distinction between human and animal life as living entities and their

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<sup>5</sup> See Don Anderson’s Introduction to *Banquet of the Mind* (Australia: Random, 2000) 1-10.

depiction as food is often blurred. Satire in the texts selected is, I will argue, often linked to food in one way or another, and that certainly comes from a long literary tradition. Indeed, as Anne Pender points out, the etymological root of satire, *lanx satura*, means a full dish, of fruits and foods comprising many elements, offered to the gods (12). Effectively, satire conveys an underlying anxiety: taken in that context the verb “fret” is derived from the Old English *fretan*, to devour. So, in this thesis I will argue that the selected authors’ satiric targets are mediated through the accounts of food and eating in their oeuvres. To elaborate: food is variously aligned with love, but obversely with anger; it can represent want and also greed, and intertwined with that dichotomy, it symbolises both impecuniousness and opulence, abhorrence and appreciation. Another etymological link between satire and food is found through Patrick White’s obsession with teeth, used to masticate food of course, as well as being the “most enduring part of the body” (Cooper 169). The word molar derives from Latin *molaris* which is from *mola* millstone, which in turn grinds grain to meal. This “meal”, that is ground grain, is different etymologically from *repast*. Nevertheless, the link between teeth and food that White alludes to frequently is an interesting notion to pursue. Although many of the symbolic objects in White’s novels have been analysed, food and its accoutrements have been neglected. Frequently the imagery of food is a satiric observation that exposes the often unpleasant elements of social interaction. As Martin Elkort points out: “Food and fodder both come from the Old English word *foda* meaning “that which sustains, or keeps active” (56). In other words, Stead and Astley, and even more predominantly White, use food in their writing to convey subtly important meanings offering particular new insights into the human condition.

A fourth point congruent with the notion of that quest for a confluence of ideals, is that the authors deal with desire and its often unattainable objects. As Elaine Martin explains, “although the underlying principle of dualities stems from western culture, the

role of food in linking body and mind, self and other – whether or not in response to a conscious perception of duality – would seem to function on a global plane” (31).

Essentially their novels explore the human soul and the hardships that humankind has to endure to achieve any wisdom or sense of the meaning of existence. Of course, food is necessary for existence, and I argue it is that nourishment, even when it presents as lack or indeed merely as metaphor, that is so important and meaningful in the selected novels.

Fecundity and food, what an inspirational alliteration, yet it so often becomes an oxymoron in literature, and indeed, in many characters’ quest for a healthy sense of self. I argue finally that the Australian texts examined in Chapter Four challenge the “capitalist dualities of control and release, work and play, constraint and freedom ... and the flexible relationship between production and consumption that characterizes [*sic*] advanced capitalism” (Gremillion 400). Clearly, the economic and political agendas are inescapable as is evident in this passage in Stead’s *I’m Dying Laughing*:

You know how they are finding out about the final disposal ... Through the account book ... It was a question of calories, kilograms and grams of human resistance ... Each man and woman was calculated as an animal utilizing his spare fat and energy. That gone, that stolen, he was killed. (249)

Through the accounts of food the authors reveal a sense of self that is often at odds with the hegemonic modes of production. Clearly, the reader is invited to participate in this mode of escapism, whilst at the same time acknowledging the restraints imposed by society and culture. As Horace enunciated in his *Epistles*, “*Nos numerus sumus et fruges consumere nati*” [We are just statistics, born to consume resources] (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 386), but being a statistic is a hollow and largely unsatisfactory existence particularly when compared to the fecundity of the imagination that is explored in the novels of all three authors. As Donald Friend said, “I regard art as the puritans regarded religion – a duty, an obsession, a compulsion, a revelation, the only truly good relief from the pressure of one’s own evil and the world’s, and the only possible expression of one’s

love and desire and understanding of life” (116). Both White and Astley place the artist under intense interrogation in their novels *The Vivisector* and *The Acolyte*. I contend that through the imagery of food they highlight the dilemmas that their oftentimes obstreperous characters face in a quest for self-fulfillment through their painting and music.

Concomitantly both authors explore their own role as writers and the ways in which art, that is painting, music and writing, offers a freedom from the confinement of the quotidian. That is to say, the freedom of the imagination offers a means of (re)connecting with humanity that the strictures of life and its binary oppositions all too often dehumanise.

## **Approach and Theoretical Position**

Although the investigation of food in literature is by no means a unique concept, the approach to food and text that I adopt in my thesis has not been researched in detail before. For example, in her analysis of Stead’s *I’m Dying Laughing*, Tina Muncaster attempted to delineate appetite in the text. She declared that appetite operates on at least two levels, one being the texts of food, the characters who consume it and the method in which appetites are revealed in narrative, in what she referred to as “the textuality of appetite” (Muncaster 1993, 106). Secondly, and somewhat ambiguously, she posits a parallel concept of the appetitive nature of the text in which she refers to the reader experiencing a sense of hunger following the completion of an eclectic text that offers no closure. Whilst such an interpretation of appetite merits consideration, I argue here that it is not appetite alone that influences the writer/reader. Indeed, words are themselves a feast to be devoured and the concept of food offers many beguiling connotations. As Elaine Martin notes, “[t]his culturally-based distinction between the merely consumable and food ... carries crucial identity value” (30). Such polarities are evident in the interesting, but often contradictory, analyses posited by both Anderson and Muncaster. For example, Anderson argues that his

interest in the topic of dinner-parties and eating “offers a significant structural pattern in fiction” (Anderson 1980, 399). He posits two paradigmatic dinner-parties in the written mythologies of the West: a Christian and a Platonic tradition linked through Love, which Muncaster also alludes to in her “appetitic” analysis of food and its consumption. In the same article Anderson discusses Freud’s analyses of the primal meal, where “society is now based on complicity in the common crime” (qtd. in Anderson, 1980, 402). Anderson acknowledges that the notion of religion and morality being inextricably associated with guilt is commonplace, and this element is certainly evident in Stead’s, White’s and Astley’s oeuvres. Nevertheless, given that the link between food and sex has been much discussed, this topic will largely be absent from this thesis. Of course theorists such as Pierre Macherey have argued the relevance of absences from texts, as well as “the often crucial nature of what the text does not, or cannot, speak” (Anderson, 1980, 403). Such polarities of absence and presence, I will argue, offer a mode of fusion, a confluence or delineation that will offer a new reading of the representation of food in literature.

It would certainly be no exaggeration to state that all writers write to some extent to lose themselves. This in theory agrees with Foucault’s assertion that the author gives unity to a text and authorises as Foucault says, “its insertion into the real.”<sup>6</sup> However, whilst acknowledging that claims of the instability of the text and of history continue to create debate, this thesis works from the notion of the author as the enunciating individual who writes the texts rather than the notion of the text writing itself. The fact that all the novels selected for analysis have an element of excess indicates their deeper and more profound meaning. That is, the polarities of excess and scarcity become irrelevant, and their meanings are fused. In other words, through a rich and fulsome text that often depicts want,

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2002), in particular “The Discourse in Language” which appears as an appendix.

the authors highlight the dichotomous elements of that text and force-feed the reader to consider their own sense of being in a contradictory world.

Thus, although accepting that history could be seen as a problematic basis for grounding the meaning of a literary text, I have based my research on the assumption that literature is an agent in constructing a culture's sense of reality. The selected novels are replete with food as objects and metaphoric experiences that most post-Saussurian criticism, with its adherence to the disembodied word, would find difficult to digest. Indeed, I will argue that the representation of food in all its diversity is in the selected texts for a reason, not just because food is an integral part of life, and it is that very reason, or reasons, that this thesis aims to dissect.

## CHAPTER ONE: FOOD AND QUEST

*“It is a fruitful island of the sea-world, a great Ithaca, there parched and stony and here trodden by flocks and curly-headed bulls and heavy with thick-set grain. To this race can be put the famous question: ‘Oh, Australian, have you come from the harbour? Is your ship in the roadstead? Men of what nation put you down – for I am sure you did not get here on foot?’” (FLA 2).*

There can be no argument that travel and quest are enduring themes in Western literature. Symbolic images recur in all forms of travel and quest literature from the obvious, such as ships and sea, to the less obvious, such as food. In this chapter I argue that Stead’s *For Love Alone* and White’s *The Aunt’s Story* and *A Fringe of Leaves* use food imagery to convey their protagonists’ inner turmoils and triumphs during their individual quests for love and understanding. These characters’ emotional worlds are conveyed through their contact with the physical world of food. In analysing such food imagery I reflect concurrently upon the “aesthetic and philosophical” harmony of each of the novels (Cotter 21).

The fundamental quest of the three female protagonists, Teresa Hawkins in *For Love Alone*, Theodora Goodman in *The Aunt’s Story* and Ellen Roxburgh in *A Fringe of Leaves*, is to achieve maturity as a woman in an often hostile male-dominated world. As Deborah Lupton points out, “philosophy is masculine and disembodies; food and eating are feminine and always embodied. To pay attention to such everyday banalities as food practices is to highlight the animality always lurking within the ‘civilized’ [*sic*] veneer of the human subject” (3). Each of the women’s fathers plays an integral part in their lives, yet these male figures are characterised antithetically. Teresa’s father, Andrew, is selfishly bombastic whilst Theodora’s, and to a lesser extent, Ellen’s, fathers are nurturing and sympathetic. Moreover, the concept of a nourishing mother-figure is an absent presence in all three novels: Teresa’s mother is dead; Ellen’s mother dies in her daughter’s childhood; and



Theodora's mother ruthlessly dominates her life. It is, therefore, only in the absence of the mother that Teresa, Ellen and Theodora commence their quests. Although both authors disavow any feminist allegiance, I claim in this chapter that they do indeed interrogate the notion of the oppressed female, not only in the three novels selected for primary analysis, but also in most of their fictions (Gribble 1994, 4). Moreover, through the imagery of food White and Stead both explore the notion of not only the oppressed female, but of those others who are marginalised in society. Indeed, White's *A Fringe of Leaves* exposes the dichotomies inherent in a hegemonic colonial society that seeks to dominate the oppressed and marginalised. Nevertheless, both authors were well aware of the dangers of their fascination with ideas, largely because they realised that whether such ideas were "consolatory or empowering" they always "reflect subjective needs and viewpoints" (Gribble 1994, 5). However, I will argue that it is that subjectivity in relation to the depiction of food and its inextricable link with travel and quest that conveys a notion of the construction of society, as positioned in post-world war Australia.

Whilst undertaking a largely feminist theoretical analysis, this chapter also addresses food symbolism through a hermeneutical methodology. Such an approach justifies interpreting the food imagery as a puzzle that requires deciphering. The minutiae of the text lead to broad interpretations that, from a biographical perspective, are warranted. However, the strength of the minutiae as a basis for interpretation is in their pervasiveness and in the patterns they create. Furthermore, in giving *avoirdufois* to the symbolic relevance of foodstuffs I have used J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* and Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, as authorities for symbolism. These texts provide a deeper comprehension of the frequently ambiguous nature of symbols.

## QUEST FOR LOVE

*“Many of them had not seen her since Malfi’s wedding: she looked many years older, terribly thin, and distracted, almost as if she did not know they were there.” (FLA 255)*

*“When you don’t have any money, the problem is food. When you have money, it’s sex. When you have both it’s health.” (Donleavy 32)*

In literature food and love are recurring synonymous themes. The following sub-sections explore the links between Teresa Hawkins’ and Ellen Roxburgh’s quests for love and how they relate to food. Both characters have a compulsive dependence upon their parents in the early part of their life, or more poignantly, journey. However, in Teresa’s case her dependence upon her domineering father is caused by the absence of the mother, while Ellen’s regard for her father slowly diminishes after the death of her mother. Furthermore, this section considers how narrative is associated with journey and how emotions are linked with the representation of food. The food imagery in the novels to be discussed, namely *For Love Alone*, which is analysed under the banner “Anorexic Love,” and *A Fringe of Leaves*, examined in “Cannibalistic Love,” ranges from extravagantly edacious behaviour to an outright denunciation of food. Such imagery, I contend, highlights how the diverse themes of anorexic love and cannibalistic love represent all too similar emotional traumas. The symbolism inherent in the representation of food and love has hitherto been used to depict such diverse elements as sexuality and fecundity, or conversely aridity and lack of passionate sexuality.<sup>1</sup> However, I aim to show how lack of food does not necessarily equate

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Don Anderson, *Text and Sex* (Australia: Random, 1995); Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (Oxford: Polity, 1990); Delys Bird, “Bodily Desires and Narrative Pleasures: Food in Elizabeth Jolley’s Fiction,” *Masks, Tapestries, Journeys*, ed. Gerry Turcotte (Wollongong: Centre for Research into Textual and Cultural Studies, U of Wollongong, 1996) 87-98; Virginia Blain, “A Little Tea, A Little Char: Decadent Pleasures and the Pleasure of Decadence,” *Southerly* 53.4 (Dec. 1993): 20-35; Abigail Bray and Clare Colebrook, “The Haunted Flesh: Corporeal Feminism and the Politics of [Dis]embodiment,” *Signs* 24.1 (1998): 35-67; Diane Curtin, “Food/Body/Person,” *Cooking, Eating Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food*, eds. D. Curtin and L. Heldke (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992) 3-22; Blanche Gelfant, “Sister to Faust: The City’s ‘Hungry’ Woman as Heroine,” *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Knoxville: The U of Tennessee P, 1984); David Herzog, Isabel Bradburn and Kerry Newman, “Sexuality in Males with Eating Disorders,” *Males with Eating Disorders*, ed. Andrew Andersen (New York: Brunner/Mazel) 40-53; Dorothy Jones, “The

with lack of passion, but resonates with a deep, passionate desire for love. Whether that be self-love, or more correctly self-esteem, or love and recognition from others, is open to further analysis. Both protagonists' endeavours to escape hunger reveal their struggle to acknowledge their sensual natures, a struggle destined to failure because human beings have physiological needs that cannot be denied (Chernin 1981, 10). Moreover, I argue that such polarities of opulence and scarcity of food, with their link to emotion, also relate to the text itself. In other words, the complexity of the prose juxtaposed with the clarity of interpretation is not only polarised, but such an interpretation of the text also allows an intellectual and intuitive perspective. In this way the consumption of the text by the reader and the expulsion of meaning by the reader/writer are themselves both destructive and productive (Muncaster 1993, 115). This section also examines how the antithetical notions of abundance and dearth of food relate to social-psychological feminist theory, in which the link between some women's obsession with self-starvation and wider political and social spheres is paramount (Counihan 1999, 76).

In analysing Teresa Hawkins' reasons for developing anorexia I demonstrate that eating disorders cannot be defined as a madness, but rather that they result from a social praxis that condones females' obsession with [body] image. In other words, eating disorders make explicit what is tacitly sanctioned in Western society. They articulate the contradictory nature of the social process of becoming an [Australian] woman (Nicholson 54). The following discussion necessarily incorporates an analysis of *anorexia nervosa*.<sup>2</sup> It

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Post-Colonial Belly Laugh: Appetite and its Suppression," *Social Semiotics* 2.2 (1992): 21-37; Joan Kirkby, "'The Vertigris of Glory': The Lure of Abjection in Thea Astley's *Acolyte*," *Kunapipi* 16.1 (1994): 27-43; Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self* (London: Sage, 1996); Elaine Martin, "Food, Literature, Art, and the Demise of Dualistic Thought," *Consumption Markets and Culture* 8.1 (Mar. 2005): 27-48. *Taylor*. 24 Oct. 2005. <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content>, and Elizabeth Telfer, *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as anorexia.

shows how this psychological disorder has a direct relationship with the quest for love and with displaced anxieties.<sup>3</sup>

Ellen Gluyas/Roxburgh is similarly starved. Yet her lack of food connotes the subversion of a gamut of social praxes that revolve around the central motif of colonisation. Her anxieties are more culturally based. Although both women are displaced from their cultural heritage through their involvement with men, Teresa's quest drives her from the colonised (Australia) to the coloniser (England). Conversely, Ellen's quest directs her to the colonised, not only Australia but its Indigenous people. As a result her quest is less well-defined; it is a quest for love but not necessarily for love from one man.<sup>4</sup>

### **Anorexic Love: *For Love Alone***<sup>5</sup>

This sub-section discusses how the protagonist in *For Love Alone* starves herself in her quest for love, a form of self-abnegation by which she gradually denies sustenance to her body and her mind. Such deprivation conveys the firm link between food and desire. Teresa annihilates her identity, her sense of being and her notion of selfhood, and in the process effectively jeopardises her own rich dreams and memories. Ultimately she displays a concatenation of physiological symptoms that, viewed from a psychological perspective, correlates with the notion that Teresa suffers from anorexia. These symptoms include distorted perceptions, sensitivity to cold and light, and lanugo or excessive body hair (qtd.

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<sup>3</sup> See Susan Sheridan "Christina Stead's *For Love Alone*: A Female Odyssey?," *The Magic Phrase: Critical Essays on Christina Stead*, eds. Margaret Harris and Elizabeth Webby (St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2000) 174-90. Sheridan points to the "psychological drama" which drives the plot of the novel. She also shows how Stead's "radically critical insight" into social mores of both Australia and England helps to form her characters (175).

<sup>4</sup> See Kate Macomber Stern, *Christina Stead's Heroine: The Changing Sense of Decorum* (New York: Lang, 1989), for an analysis of the way in which decorum is destabilised in Stead's novels in order to shock the reader into assessing how Stead's oeuvre operates.

<sup>5</sup> Part of this section was presented at the annual ASAL conference in Adelaide in 2005, and later published as an essay in *JASAL* 5 (2006): 152-62.

in Counihan 218). In sum, both her body and her cognitive processes are debilitated by lack of nourishment, literally and metaphorically.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst acknowledging the “prevailing critique of psychoanalysis as a form of social control” (Elliott 47), I will show how diagnostic criteria for psychoanalytic disorders such as anorexia offer a unique psycho-theoretical tool for analysing Teresa’s changing position in *For Love Alone*. Of course, diagnostic manuals themselves are texts open to various interpretations. However, several critics note that Stead had a deep interest in psychology (Dizard 104, Ronning 114), so a refined inter-disciplinary approach to the dichotomies evident in Teresa’s physiological and psychological states validates diagnosing her condition as anorexic. Indeed, the novel’s dual structure underpins Teresa’s dichotomous state of being in a fragmented world. Textually her narrative is divided between “The Island Continent” and “Port of Registry: London”; geographically she is caught between Australia and England; and metaphysically she struggles with the notion of being and knowing.<sup>7</sup> Although the framework of *For Love Alone* is that of a quest novel such as *Don Quixote*, Stead subverts traditional questing by foregrounding hunger as a metaphor for deprivation.<sup>8</sup>

Teresa’s subjugation by the males she interacts with at the commencement of the novel, primarily her father Andrew Hawkins and her tutor Jonathan Crow, is the

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Bryan Turner, *The Body & Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Sage, 1996). His hypothesis situates food and consumption alongside “familial politics” and assertion of power (176). Susan Sheridan, “Christina Stead’s *For Love Alone*” refers to “the social dynamic” evident in Stead’s oeuvre, “of human energy burning itself up” where the characters “walk, talk, gesture repetitively and compulsively” (175): a psychological devouring of the corporeal. See also Nicholas Jose’s discussion, “The Dream of Europe: *For Love Alone*, *The Aunt’s Story* and *The Cardboard Crown*.” *Meridian* 6.2 (1987): 113-25, concerning how a “fantasy is fed” and how such aspirations are realised “in biological, social, economic and psychological conditions” (117).

<sup>7</sup> Anita Segerberg, “A Fiction of Sisters: Christina Stead’s *Letty Fox* and *For Love Alone*.” *Australian Literary Studies* 14.1 (May 1989): 15-25 discusses unpublished manuscripts of *For Love Alone* and the “common store” of autobiographical material that Stead draws upon in *Letty Fox* and *For Love Alone* (17).

<sup>8</sup> See Nick Mansfield, “‘This Is Not Understanding’: Christina Stead’s *For Love Alone*.” *Southerly*, 52.1 (1992): 77-90, where he asserts that Teresa’s quest has “no fixed goal” (77). He goes on to discuss the fact that travelling around in Stead’s oeuvre circumvents “an all-smothering power” (77) represented through the various loves she encounters on her journey.

cornerstone of her developing ailment.<sup>9</sup> Anorexia typically manifests itself in females who display low self-esteem, often generated by dominant fathers or father-figures (Counihan 82). Other themes emerge throughout the novel that underpin the argument that Teresa is anorexic: her conflict with hierarchical power structures; her confusion over her sexual identity; and her solitude and self deceit (79). Fundamentally her suffering induces the reader to question gendered power structures and their relationship to self-esteem. It is only by experiencing and gradually understanding her abuse of herself that Teresa is able to establish her identity, and it is only through abandoning the males who dominate her that she is able to achieve her own sense of worth.

Teresa's quest for identity emerges as an addiction. She is addicted to the ideal of love and lives out her addiction through her total absorption in Jonathan Crow.<sup>10</sup> Her problematic relationship with Crow illustrates the many difficulties people encounter in confronting the contradictory praxes of society surrounding food, its production and consumption (76). Teresa's starvation escalates exponentially as her fixated desire for Crow's love feeds her obsessive personality. Personality has been defined as the "brain's abstraction" of the sum of memory or experience (Rosenfield 202). Memory, however, is continually evolving and at each new situation the recognition of what constitutes identity is reconstructed through relationship to others. The paradox inherent in the view that memory is separate from personality yet part of it is the cornerstone of Teresa's abandonment of self, through which she wholly devotes herself to the pursuit of love.

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<sup>9</sup> See for example, Susan Sheridan's feminist critique: *Christina Stead* (Sydney: Harvester: Wheatsheaf, 1988) 55-81. See also Heather Stewart, "Feminism and Male Chauvinism in the Writings of Christina Stead." *Hecate* 29.2 (2003): 113-23.

<sup>10</sup> See also Kathleen Jones, "'If She Could Take Up Less Space/She Would': Modern Times, Medical History, and the Adolescent Female." *Reviews in American History*, 17.3 (Sep. 1989): 365-70. *JSTOR*. 16 Feb. 2005. <http://www.jstor.org/search>, in which Jones refers to the fact that anorexia "might best be understood as a form of addiction" (366). She also defines the quest for success as requiring a "singlemindedness" evident in anorexics (368).

As Jillian Furst points out in her introduction to *Disorderly Eaters*, eating disorders are a foundation for a conflict grounded in desire and power. During this conflict the process of forming an identity confronts and rebels against what is traditionally expected within a cultural framework. Teresa rebels against the power her father wields over her and indeed which patriarchy wields over all women, but in doing so her sense of identity in an androcentric cultural paradigm is severely jeopardised. Furst demonstrates that this notion of conflict refers to eating disorders in both reality and literature (12), a point realised in the fact that the autographical elements evident in *For Love Alone* conflate reality and literature. For example, in the Prologue, “Sea People,” Stead writes: “In the part of the world Teresa came from, winter is in July, spring brides marry in September, and Christmas is consummated with roast beef, suckling pig, and brandy-laced plum pudding at 100 degrees in the shade” (1). In this passage, the conflicting seasonal representations of a traditional Christmas meal; the emphasis on weddings, which are invariably accompanied by a feast; and the dislocation of time foreground memory and displacement and their association with food and eating.

Furthermore, these elements highlight the narrative structure of *For Love Alone*. Love stories traditionally conclude with a wedding, yet Teresa’s tale, in some respects a traditional love story itself, commences with a wedding and avoids one at the end. As Joan Brumberg points out in discussing an earlier era, Victorian women suffering from anorexia were placed under enormous emotional pressure to marry.<sup>11</sup> From surviving records she extracts an image of a society where food and eating created many problems for young females. In an age that enforced female passivity, food and its limited consumption became

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<sup>11</sup> See Joan Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988). For discussion of an era preceding the Victorian see Caroline Bynum Walker, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987).

a nonverbal rebellion, yet at the same time it symbolised decorous behaviour.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, in the twentieth century Teresa experiences ambiguous emotions in a household dominated by her father. The first chapter opens with the single word “Naked” and continues with a description of Hawkins’ nakedness, with its inherent virility exposed, set in sharp contrast to the image of his two daughters, Teresa and Kitty, sewing their garments for Malfi’s wedding. Hawkins denigrates his daughters’ appearance: ““What a strange thing that I didn’t have lovely daughters.”” and compares them to the “three beautiful bouncing” Harkness “maidens” (8). In relation to food symbolism, *The Man Who Loved Children* Sam Pollit’s paternal possessiveness and psychological dominance is illustrated through food, when he transfers his chewed food into the mouths of his children (Clancy 1981, 19).

The dichotomous female/male, love/hate relations at play in the Hawkins’ household are sustained in food metaphors. Hawkins refers to “an ugly face” as being “the dried crust of a turbid, ugly soul” (9), but Teresa challenges her father’s assertion of power by contesting his theories of beauty and love. The dichotomous dynamics in the household are also sustained in symbolic action. That Hawkins conflates the female mind/body in his assessment of love and beauty illustrates his objectification and denigration of women. His contradictory expectations, in conjunction with the slighting of Teresa’s experience and values, ultimately become a factor that contributes to her anorexia (Counihan 77). There is, however, a paradox in that conflation of the mind/body binary opposition. In some respects, it could be argued that Teresa’s ultimate recovery, or assimilation perhaps, is achieved through a Manichean resolution, a recognition of intrinsic good and evil. This is where the paradoxical nature of *For Love Alone* expands into new realms, encouraging the reader’s mind to move freely and explore hitherto unresolved dilemmas.

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion about the obverse effects of patriarchal control and eating see the seminal text Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue . . . The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weight Loss* (New York & London: Paddington, 1978). Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1966), also refers to the phenomenon of food and desire as commodities. See in particular the scene where Maisie observes Mrs. Wix eating (197-98).



Although Stead denied being a feminist, by using food as metaphor in the domestic domain she demonstrates the overt disparities in relationships between the sexes.<sup>13</sup> The morally based paternal tyranny that Teresa experiences exacerbates her sense of inadequacy and loss of self-esteem. The references to food and eating highlight the dilemma that she faces and presage anorexia as a means of self-empowerment. Such a notion is given *avoiirdupois* when Teresa experiences an epiphany concerning marriage. In this she metaphorically immerses women in a stew which boils and bubbles, suggesting their enforced passivity, much like the Victorian women mentioned earlier (*FLA* 19). Teresa resists the impulse to subjugate herself to such tyranny and marry a “small underfed man” (18). Yet the fact that she later invests her future in Jonathan Crow underpins her dependence on “underfed” men, and for much of the narrative her resistance appears futile. She becomes, like the women in the stew, “discontented, browbeaten, flouted, ridiculous” (18). As an aside, the Southwark red-light district in medieval and Renaissance London had the moniker, “the stews.”

The novel’s preoccupation with love as experience and theme underpins Teresa’s obsessive personality and her anorexia: “She burned with internal flame, her hope and desperate energy, the hope that she would be loved, and at times she thought that her affair with Jonathan was only a step to the unknown man; she would use him for that” (228). Once again a paradox arises: viewed from this perspective, that is Teresa’s inner emotions and her mind, she should not be regarded as a passive victim of patriarchal society. Clearly, she has her own agenda and her self-assertion is evident in the previous quote. Thus, that notion of centrality, or to borrow from the novel’s title, “alone[ness],” is asserted. Indeed, it could be argued that Teresa’s regulatory food intake is not a direct result of patriarchal

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<sup>13</sup> See John Beston, “An Interview with Christina Stead,” *World Literature Written in English* 15.1 (Apr. 1976): 87-95, where Stead asserts her disdain at the tag. She claims, “I feel about women’s rights the same as I do about any human rights. I suppose it’s a natural extension of socialism: why shouldn’t everyone have their fair slice of the pie?” (90).

power but a form of control exerted as a means of “constructing subjectivity” (Lupton 14): she does not perceive herself as the hopeless “ill-kempt” object of derision; instead she “burn[s] with internal flame” and “hope” (*FLA* 228).

As Zaitsoff’s research into eating disorders revealed, “an interpersonal style of focusing on others’ emotional needs and suppressing feelings appears to have a distinctive relationship with eating disorder symptoms” (58). The obsessive nature of the novel’s preoccupation with love underpins Teresa’s obsessive personality and her anorexia.

Following her twenty-first birthday party:

She hated to let them go so, empty-handed, empty-hearted, but all familiar joys were forbidden to her. She supposed it was because she was ugly, because, like all poor, timid people, she blamed herself. When she looked in the mirror and saw this pasty face, the face of a devout monk who has felt love-pangs and denied them, she believed that she had no right to pity or indulgence or love. If she won Jonathan Crow, it would be by superior will and intelligence; but this will and intelligence she had to devote to diverting her passions, because she had evolved the curious idea that she would only win Jonathan Crow by bridling passions as far as she was able, because of Jonathan’s own self-denial. (256)

Her will, however, is initially more optimistic and is focussed on “get[ing] a lover”: “She believed firmly in the power of will to alter things and force things to an end. Cheerful, she got up and jumped into bed, as if she had heard a promise ... ‘Love, learning, bread – myself – all three, I will get’” (87). This phrase is enigmatic in that it literally does not add up: Teresa yearns for love, for learning and for bread, but what she yearns for her[self] is ambiguous. She clearly seeks love, learning and bread for herself, and that sense of self is grounded in the world rather than the masculine sense of self as separate from the world (Brydon 7-9).

The reader’s first encounter with Jonathan Crow prefigures the emergence of Teresa’s compulsive obsession with love:

Teresa sailing out in front of her [Kitty], her lavender skirts swelling gracefully over the fatly wrinkled asphalt, her head tilted, her whole attitude vigorous and excited. A dark axe-faced, starved

young man, with spectacles and a black felt hat cocked, was smiling at her and stopping to chat. Kitty approached quickly and was introduced – Mr. Crow.  
“Nice weather for fried fish,” said Mr. Crow. (23)

The alliteration of “sailing,” “skirts swelling” combined with the sonorous consonants in the above passage impart Teresa’s “vigorous and excited” demeanour. In fact the entire descriptive sentence is replete with engorgement, even to the extent that “lavender” suggests calm and femininity. Such resplendent imagery is sharply contrasted with Crow’s “dark axe-faced, starved” appearance. The oxymoronic sentences, one imparting softness the other harshness, presage Teresa’s later debilitated condition. Furthermore, Crow is depicted as a crow where the visualisation of him with his “spectacles and a black felt hat cocked” needs no further explanation: he is a metaphor for the carrion crows of Baudelaire’s “Un Voyage à Cythère,” to be discussed later, whereby his corvine character literally devours Teresa’s identity.<sup>14</sup>

Teresa’s problematic relationship with Crow is inextricably linked to food and its consumption. However, she exhibits a strong will and ambitious outlook at this juncture. Moreover she is physically strong and healthy: “She leaned over the sill, her round arms and full breasts resting on the woodwork. Her flesh was a strange shade in that light, like the underside of water beasts. Or like – she began to think like what” (*FLA* 73). Evidently she demonstrates the capacity to dream, to indulge in the fecund potential of her imagination.<sup>15</sup> However, the above quote recalls Horace’s satirical observation mentioned earlier and presages Teresa’s transformation into “a black and ugly fish” (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 385). That transformation commences with her exhibiting self-

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<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Gribble, *Australian Writers: Christina Stead* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1994), attributes this metaphor to Ron Geering, although she suggests that Watteau’s *The Embarkation for Cythera* is talismanic for Teresa’s imaginings of erotic love (46).

<sup>15</sup> See Mervyn Nicholson, “Magic Food, Compulsive Eating, and Power Poetics,” *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment*, eds. Lilian R. Furst and Peter Graham (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1992) 43-60. Nicholson argues the importance of “the logic of visualization [*sic*]” (44) in relation to food and eating disorders.

doubt concerning her physicality and sexuality: “In art courses, we see women’s bodies, not men’s; we’re shown how to admire our own beauty, but when it comes, then we must hide it ... Her head whirled with confusion and frustration” (*FLA* 93). The naked female body may be venerated by men, but female sexuality is “degraded and objectified” in Western society (Counihan 82). Teresa’s sense of helplessness is fundamental to the anorexic’s problem and already she displays a degree of the “isolating self-centredness” basic to the obsessive nature of anorexia (77). Feminist theory identifies the disproportionate gaze of the eye and how that gaze cannot be unbiased, but is constructed by male belief systems. So adolescent females internalise their bodily concerns in order to project a corporeal ideal.<sup>16</sup> The eyes are therefore female, but the gaze is male.

Undoubtedly then, food and desire are intertwined. Teresa attempts to escape the “gnawing thoughts” of her seemingly futile and increasingly confused existence through her “favourite private movies” (84). Invariably her dreams are replete with food imagery, commencing with an “hors d’oeuvre” and the other “movies” following in rapid succession: halls bedecked with bright colours and “golden goblets and splendid male and female slaves”; tavern scenes from Breughel; “a Hogmanay party in the Highlands with the bursting of a great haggis, and the guests fallen down in a flood of pease pudding, small birds, giblets, and tripes” (84). Her dreams include “cannibalism from Grimm [and] brothels from Shakespeare,” from which Teresa derived “unutterable pleasure” (84). The third-person narration emphasises the richness of Teresa’s imaginings; they were “not thin black shapes of fantasy”; instead her dreams belonged to “a country from which she, a born citizen, was exiled. She struggled towards it” (85). The sharp contrast between Teresa’s opulent dreams, from which she is excluded, and her grim reality is palpable at this juncture

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<sup>16</sup> For a feminist theorist analysis of art see Mary Devereaux, “Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers and Gendered Spectator: The ‘New’ Aesthetics,” *Arguing about Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (London: Routledge, 2002) 381-98.

(Gribble 1994, 9). Moreover that capacity to dream is threatened when Crow's corvine character starts to impinge on Teresa's imaginings: "Through a dress of lemon velvet the pouting breasts of a young mother stood out, bursting with their thick white wine; she suckled her child as she walked" (*FLA* 96). But this reverie is "staled" and "she would dream no more" (96).

The concepts of fertility and the mind/body duality are evident in the imagery of Teresa's musings.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the notion that the quotidian, in this case the life of women in a male-dominated household, denies an acceptance or tolerance of the female mind/body is made explicit, when, following her reverie, Teresa goes downstairs:

Lunch. First, the big kitchen ready, robust, steaming, with the oven, cupboards, dishes full of the food they had earned, a food grove that was their own ... Why couldn't she cover the bare walls of the dining-room with designs ... in each wall a painted window or vignette, through which a painted scene would show. (96)

The "robust" abundance of the food is contrasted with the "bare walls" that Teresa would like to adorn. Immediately she is awakened from her dreaming: "It was time to change the plates. 'The two girls are fast asleep,' said their father indulgently" (96). The scene that follows places the females in the domestic sphere, despite the fact that Teresa appears to be the major "bread-winner," and each sister faces criticism from their male relations about their appearance, their lusting after men, and their inability to cook. In this way Stead persistently highlights the feminine domain and its controversial place in a male-dominated sphere. The complications that arise in the narrative trace the confused state of Teresa's mind and the trauma that she undergoes in attempting to place herself in that male-dominated sphere. In this way the text traces her psychological interior alongside the decay of her exterior, her physical embodiment.

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<sup>17</sup> A recurring theme in all three novelists' oeuvres is female fertility and motherhood. Yet, all too frequently motherhood is either an absent presence or mothers and mothering are projected negatively.

Teresa clearly recognises that “women are trained to be non-aggressive, pacifying and self-sacrificing” (Counihan 84). The fact that she struggles with suppressing her strong emotions results in an anger that she ultimately turns against herself. Her frustration is evident:

Men are corrupted by power and want submissive women, but we – the corruption of weakness fortunately is a mere surface, like house-dirt; the human being sleeps underneath and can be roused. I am certain that as I lie here now, frenzied with desire and want, all women have lain for centuries, since innocent times and never an ounce of bravado to throw off the servitude of timidity. (101)

Teresa recognises the diachronic relevance of those injustices, yet, like the women before her, she is unable to “throw off the servitude of timidity.” As has been pointed out, “eating problems begin as survival strategies – as sensible acts of self preservation – in response to myriad injustices” (Thompson 1994, 2).

Although it could be argued that Teresa’s obsession is not with body size, she exhibits other signs of obsessional behaviour that result in what Hilde Bruch refers to as atypical anorexia (34). In Western culture, where power and intellect are coded masculine, and subservience and body are coded feminine, the anorexic’s struggle to understand that mind/body duality often results in what Kim Chernin names the “tyranny of slenderness” (110). It also emerges that Teresa’s dreams will become less opulent but more obsessed, along with her desire for escape through Jonathan Crow. As Clancy points out, in *For Love Alone* the theme of the artist is subordinated to the preoccupation with romantic and sexual love (1981, 19).<sup>18</sup> Yet I will argue that subordination is not necessarily a conscious theme to Stead, but one that emerges as a symptom of Teresa’s obsession and her anorexic tendencies. Clearly, in the above quotes Stead’s imagination conveys a fanciful streak, but Teresa’s character is sublimated by Crow’s dark, scavenging and ultimately selfish nature.

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<sup>18</sup> See Jennifer Gribble, *Christina Stead*, Chapter 3 “Embarking for Cythera.” In this chapter Gribble discusses the many aspects of love and the lacuna between what is said about love and the experience of love.

At her twenty-first birthday, one year after Crow's departure for England, Teresa's "terribly thin" androgynous appearance, which lacks the overt signs of femininity, is unmistakably a result of her attempt to deny her passionate sexuality (*FLA* 255). Moreover, her "distracted" demeanour conveys her inability to recognise the pleasure of her guests (255). This instance of not recognising facial affect is another symptom of anorexia, known as alexithymia (Kucharska-Pietura 43). Teresa's symptoms of anorexia are further indicated when she fails to recognise faces in the city streets, and when "she develop[s] the acuity of a savage, in sound and in smell" (*FLA* 260). Furthermore, like many anorexics, Teresa is deceived by her mirror image, where the "physiological effects of starvation are crucial to the distorted perceptions of self and reality" (Counihan 79): "She did not notice how her bones were showing, nor was ashamed of her threadbare clothes; she appeared to others an ill-kempt sallow woman five years older than she was" (*FLA* 228).

In addition, her previously sensuous dreams are transformed into a parody: "so that cheap sweets, dirty jars of pineapple and coconut juice, fruits in windows, crawling with cockroaches, and even sticky, bright cakes attracted her fearfully" (276). In her analysis of food, the body and the self, Deborah Lupton claims that food connotes the feminine and because it is ingested it becomes embodied. It has the capacity to intrude "into rational thought because of its organic nature" (3). Food's instability, inherent in its inevitable decay, is a metonym for the human flesh and the ambiguity that arises from the binary opposition of pleasure/disgust. Lupton suggests that to "pay attention to such everyday banalities as food practices is to highlight the animality always lurking within the 'civilized' [*sic*] veneer of the human subject" (3). That "animality" in Teresa metaphorically depicts her hunger for a holistic state of being in an androcentric world, a "unified condition of the self" (Chernin 191).

In support of the view that Teresa's androgynous appearance reflects her anorexia, it can be noted that her obsessive eating disorder has become an all-consuming quest, "a pathetically reductionist channel for attaining control in a world where women suffer institutionalised powerlessness" (Counihan 84). But it is a self-destructive and unproductive response to the pressure that she endures from society, represented through the egregious Jonathan Crow.<sup>19</sup> His name too is indicative of his predatory nature, and the chapter "Embarkation for Cytherea" adds *avoirdu pois* to the notion of birds of prey feeding on the body of love in that it recalls Baudelaire's "Un Voyage à Cythère."<sup>20</sup> To Baudelaire love meant the loss of innocence: "– Ile des doux secrets et des fêtes du cœur!" (Clark and Sykes, 189). But love is also the highest pleasure, while doing evil intentionally is a source of lust.

Finally, the narrative structure of *For Love Alone* conveys Teresa's bodily transformation: two years of her tale are condensed into two pages of the novel. These portray her abstinence from food, her emotional detachment from family and friends, and her total absorption in Jonathan Crow. As I have already mentioned, Zaitsoff's research into eating disorders reveals how an anorexic's emotional focus on others at the expense of her own health and well-being has a direct correlative with eating disorder symptoms (58). Teresa's obsessive self-starvation has become an all-consuming passion: "[t]o be hungry was her life and a necessary condition of getting to Jonathan; therefore she did not mind it at all, and it made life more interesting than it had been for years" (*FLA* 275).

Indeed, when Teresa at last reaches Crow in England, he repeatedly degrades her. He defines love through a food classification based on social class: "Primitive love—raw fish, Cockney love—fish and chips, middle class love—cottage pudding, the grand

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<sup>19</sup> Hazel Rowley *Christina Stead: A Biography* (Port Melbourne: Heinemann, 1993). Rowley points out that the character is based on Walter George Keith Duncan, whom Stead met whilst studying "Psychology II" (50-51).

<sup>20</sup> See my earlier allusion to the similarities. Stead also refers to the "opposition between the Hawk and the Crow" (Beston 1978, 93).



passion—roast duckling and port wine” (331). Crow’s wildly erratic theories on love and sex reveal his misogynistic nature. His reductionist statement, that “[i]n the spring a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of—well, for me, it’s beer and bread” (332), not only devalues Teresa’s vision of their relationship, but also subordinates the romantic ideal of spring, love and procreation to “beer and bread.”

However, James Quick, Teresa’s boss, is set in sharp contrast to Jonathan Crow. He reflects on the previous week when he had interviewed Teresa, in her second week in London, and acknowledges the pleasure he derives from her company. His empathy with her is evident: “[h]e went on thinking of the woman’s face, her manner, nervous, anxious, hungry, her timidity in her independence” (362). He considers her spoken language, with its “pleasing idioms of the English he had read in English literature. He masticated them, ran over them with the tip of his tongue” (363). Metaphorically he eats her words, yet he is absorbed by her mind rather than by the body that Crow has metaphorically consumed. Teresa’s monograph, entitled “The Seven Houses of Love,” about “despised and starved” women, enraptures him. The final section, entitled “The Last Star or Extinction” reads:

The last star. To die terribly by will, to make death a terrible demand of life, a revolt, an understanding, such as rives life, blasts it, twists it. To die by the last effort of the will and body. To will, the consuming and consummation. To force the end. It must be dark; then an extraordinary clutching of reality. This is not understanding, not intellectual, but physical, bitter, disgusting, but an affirmation of a unique kind. (421-22)

Here, Teresa’s affirmation of revolt is “physical, bitter, disgusting.” She assimilates the paradox of the psyche/body duality by asserting that through death she will achieve a “clutching of reality,” a clearer resolution of the conflicts that confront her. However later she comes to understand the dilemma with which she has been confronted and challenges it

through another, more productive form of self-empowerment, namely writing the self.<sup>21</sup> Through her writing she acknowledges her status as a “despised and starved” woman in Crow’s eyes, and concedes the futility of following that trajectory. Her hunger is transformed.

In *Christina Stead*, Susan Sheridan contends that Teresa’s “Seven Houses” and St. Teresa of Avila’s<sup>22</sup> *The Interior Castle* both “articulate a desire for an impossible union” and “desire [as] struggle as well as ecstasy” (1988 75-76). However the parallels between the two texts are more in structure and form than in meaning. Closer reading of the two reveals a light/dark polarity in the subject matter: *The Interior Castle* is optimistic and the imagery used is bright; “Seven Houses” is pessimistic and the imagery is dark and menacing. Teresa’s “beloved” is indeed revealed as an adversary, yet St. Teresa’s beloved God could hardly be described thus (76). What the two texts do have in common, nevertheless, is a quest for self-knowledge.<sup>23</sup> The parallel themes evoke a notion of “Holy Anorexia,” the term used by Rudolph Bell in his exploration of female fasting in medieval religion. Both Teresas find an affirmative path through their explorations of self-knowledge, humility and detachment in writing their respective experiences. Indeed, the patriarchal dominance that Bell identified in medieval women’s self-starvation, like that of Victorian women, was often a consequence of coercion to marry—an imperative both Teresas steadfastly avoid. Much like the holy anorexics, Teresa Hawkins displays a wilful

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<sup>21</sup> See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality.” *New Literary History* 16.3 (Spring 1985): 515-43. In this scholarly article the authors illustrate how the protagonist in Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children*, Louie Pollit, transgresses from the “exclusiveness of a (masculinist) linguistic code” to a “witchlike private language” which allows her to express the multifaceted depths of her imaginative ideas (528).

<sup>22</sup> b.1515, d.1582.

<sup>23</sup> Columba Hart, trans. *The Complete Works/Hadewijch*, (New York: Paulist, 1980). Hadewijch’s “Loves’s Seven Names” has remarkably similar concepts.

personality in which the refusal to eat represents a need for independence from the impositions of hierarchical control (Farmer 611-12).<sup>24</sup>

Crow represents that control and, although he purports to educate Teresa's mind, he literally feeds off her innocence and her quest for fulfilment. For example, when Quick reveals that Teresa had "half-starved herself" (*FLA* 439) in order to reach Crow in England, he denies enticing her: "Not on your life. She said that? She's getting the illusions of that outcast—you know, the little match girl dreaming about the roast duckling offering itself to her with knife and fork stuck in?" (440). Furthermore, discontented with merely possessing Teresa's body, Crow attempts to appropriate Quick's intellectual influence: "By Jingo, of course that's an economic truth, I certainly get somewhere rubbing my brains against yours" (440). Such a statement is analeptic of his "suspicion of everything, which was at base a fear of not eating; and whatever unhurried but persistent calculation he had made of how he was to eat for the rest of his life, was to govern him from now on" (200). Crow's obsessive egoism is palpable and his self-righteous disdain for the female sex is clear throughout the novel, witnessed by his abusive behaviour towards all the women he interacts with.

Ultimately Teresa's recovery from the "illusion of a love-hungry girl" is self-empowering (424). Both she and her hunger are transformed: "Her hunger had made her insatiable, and she was not content ... she was not at all satisfied with the end of physical craving; she wanted to try men" (464). Her self-empowerment is evident: "[n]o one would hold her prisoner, Harry did not, and even James would not, but she would hold them both

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<sup>24</sup> See also Alec Irvin, "Devoured by God: Cannibalism, Mysticism, and Ethics in Simone Weil," *Cross Currents* 51.2 (Summer 2001): 257, *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Thomson Gale, James Cook U. 22 Mar. 2007 <http://find.galegroup.com>. Irwin writes, "Weil died in 1943, at the age of 34, a victim of tuberculosis and of self-imposed food austerities she understood as obedience to God's love. In a notebook, along with passages from the Gita [Bhagavad Gita], Weil had copied a fragment from Heraclitus: "Mortals are immortals and immortals are mortals, living each other's death and dying each other's life." Weil's exegesis: "To live the death of a being is to eat it. The reverse is to be eaten. Man eats God and is eaten by God" (*Oeuvres complètes* VI.2, 454). A year and a half after writing these lines, Weil herself was dead, consumed by *mycobacterium tuberculosis*, by self-starvation, perhaps by the God she yearned to encounter in the depths of affliction" (258).

prisoners” (493). In her final epiphany she recognises not only her former weakness as “a vain, thin thing” (493), but also the futility of her striving for perfection as a saint of love. However, her epiphany also entails a recognition that “the hungry and the dispossessed, the ugly ... will have it, all passion, all delight” (494). As Diane Taub remarks when speaking about Catherine Garret’s *Beyond Anorexia*, “employing a sociological perspective Garret views anorexia and recovery from anorexia as a spiritual, but not necessarily a religious, experience. Recovery entails the discovery of spiritual meaning, along with an awareness that a greater power than the individual participates in the recovery process” (423). Teresa’s recovery entails a purging of her negative and self-destructive thoughts, thereby finding affirmation in her own insatiable desires and affinity with her psyche.

In the autobiographical *For Love Alone* Teresa Hawkins’ self-starvation in her quest for love reveals how food, desire and identity are inextricably linked. Although there is no extant evidence to suggest that Christina Stead was anorexic, she clearly understood the psychoanalytical elements of the disorder. Teresa displays many of the physiological and psychological symptoms of anorexia, and her “pain of hunger” is conveyed both literally and metaphorically (Counihan 21). Ultimately she is empowered, and she demonstrates her empowerment by reconciling the psychological conflicts that affected her physically through writing the self. Her debilitated body strengthens as she recognises the profound way in which she has achieved independence and sexual liberation. In *For Love Alone* Teresa’s anorexia is a testament to the paradoxes and dilemmas that confront women and their quest for identity.

## Cannibalistic Love: *A Fringe of Leaves*

*“No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is. And as to ... beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze”* (Conrad 60).

The diverse representations of food in Patrick White’s oeuvre are highly relevant to interpretation. However, while many of the symbolic objects in White’s novels have been analysed, food has been largely neglected. Frequently the representations of food are the basis for a satiric observation of society exposing the often-unpleasant elements of human interaction. In other words, the food symbolism in White’s writing conveys subtly important meanings, suggesting both the contradictory nature of the Australian psyche, as a national collective, and its universality. As Edgecombe points out, White, like Dickens, “bypasses commonsense explanations for metaphor. The metaphor, endorsed by the conditional rejection of fact, thus acquires more definitive, even authoritative substance” (1996, 112). Thus through tenuous threads of metaphorical meaning, White not only creates visual images but invites the reader to question the images he projects. He uses polysemy to great effect, particularly in relation to the depiction of food in his novels. Indeed, like Thea Astley, White frequently operates with polarities that incorporate nature and culture. In evoking such polarities in his writing he confronts desire and its seemingly unattainable goals. *A Fringe of Leaves* gives voice to the complexity of desire: “Their stomachs compressed by irregularity and fright had ceased to be part of their anatomy, so there was no question of their feeling hungry. They were hungrier for the dreams which eluded them soon after leaving their skulls” (162).<sup>25</sup> White feeds and stimulates the reader’s imagination by frequently foregrounding poignant representations of food and eating.

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Harris, “Victorian Repression and Colonial Desire in *Heart of Darkness* and *A Fringe of Leaves*,” *Antipodes* 10.2 (Dec. 1996): 133-36. Harris refers to both novels as being “open to diverse readings” (135). He also refers to the Roxburgh’s relationship as “devoid of passion” (135). As I have demonstrated, Teresa Hawkins’ passion was likewise subordinated by a dominant male character.

Indeed, food motifs abound in *A Fringe of Leaves*, where for example, the killing and eating of birds is paradoxically linked to several characters. Another recurring trope which incorporates the nature/culture binary is both animal and human thighs, where imagery often obfuscates the difference.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, congruent with that obfuscation, the distinction between animal and plant life as living entities and their depiction as food is often blurred. It is through the blurring of such distinctions that White frames the central trope of this novel, anthropophagy. Indeed, the etymology of the trope itself has an element of ambiguity. Cannibalism as a term used to describe the practice of humans eating humans is derived from the name of a West Indian tribe Carib that Spanish explorers mispronounced as Canib. Anthropophagy is the term coined by anthropologists to describe “man eating.” This section examines the symbolic meaning of food in traditional meals, and what constitutes the term “traditional.”<sup>27</sup> It also addresses the complexities that emerge from such an analysis through the inherently contradictory nature of food and its consumption.

This sub-section, then, offers a close reading and analysis of the symbolism inherent in many aspects of food and eating in *A Fringe of Leaves*. Indeed, the first overt instance of food in the novel is proleptic, as are many of the food images, and signifies one of the tropes of the novel, thighs: “Mr. Merivale’s present intention was to drive round by the Brickfields and call at the house of one Delaney who had undertaken to collect a leg of pork from a Toongabbie farmer” (*FL* 15). This trope of thighs highlights the unsavoury

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<sup>26</sup> See Don Anderson “A Severed Leg: Anthropophagy and Communion in Patrick White’s Fiction,” *Southerly* 40.4 (Dec. 1980): 399-417. Anderson refers to the subtleness of the recurring thigh imagery and how it defines the “insistent and obsessive” nature of the narrative (415). See also Alphonso Lingis, “The Dreadful Mystic Banquet,” *Janus Head* 3.2 (Fall 2000): <http://www.janushead.org/3-2/lingis.cfm>. Lingis refers to the rite *chod* which is practiced in Tibet where one of the essential pieces is a *kangling*, a trumpet made of a human femur.

<sup>27</sup> See David Marshall, “Food as Ritual, Routine or Convention,” *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 8.1 (Mar. 2005): 69-85. *Taylor*. James Cook U. 24 Oct. 2005, <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content>.

desires and needs of humanity that reside below the veneer of civilised society (Jose 1991, 30). That undesirability is explored further through the layering of puddings, food and clothing. These food motifs, and the notion of layering, are more common earlier in the novel, but are absent from the Chance section. However, in the narrative that leads to Ellen's encounter with the convict, the leg of pork is transposed into the thigh/leg of the Aboriginal girl who is murdered, which culminates in Ellen's act of cannibalism (Maes-Jelinek 1980, 37). So, in foregrounding the leg of pork White prefigures the many instances of the devouring of flesh that occur throughout the novel.

Moreover, in blurring the distinction between human and animal he exposes humans' cruelty to each other and all its inherent emotional trauma. For example, immediately before her own descent into anthropophagy, Ellen experiences uncertainty in her reaction to witnessing the Aborigines roasting and eating the young murdered Aboriginal girl. She "tried to disentangle her emotions, fear from amazement, disgust from a certain pity she felt for these starving and ignorant savages," who she nevertheless acknowledges are "her masters" (244). Her vacillating emotions are compounded when she "looked down and caught sight of a thigh-bone which must have fallen from one of the overflowing dillies" (244). Her immediate reaction is one of "disgust," but what follows is fraught with emotion. On the "monstrous" bone "were one or two shreds of half-cooked flesh and gobbets of burnt fat," which she raised and "spasmodically chewing, swallow[ed] by great gulps which her throat threatened to return" (244).<sup>28</sup> White displays Ellen's literal ferocious appetite for life that invades her desperation and exposes her traumatic dilemma.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Once again refer to Don Anderson's "Severed Leg" where he indicates that the phallic symbolism of the thigh signifies the fact that Ellen is "*eating the patriarchy* [his italics]" and thereby kills the "Father-totem" within her (415).

<sup>29</sup> Duncan Greenlaw, "Preying on Foresaid Remains': Irish Identity, Obituaries, and the Limits of Mourning," *Mosaic* 34.4 (Dec. 2001): 123. *ProQuest 5000*. James Cook U. 10 Nov. 2005, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb>, Greenlaw discusses the concept of mourning as interiorising a "lost one,"

Although I have not researched the veracity of Aboriginal cannibalism in any depth, there is documentary evidence that it took place.<sup>30</sup> Paul Fieldhouse observes that a Western Australian Aboriginal tribe ate every tenth newborn to ensure the continued sustenance of its members from the land (185). Whether or not the Indigenous inhabitants of Fraser Island practiced such a custom, and Schaffer considers the evidence inconclusive (1995 107), White unveils a not-uncommon historical precedent where marginalised groups were accused of deviant behaviours (Fieldhouse 183). In this instance, through the shockingly vivid food imagery White invites the reader to question the motivations of humanity by literally exposing the bare bone stripped of all layers. Given his vacillating religiosity he could be satirising “transubstantiation, a Catholic doctrine that has sometimes been seen as cannibalistic when viewed from the less sacramental side of Protestantism” (Graham 116). Whether that is the case or not, he clearly exposes the barbarity and violence inherent in humanity’s capacity to consume.

More specifically, through the depiction of food and eating White exposes the colonisers’ own barbarity by highlighting the pious horror they expressed at what they perceived as barbaric behaviour. As mentioned earlier, anthropophagy is the central trope and determining metaphor of *A Fringe of Leaves*.<sup>31</sup> Through the disgust that the image engenders White “coalesces more general anxieties about the dismemberment, re-use, and misuse of bodies” (Susan Martin 2003, 55). To add further impact to these anxieties, he inverts the perception of who is master/slave and who is civilised/barbaric. In

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and its analogy with cannibalism, “through which we sever our attachments to a lost one by cannibalistically devouring them” (126). The Eucharist symbolically reasserts the devotee’s attachment to Christ as divine, and so reverses this view of mourning.

<sup>30</sup> See Carole Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power*, where cannibalism, she claims, “connect[s] the living and the dead, humans and their gods, neighbours and kin, and family members” (17). For a counter-argument see William Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979) and William Arens, “Cooking the Cannibals,” *Consuming Passions: Food in the Age of Anxiety*, eds. Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998) 157-66.

<sup>31</sup> Don Anderson, “A Severed Leg,” ably discusses the significance of Ellen Roxburgh as a “a communicant at the end of a cannibalistic feast” (400). His essay inspired some of the ideas discussed here.



foregrounding the leg of pork in the prologue, along with the many other references to thighs, he alerts the reader to their significance in the tale to unfold. In this way he exposes how food is the locus of power. Food is necessary for basic existence, yet the acquisition of food, particularly in the Australian bush, further defines both the powerful and the powerless and the contradictory perceptions of what constitutes power.

None of the characters in this prologue, except Miss Scrimshaw who reappears only in the epilogue, occur again in the novel. Yet they signify much. They are indeed the choric prelude for what is to come.<sup>32</sup> Ellen's emotions and character are drawn to the reader's attention in the following exchange: "'If you want my honest opinion,' Mr. Merivale said, 'the ladies haven't left her a leg to stand on'" (FL 15). Whilst this enigmatic phrase does not refer to food specifically, it certainly prefigures Ellen's cannibalism introduced above. At the same time it emphasises her dilemma, her contradictory characterisation, and her intractable emotions that lie below the veneer of respectability that governs her existence as Mrs. Roxburgh.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, the process of layering is another trope in *A Fringe of Leaves*. White uses the preparation and consumption of food as a signifier for the stratifications that proliferate in this novel. The ambiguity of much of his imagery, particularly in relation to food, signifies the ambiguity of the characters who embody the tale's significance. For example, Miss Scrimshaw, whose surname means shells, ivory, etc. etched with carved or coloured designs, often crafted by sailors at sea (Davidson 456), is brown, she is dressed in brown and this clothing "made her complexion, if not livery, browner than it should have been" (FL 10). The liver, of course, was anciently supposed to be the seat of love and of violent

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<sup>32</sup> See Michael Harris, "Victorian Repression and Colonial Desire in *Heart of Darkness* and *A Fringe of Leaves*," *Antipodes* 10.2 (Dec. 1996): 133-36. Harris discusses the Aboriginal people in *Voss*, whom he refers to as "a form of tragic chorus which lamented the folly and presumption of Voss" (89). Refer also to my argument in Chapter Three where I claim the significance of this "tragic chorus," that is the Indigenous characters, to an understanding of food and characterisation which proliferates throughout *Voss*.

<sup>33</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Greg Manning, of the Department of Humanities at James Cook University, whose textual knowledge of *A Fringe of Leaves* inspired my research.

passion generally, whence expressions such as “lily-livered” meaning cowardly. Obversely, and significantly for Miss Scrimshaw in this instance, the adjective “liverish” refers to one who is peevisish or glum. Whilst the notion of conflating “livery” with offal may appear to be stretching the metaphor, it has credence, particularly because later, aboard the *Bristol Maid* as the Roxburghs “crumbled untidy fragments of conversation,” Mr. Roxburgh asserts, “the brown woman – that eagle – or *vulture*, would peck out a man’s liver for tuppence” (35). To add further dimension to the notion, when Mrs. Roxburgh re-encounters Miss Scrimshaw at Moreton Bay, she considers: “The lady could hardly have lost her maidenhead for frightening off the men or tearing out the entrails of those unwise enough to approach” (319). In this way White uses the contradictory representation of liver as metaphor to give authoritative emphasis to the characterisation of Miss Scrimshaw. However, the Promethean allusion in the quote is inverted. Thus through such tenuous threads of metaphorical meaning White not only creates a visual image, but also indicates the ambiguity of Miss Scrimshaw’s nature (Nicholson 43). Furthermore, the emphasis on food imagery foregrounds her relevance to the story that has already begun. Significantly, Miss Scrimshaw’s description occurs before the initial overt mention of food, the leg of pork, thereby further reinforcing the relevance of her character. Her “livery” countenance in the prologue is no less ambiguous in the epilogue where she wishes she “were an eagle!” (*FL* 363). White grounds Miss Scrimshaw in an ineluctable position, forever condemned to “presid[e] at the tea-kettle” (364). She is as unable to escape the layers of respectability imposed by society as she is unable to escape the female form, to become “[e]levated, and at last free!” (363). In this instance, White uses the ritual of the tea ceremony as a metaphor for a form of imprisonment imposed on women who, through the demands of the quotidian, are unable to discover their “essential part” (363).

Ellen too is irrevocably re-enclosed into the restrictive colonial society. Although she wins a small victory over Garnet Roxburgh, her ultimate disempowerment is ineluctable. Much as Stead does in *For Love Alone*, White uses eating as a metaphor for that disempowerment. Whilst dining with Garnet Roxburgh, eating prevents Ellen articulating her thoughts and emotions: “His guest choked on a bone, but asked, ‘What is it, Mr. Roxburgh?’ ‘What? Oh, the fish. A trumpeter, I think. Yes, trumpeter.’ He sighed and ate, and ate and sighed” (112).<sup>34</sup>

This notion of the female’s inability to articulate opinions is highlighted again prior to Ellen’s recollections of Dulcet whilst on board the *Bristol Maid*: “her voice sounded ugly, doubtless due to a constriction of the throat” (30). Ellen is on the brink of escaping from the stasis that has enveloped her, “as her locked hands sped their becalmed brig, her thoughts in tow, till she was again seated beside the silver kettle behind brocade curtains which the servant had drawn, listening for some indication that her husband would join her at the tea-table, or whether she would conduct the silent ritual of taking tea alone” (30). Here she is literally transported back in the “brig” of her mind to her “civilised” self as Mrs. Roxburgh. In her recollection of “Birdlip House”<sup>35</sup> she is rendered silent and dependent on her husband for social interaction. On the “becalmed brig” the contradictory Ellen Roxburgh is experiencing an “ugly” rebellion against the “ritual” of “taking tea.” She is re-evolving in antithesis to the stationary brig; she has commenced peeling away the layers and in the process will discard the identity of Mrs. Ellen Roxburgh.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Harris, “Victorian Repression and Colonial Desire in *Heart of Darkness* and *A Fringe of Leaves*,” also elaborates on the interconnectivity between “primitive setting, colonial power and libidinous sexuality” and shows how primitivism, landscape, colonialism and sexuality relate to the structure of *A Fringe of Leaves* (136).

<sup>35</sup> It is worthwhile noting the irony of the name, especially in light of the fact that many of the females in *A Fringe of Leaves* are depicted as birds. However, their lips are sealed in a house, and more significantly, birds do not have lips. “Birdlip House” is now part of Gloucester Royal Hospital so perhaps White is covertly drawing upon the Cheltenham landscape where he suffered in his childhood (Marr 543).

<sup>36</sup> For an unsympathetic portrayal of the ‘real’ Mrs. Fraser see Jim Davidson, “Beyond the Fatal Shore: The Mythologization of Mrs. Fraser.” *Meanjin* 3.49 (Spring 1990): 449-61. Davidson asserts that Mrs. Fraser was

Finally and cathartically, she acknowledges the constraint imposed by the patriarchal domination she has endured: “It seemed to Mrs. Roxburgh that the whole of her uneventful life had been spent listening to men telling stories, and smiling to encourage them. It was a relief to catch sight of the boy, who entered bearing a dish with some of the apples they had taken on board at Sydney, and which were of a wrinkled, though hectic red” (139). The subtlety of the Edenic imagery in this quote encapsulates Ellen’s betrayal of Austin Roxburgh and presages the temptations she is to endure away from the enclosure of civilised society (Anderson 1980, 410). Perhaps the satirical element is unavoidable here. As I have already mentioned, Anne Pender points out, “the etymological root of satire, *lanx satura*, means a full dish, of fruits and foods comprising many elements, offered to the gods” (12). To “the boy” Oswald Dignam, Ellen is a “Divine Presence” and he literally offers her the dish full of fruit, albeit “wrinkled” (*FL* 173).<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, however, Ellen is reluctantly re-enclosed into colonial society. In partaking of tea on the *Princess Charlotte* prior to departing for Sydney, “she felt breathless, restless”: her corset, another metaphor for restraint, was “not yet broken in” (365).<sup>38</sup>

That connection between clothing and food recurs throughout *A Fringe of Leaves* and once again its importance is signalled in the first chapter, when Mrs. Merivale imperiously demands of Miss Scrimshaw: “‘I took it for granted you would dine with us. We have a pigeon pie.’ She had, besides her *mousseline de soie* which needed letting out” (15). There is a degree of ambiguity in “*mousseline de soie*.” It can refer to both a muslin-

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a venally manipulative female who was totally unsympathetic to the plight of the marginalised. He views the mythologising of the Fraser tale as a product “of a superior civilization [*sic*] exposed to harsh conditions and primitive people” (452). He attributes the increased interest in Mrs. Fraser to Sidney Nolan who spent several weeks on Fraser Island in 1947.

<sup>37</sup> Such an action evokes the idea of an offering to a goddess. However, the subversion of Idun’s basket of golden apples (which bestow immortality on the gods of Asgard in Norse mythology), further substantiates the satiric elements of the narrative evident in Oswald Dignam’s offer.

<sup>38</sup> See Kay Schaffer’s “The Eliza Fraser Story and Constructions of Gender, Race and Class in Australian Culture,” *Hecate* 17.1 (May 1991): 136-43. The basic premise of Schaffer’s discussion is that representations of the Eliza Fraser story could be read as “cautionary tale[s].” She refutes the national mythologies that are sustained through the depiction of women in history and refers specifically to Louisa Lawson and Lindy Chamberlain, in addition to Eliza Fraser, in her argument.

like silk fabric and a soft light mousse or hollandaise sauce made frothy with whipped cream or egg white. The ambiguity of meaning combined with the reference to “pigeon pie” adds dimension to the aforementioned combination of food and clothing. As Brady points out, “[t]he novel also makes great use of the homologies of food and clothing attempting as [Lévi Strauss] does to come at some basic understanding of common humanity by a comparative study of the underlying codes of social existence” (1983, 63). Such imagery foregrounds Ellen’s literal reversion to nature, where she is stripped naked and has to hunt for her subsistence. Clearly, in the above quote the *mousseline de soie* that needs “letting out” refers to an item of clothing, but the juxtaposition of the two images invites the reader to question the implied ambiguity. Further, clothing is protective of the body, but White conveys it as being protective of the inner self (McClymont 53). In foregrounding such imagery White challenges the relationship of civilised society to anthropophagy and the unclothed Aborigines. He challenges the imperatives of a society that has to dress food up, to keep in place a veneer of respectability essential to Western humankind’s existence (Brady 1977, 123-40; 1983, 61-68).

Indeed, not only does White convey layering through food and clothing metaphors, but he often aligns food with religious imagery (Anderson 1980, 414). In the liminal space of the sea, poised between experiences of civilisation and barbarity, Ellen reluctantly partakes of a bizarre sacrament:

One of the seamen closest to her knelt in the bilge, hands raised as though preparing to assist in a ceremony. All were waiting for the lady to drink.

‘Mrs. Roxburgh,’ the captain invited in a reverent whisper.

All were watching.

‘No,’ Mrs. Roxburgh began, and made a movement to push the stinking vessel away. ‘I hardly think – oh, *no!*’ she snickered in disgust.

‘Ellen,’ her husband chirruped, ‘you must take a sip at least, out of deference to the captain, and because,’ he thought to add, ‘the Almighty has brought us safely to land.’

For one blasphemous instant there arose in her mind the vision of a fish the Almighty was playing, the distended lip in which the hook was caught, her own; then she said, ‘Oh dear! You are all

against me,' and accepted the tin cup as though it had been a silver chalice, and despite her nausea, sank her face.

'This,' said Austin Roxburgh, winking at the congregation, 'is the original Cornishwoman!'

That her husband could have betrayed his own creation, granted it was under the influence of rum, made her blush and swallow, and what she experienced was not remission of sins, but a fire spreading. (181)

The ironic satire in the above passage is palpable. Such a sacramental scene presages the Aboriginal ritual feast in which Ellen "had participated after a fashion" (244). There "she sensed something akin to the atmosphere surrounding communicants coming out of church looking bland and forgiven after the early service" (243).<sup>39</sup> Indeed, as Fieldhouse points out:

During the early centuries of human civilisation the idea of cannibalism gradually came to be thought of as largely impractical and somewhat reprehensible morally. But it was not until the second century B.C. when visions of Heaven and Hell, and of damnation and salvation, emerged that the view prevailed that man needed his body after death. This effectively placed a taboo on anthropophagy amongst Jews and, later, Christians which has no real parallel in the other great religions of the world. Although most societies condemn murder only Jews and Christians are fundamentally dedicated to the proposition that eating people is worse than murder. It was to take more than the rise of a powerful religious movement to halt the reviled practice. (Indeed, the Christian Church itself was to endorse a form of cannibalism with the propounding of the Doctrine of Transubstantiation). (187)

Interestingly, back in civilisation Ellen denies the Eucharist proffered by Mr. Cottle.

Captain Lovell asked the chaplain to visit Mrs. Roxburgh proclaiming, "nourishing food is not everything, is it? Let no one accuse us of not giving thought to your spiritual welfare!"

(*FL* 345). Indeed, congruent with Miss Scrimshaw's characterisation discussed above,

White describes Mrs. Lovell as "one of those practical women too distracted by their daily responsibilities to give overmuch thought to religion, but who will recommend a helping of

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<sup>39</sup> Once again, refer to Don Anderson's essay, "A Severed Leg: Anthropophagy and Communion in Patrick White's Fiction."

moralistic pudding to any they feel in need of it” (345-6).<sup>40</sup> Like Ellen, she is denied extraneous thought and is subjugated by the quotidian (Brady 1977, 126).

Another recurring food motif in *A Fringe of Leaves* is puddings. Initially in the first chapter the reference is to Mrs. Delaney, a character who is not encountered again: “‘She would stuff us with plum-cake. Before our dinner ... ‘She will be disappointed,’ Mr. Merivale reminded fruitlessly ... *her* face at its post, a desperate, mulberry-tinted pudding” (*FL* 16). The word pudding is derived from the Latin *botellus*, sausage, the same etymological root as bowel.<sup>41</sup> Of course, it also has a derogatory colloquialism meaning a fat, dumpy or stupid person. Thus, the word is not a disembodied element in White’s fiction, but the word, in this instance “pudding,” is clearly relevant. To elaborate, “pudding” in the above quote does not refer to a literal pudding, but the entire passage is replete with references to the ingredients associated with a “mulberry-tinted pudding.” For example, Mrs. Merivale’s scornful dismissal of the prospect of visiting Mrs. Delaney is characterised by the notion of being “stuff[ed] ... with plum-cake.” Here, the notion of a stuffed sausage comes to mind, further emphasising the metaphorical weight of the word “pudding.” Moreover, Mr. Merivale’s assertions are “fruitless”; his character lacks the ingredients for a rich plum pudding. Mrs. Delaney’s depth of character is also dismissed through Mrs. Merivale’s caustic comments, yet both women are confined to respective prisons, Mrs. Delaney behind her “holland curtains” (16) and Mrs. Merivale in the “stuffy, confessional gloom of the box” (16). Both these female characters lack a fruitful existence and clearly Mrs. Delaney’s portrayal reflects the notion of spiritual constipation. Such

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<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of White’s relationship with religion see, Rodney Wetherell, “Uncheery Soul.” *Meanjin*, 64.1-2 (Mar.-Jun. 2005): 243-55.

<sup>41</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: MIT, 1968) 221-22. Here grotesquery is valorised: “Bowels, intestines, with their wealth of meaning and connotation are the leading images of the entire episode . . . these images are introduced as food . . . The limits between animal flesh and the consuming human flesh are dimmed, very nearly erased” (221).

characters in the prologue are thus dismissed; they are mere foreshadowings of what is to follow (Brady 1983, 65).

The process of dismissing the choric characters, who nevertheless serve a proleptic purpose, is evident when Delaney recounts the tale of the slain shepherds (Anderson 1980, 414). The two shepherds were “in the remote corner of the run” and killed by “the natives” over “some matter ... of women.” “‘Well,’ he said, ‘to cut a story short and come to the point however tragical, the two men – honest fellers both of ‘em – had just been found, their guts laid open (savin’ the ladies presence). Stone cold, they were, an’ the leg missin’ off of one of ‘em – a mere lad from Taunton, Somerset’” (*FL* 20). This passage contains subtle clues foreshadowing the instances of anthropophagy discussed above. The victims were male, not Indigenous, two in number and although they had been disemboweled, they had not apparently been roasted. In the story to unfold, two corpses are roasted and eaten. In this vignette it is not even explicit whether the slain shepherds were eaten. White is clearly playing at storytelling here, implicitly raising questions as to the reliability of the narrator, an element central to the Eliza Fraser legend. He further emphasises storytelling through the echoes of Jacobean tragedies in the “tragical” story. Once again, he interrogates the dichotomy of native versus civiliser, representing the latter by Somerset, over the Tamar and beyond Devon, “Across the River” (*FL* 47) and therefore more civilised than Ellen Gluyas’ druidic Cornwall. He thus prompts the reader to question the notion of savagery and highlights the paradoxes inherent in the dichotomy of barbarity and civilization (Ward 1978, 408-9).

In fact the females’ reaction to this tale is significant: “Mrs. Merivale might have been impaled; Miss Scrimshaw on the other hand, continued distantly watching a scene, each detail of which filled her with a fascinated horror” (*FL* 20). It is not clear which scene Miss Scrimshaw is watching. Is it a literal view from the window of the coach, perhaps of



some of the convicts at labour? Or is she watching a scene within her head, feeding her active imagination with gruesome imagery of the slain men? Once again the ambiguity causes the reader to attempt to define Miss Scrimshaw's place in the novel, since she is clearly relevant to the story about to unfold. In fact her importance is made explicit in the scene where the Roxburghs arrive in Hobart Town. Garnet Roxburgh repels Ellen, but the "spurious lady" recognises in him something "coarse and sensual ... to escape from her inner self she looked out across the country" (74).<sup>42</sup> She clearly has an empathy with Garnet's "sensual" persona, but is unwilling to admit this to the fecund imagination that is "her inner self." She is however unable to escape that wildness, for at this juncture, as "she looked out across the country," she first sights the convict labourers, the "human beasts" (75).

In this way White compares and contrasts his observations of human nature with aspects of the landscape and environment (Anderson 1980, 401). Garnet's excesses are further exemplified in: "The visitors would have retired willingly to their own quarters and given way to their exhaustion, had it not been required of them to listen, admire, recount, and feast until well into the evening" (*FL* 78). His description is imbued with food imagery: "His lips glossy as washed cherries, his chestnut hair" (69) – almost good enough to eat!<sup>43</sup>

To return to Miss Scrimshaw's significance in Ellen's characterisation: following her observation Mrs. Merivale exclaims, "Loathsome savages." but her statement too is fraught with ambiguity. Here, apparently "loathsome savages" refers to the Aborigines who slaughtered the shepherds, yet the presence of Delaney, the emancipist, along with Miss Scrimshaw's observations, serves to foreground Ellen's equally ambiguous relationships with the Aborigines and with Jack Chance, and her general attitude towards the convicts

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<sup>42</sup> See Laurence Steven, *Dissociation and Wholeness in Patrick White's Fiction* (Waterloo, Ontario: Laurier UP, 1989) 113-46. Steven discusses the "trappings of . . . civilized [*sic*] humanity" (113).

<sup>43</sup> Petronius' "Dinner with Trimalchio" draws upon similar moral concerns in the depiction of food.

and Indigenous inhabitants of Australia. Thus, through subtle references to cannibalism and savagery, White raises the paradoxical basis for British colonisation of Australia, the illusion of *terra nullius*.<sup>44</sup> The recurring dichotomy of plenitude and lack, not only in relation to food but also in relation to human nature highlights the paradoxes prevalent in the establishment of Australian society and culture. As Dorothy Jones points out:

Empires swallow not only raw materials, but entire countries and nations. Imperialism, perceived in terms of *appetite*, for national prestige, territory, wealth and commodities, leads to *transgression*, the crossing or overstepping of boundaries (geographical, national and moral) which also involves theft and the despoliation of indigenous peoples. (1992, 22)

Women are compared to the dispossessed colonised people too: Nicole Terrien defines the relationship between colonial/primitive, male/female sexuality, and male/female dominance using tea as the shaping metaphor:

To define Victorian England, the narrator often uses words that he also uses to picture primitive Australia, he never underlines them but systematically points out the similitude. Thus English society seems to become the object of an anthropological description as much as Aboriginal customs would have been in an English text. When Ellen Gluyas sheds her identity to become Mrs. Roxburgh, she adopts the sartorial habits of her new class but she also changes her relationship to food. Tea is used as the easily recognisable symbol of the English gentry, but it has to be tasted in a Worcester porcelain cup so that the ceremonial becomes more important than the act of drinking itself. Mrs. Roxburgh's sexual life also becomes strictly regulated and totally deprived of spontaneity.<sup>45</sup>

In *A Fringe of Leaves* White examines the complexities of such binaries. He explores how they relate to the marginalised in a developing society and how that relationship impacts on those who exist at the lower echelon.<sup>46</sup> However, White does not necessarily offer a solution to such complexities. Instead he engages in a dialectical mode of reasoning that invites the reader to see beyond the text and contemplate a metaphysical approach to

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<sup>44</sup> The concept of *terra nullius* and its relation to *Voss* is analysed in detail in Chapter Three.

<sup>45</sup> <<http://www2.univ-reunion.fr/~ageof/text/74c21e88-269.html>>.

<sup>46</sup> Dorothy Jones, "The Post-Colonial Belly Laugh" (1992): "Rosalind Coward points out the importance of food metaphors, with their implicit sadism, in delineating gender relations, as women are referred to as dishes or tarts and sometimes compared to nurturing animals like cows or sows: 'There's a language of devouring, gobbling up, feasting with the eyes, a language which suggests the desire not only to eat but perhaps to destroy the loved object.'" (25).

understanding the complexities of the human condition (Brady 1992, 25). In Chapter Three I will analyse how food, including tea, impacts on an understanding of the complex characterisation of Voss' expedition party. For a taste of what will be discussed, Ralph Angus' dying hallucinations metaphorically re-immerses him in genteel society, where "young ladies of his own class offered him tea out of Worcester cups" (V 425-26).

However, to return to the major theme of *A Fringe of Leaves*, the extremes of human nature:

As the vehicle lurched on its way, Mrs. Merivale and Miss Scrimshaw seemed united in what could have been contemplation of a common fate; only Mrs. Merivale continued to protest by never quite exhausted spasms, 'I don't understand! I don't understand! Not where human nature is concerned. Such a world as this is not fit for a decent person to live in.'

'There, there, Alice! Everything has always been against you. Can't you accept it? Then we shall enjoy the pie waiting for us at home.'

It was a proposition material enough to have appealed to Mrs. Merivale had she not chosen to indulge herself in the luxury of hysteria. (20)

Here it is human nature versus the barbarity of the outback, but is it the outback and the Indigenous people who are barbarous? What is White trying to show? His depiction of the Aborigines later in the novel has raised the ire of many critics, but is their ire justified?<sup>47</sup>

Such issues are evident in the portrayal of Austin Roxburgh. Although his childhood appears to have been stable he also appears to have an obsession with food. He exhibits symptoms of anorexia, and although there has been less attention focused on the disorder in males, such literature does exist (Gainor 30). An interesting related disorder to anorexia is "swallowing phobia" that occurs in patients who do not have a fear of fatness but exhibit a fear of swallowing. This aversion often manifests in its early stages as choking, which is evident in the behaviour of Austin Roxburgh:

Austin Roxburgh had fallen to contemplating as far as he dared the mystery of virility as embodied in his brother Garnet. Risen from the hip-bath which Nurse Hayes had stood on the floor against the

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<sup>47</sup> Once again, see for example, Carole Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power*, and William Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth* and "Cooking the Cannibals."

fender, the white flesh took on its worth in gold from firelight weaving out of the grate. If ever Austin were unwise enough in after life to let himself become intoxicated with strong drink, this same vision would materialise. At such moments he was all but choked by the ripple of his own throat. Now in an open boat Mr. Roxburgh had perhaps grown a little drunk on rain, for he visibly gulped. (176)

As Gainor points out, research into male anorexics reveals an unhealthy relationship with the mother who invests in her male child her lack of emotional fulfillment. Food in such relationships constitutes a whole gamut of binary oppositions, even “life and death” (qtd. in Gainor 32).<sup>48</sup> In his appraisal of male/female sexuality White also explores the aetiology of eating disorders. Early psychoanalytic theory expounded the male anorexic’s dependence on the nurturing mother and a wish to remain in an infantile state. That fear of a burgeoning masculinity is evident in Austin Roxburgh, his relationship with his mother, and subsequently with Ellen. Austin’s fear of passionate sexuality is evident: “She herself had only once responded with a natural ardour, but discovered on her husband’s face an expression of having tasted something bitter, or of looking too deep” (*FL* 67-8). His psychological immaturity is further evidence of an insecure masculinity and reflects an on-going conflict regarding his sexuality (Herzog *et al.* 40). Ultimately there is no ameliorative technique open to White for Austin Roxburgh’s condition and the only option available is death. Significantly he dies when impaled by a spear, “probably of wood” (*FL* 210).<sup>49</sup>

Concomitant with the recurring wood imagery, White’s fiction displays an obsession with trees. In *A Fringe of Leaves* there is an abundance of fruit tree imagery.<sup>50</sup> A notion of rich fecundity in Australian fruit trees contrasts with the wildness and barrenness

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<sup>48</sup> See also Arnold Andersen, *Males with Eating Disorders*.

<sup>49</sup> As I have already alluded to, historical references abound in *A Fringe of Leaves*, particularly in Austin Roxburgh’s death and its correlation with Captain Phillips’ death by spear to the throat. Literally he is unable to swallow with the spear in his throat and metaphorically his death signifies his wooden character. Again, metaphorically, phlebotomy in White’s fiction signals release, here particularly in relation to a turning-point in Ellen’s self-awareness of the alterity of self.

<sup>50</sup> Dennis Haskell, “‘A Lady Only by Adoption’ – Civilization [*sic*] in *A Fringe of Leaves*,” *Southerly* 47.4 (1987): 433-42. As an interesting aside, Haskell refers to the ambiguous yet “fruitful” nature of “Ellen’s suffering” (440).

of fruit trees in Cornwall, the “scraggy pear” (52). The fecundity is displayed at Dulcet, which in itself means sweetness:

Beyond the window an orchard, its green fruit glistening amongst leaves transparent in a western light, showed every sign of expert husbandry. Again she experienced a twinge, from contrasting in her mind this opulent scene with another in which damsons racked by winds from across the moor clustered with an ancient, woody pear tree at the side of a cottage, in rough-hewn, weather-blackened stone. (29)

However, an ironic ambiguity is present in this imagery in that coloniser England is depicted as wild and untamed, whereas colonised Australia “showed every sign of expert husbandry.” There is a suggestion that Garnet Roxburgh has tamed the Australian bush just as he attempts to conquer Ellen’s passion. She, however, is too “wild” for him and, in fact, she conquers *him*, albeit in a setting distant from the confines of Dulcet. The “woody pear tree” is anthropomorphised as Ellen, and as Austin Roxburgh “saw it, his mother and his brother were the opposite poles of his existence. He believed he found them united in his wife, whose sense of duty did not prevent her lips tasting of warm pears. He had never tasted his brother’s lips, or not that he could remember” (132). So, once again the reader is alerted to the notion of “conquering,” here in relation to patriarchal power, but White inverts the expected identities of the conquered and the conqueror, as indeed he does throughout *A Fringe of Leaves*.

That complex binary of conquered/conqueror is further destabilised as the Roxburghs and the survivors of the schismatic ship-wrecked crew re-establish themselves on land. The littoral offers a means of re-entering human existence. Yet again the symbolic food imagery serves to further ambiguity. On the shore where Mr. Roxburgh hoped “to recover our strength – if not our normal, rational thoughts” (208), Ellen discovers through “an obscene stink” a “putrefying carcass of what she took to be a kangaroo” (209). Repulsed at first she wonders whether they can eat it ““there’s plenty game that stinks as high on the best-kept tables’” (209). The esculent kangaroo clearly signifies transgression:

Hunger effected it quicker than it might have been. Mr. Courtney succeeded in coaxing fire out of some dry twigs and vine with the help of flint and steel he had found in a shammy-leather bag strung round the late Spurgeon's neck. Roasting somewhat quenched the stink of putrefying flesh, and in those who waited, greed quickened into ecstasy.

There was not one who failed to claim his portion. The meat tasted gamey, as Mrs. Roxburgh had foreseen, and was singed-raw rather than cooked. But Mr. Roxburgh declared he had never tasted a more palatable dish, ignoring the frizzled maggot or two he scraped off with a burnt finger, and sat there when he was finished, sucking at a piece of hide as though he could not bear to part with it.

(209-10)

One point to consider here is Austin Roxburgh's attachment to the piece of hide that he is sucking: in his primal hunger he regresses to an image of an infant seeking solace. Here too White establishes the dichotomous self/other of the Western *Weltanschauung*. The socio-political framework of colonising nations, and the foods that are incorporated in that framework, are challenged by Ellen's assertion that "there's plenty game that stinks as high on the best-kept tables" (209). Her dichotomised Cornish and wifely selves represents the self/other of the colonisers, who ultimately regurgitate the rancid kangaroo. Ellen, however, incorporates that "other" represented by the kangaroo into her body and thus breaks down the dichotomy. Alec Irwin succinctly encapsulates the relationship between hunger and its relation to amorality:

Hunger is more than an alien power assaulting our capacity for moral relation from the outside. We have internalised the paradigm of craving and consumption, and this paradigm governs the world of our relationships from within. Put another way, not only can the need to eat temporarily suspend our concern with morality, but the dynamics of greedy consumption infiltrate the substance of our relationships on an ongoing basis: even and perhaps above all relationships with those people we claim to love. We desire others as objects to satisfy our psychological and physical cravings. Driven by ego needs deeply analogous to hunger, we are caught in what Weil terms "cannibal love." (261)

The transgressive food consumptions that Ellen partakes of represent the boundaries that she transgresses.<sup>51</sup> As Lillian Furst points out, "[d]isorderly eating can thus represent the

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<sup>51</sup> See Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Fictional Breakthrough and the Unveiling of 'Unspeakable Rites' in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* and Wilson Harris's *Yurokon*," *Kunapipi* 2.2 (1980): 33-43. Maes-Jelinek

last protest left to the socially disempowered, and at the same time, paradoxically, a means for them to attain a kind of domination” (6). Significantly, following their physically driven gluttonous consumption of the kangaroo, the party encounters a group of “aboriginals [*sic*]” who appear spectre-like but all too threatening (*FL* 210). The following day, Ellen’s anamnesis after Captain Purdew’s death, where “the bloodstain widening” recalls for her the slaughter of the calf during Austin Roxburgh’s stay at their farmhouse in Cornwall, prefigures Austin’s imminent death. As mentioned earlier it is only in encountering death that Austin “bestir[ed] himself at least, in the manner expected of the male sex. Into action!” (214). In death he appeared, “the parody of a landed shrimp” (214): ineffectual to the last.

The vignettes of Purdew’s and Roxburgh’s deaths reveal how the transgressive consumption of forbidden food prefigures the act of cannibalism, particularly if one considers the theoretical position posited by Paulo Medeiros. In analysing the myths of Homer and Pindar, and the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Medeiros posits that excessive eating is inextricably linked with ontological determination. He also equates consumption of “the forbidden fruit with the acquisition of carnal knowledge” (17) that could also be applied in Ellen’s case. Concomitant with Medeiros’ theory, Fischler has identified the “omnivore’s paradox,” a continuing tension between the human physiological need for variety of foodstuffs, but on the other hand, the imperative to be cautious of unknown food because of its potential danger (946). In incorporation, from outside to inside the body, food enters a liminal phase and is made to become self. Considered in this light, subjectivity is not only linked to the organic component of food, but also to its symbolic meaning. As Curtin notes: “[t]he classification of something as food means it is understood as something made to become part of who we are. Classifying an edible as food means we have foreknowledge

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explores the notion of evil and how our misconception of what it means reveals an abject fear and refusal to align with the marginalised in society.

that it will become us bodily, and that it will be expelled” (9). As Deirdre Coleman notes: “Food is an expressive subplot, alerting us to a variety of different notations – psychological, political, sexual, etc.” (13).

White’s art similarly explores the nexus between food and the self/other existence of humanity. The tenuous food theme that threads and permeates *A Fringe of Leaves* invites (or perhaps impels) analysis of the human condition and its relationship to food. For example, on the seventh day of their voyage the Roxburghs awaken to a thick fog, and Mrs. Roxburgh announces her intention to go up on deck: “Possibly she intended to embrace him, but on second thought, laid fingers briefly against his cheek. In his present state of mind the quickly withdrawn contact thrilled him more deeply than any overt demonstration. (Besides, he had once jokingly confessed, kisses tend to be glutinous.)” (*FL* 144). So sticky kisses parody Austin’s masculinity, but they also connect the pear lips of Ellen and the cherry lips of Garnet (Anderson 1980, 413). The ambiguity of the word “sticky” complicates extrapolation of meaning further. Taken in conjunction with fruit, one immediately recalls White’s obsession with medlar trees. Thus, his penchant for oblique references using inanimate objects is typified through food. Yet food is not necessarily inanimate: in its raw form it is animated and therein lies the complexity of its structure and its relationship to art.<sup>52</sup>

The complexity that lies in the transformation of food from nature to food as culture evokes the concept of food as fetish. A fetish articulates the objectified, where the self as subject/object can be displaced through acknowledgment and disavowal. Fundamentally, Ellen’s transformation is inverted, but that inversion itself could be viewed as convoluted. She both acknowledges and disavows her inner self, an irrationality that, viewed from an

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<sup>52</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (London: Cape, 1969). Lévi-Strauss develops a theory that the differentiation between raw food and cooked food is linked psychologically with the primary differentiation between *nature* and *culture*, in other words, between food in its natural state and food which is altered or adorned by humanity.



intellectual perspective, is wholly rational. Basically, the question that this thesis constantly addresses is why? Why is food symbolism so prevalent in the novels under discussion and what does the ambiguity of its representation signify? Clearly it signifies much.

Moreover, the fact that food symbolism signifies a great deal also alerts the reader to a dearth of food symbolism in the text. *A Fringe of Leaves* certainly lacks food symbolism in the Jack Chance section of the novel, the reason for which the text makes clear, as articulated by the convict:

‘That’s the way we pass our lives – a mouthful o’ pumpkin loaf, a quick draw or chew at the crow-minder’s bacca, a try at catchin’ sight of what’s inside the shifts of a gang of Dublin and Cockney molls. In between the ‘ard labour. Or ‘arder still when they strip us naked and string us up at the triangles – for the good of our moral ‘ealth.’ (278)

Privation literally strips the corporeal to the bare bones: Jack Chance as convict was nothing more than a piece of meat to his captors: he experienced “a bastin,” his “bones was showin’ through [his] hide,” he “turned septic,” but his memories are “abstraction” (278). Ellen’s disgust, and Jack’s removal from his recollections, only heighten the reader’s sense of the cruelty that he endured. Jack, Ellen and the Aborigines they encounter are all marginalised characters. Yet they all endure their hardships. As so often in Australian literature, that endurance is enunciated through respect for and survival in the harsh landscape. As Thea Astley said in an interview:

For the early settlers the bush was so strange after the English landscape with soft contours and things, and maples and sycamores – it was regarded as the enemy, and they were in conflict with the native people who’d lived and used the landscape to their own advantage. There are trees there you can puncture and get water from, but travelers [*sic*] would die of thirst not knowing this. But the aborigines [*sic*] knew, and they knew what were the right fruits and berries to eat. They survived, but white settlers couldn’t – it was just a violent, barren-looking land, and it terrified them. (Smith 44)

Jack and Ellen survive their ordeal together, bound by physical passion rather than esculent fulfillment. However, their base passion cannot be sustained in a society that condemns convicts, no matter how repentant.

**Conclusion:**

Through the multifaceted representations of food in *A Fringe of Leaves* White discards the layers of good manners and exposes scenes of cruelty and social satire. In doing so he reveals the desires and needs of humanity that lie beneath the veneer of refinement (Jose 1991, 30). The Mrs. Merivales of this world “don’t understand! Not where human nature is concerned. Such a world as this is not fit for a decent person to live in” (*FL* 20). Such exposure epitomises the extremes of human nature and White invites the reader to question human nature in relation to the supposed barbarity of the uncivilised outback and its Indigenous inhabitants. The interconnectivity of the food imagery alerts the reader to the multifaceted nature of the story and how the power structures inherent in the dichotomies of master/slave, barbarity/civilisation and freedom/captivity, are so easily blurred (Schaffer 193). Through the linking metaphor of food White exposes the paradoxes that continue to exist in Australian culture and society in the twenty-first century.

## QUEST AND FREEDOM

*“Number is a translation of space”* (Baudelaire, qtd. in Poulet 147).

### Transcendental Freedom: *The Aunt’s Story* and *Voss*

*“Life was divided, rather, into the kinder moments and the cruel, which on the whole are not conditioned by sex”* (TAS 32).

Both *The Aunt’s Story* and *Voss* contain a body of imagery that potentially frustrates, primarily because White sets puzzles for his readers to solve (Beston 1992, 41). Much like the Orphic artist Marcel Duchamp, White “goes the limit, and is not afraid of being criticised as esoteric or unintelligible” (qtd. in Seigel, 52).<sup>53</sup> In this section I compare and contrast *The Aunt’s Story* and *Voss* in order to show how food imagery and its attendant ceremony embodies a significant part of their meaning. For example, in *The Aunt’s Story* the accretion of food imagery and its attendant descriptions of food consumption assist interpretation of the multi-layered narrative. Through a series of signifiers the novel’s two major food consumption portions convey challenging notions that analyses have not hitherto identified. Previous discussion has centred on the assumption that the characters whom Theodora Goodman encounters in the “Jardin Exotique” section are largely real - although John and Rose Marie Beston contend that the garden represents a complex fantasy world where the protagonist writes her own fantastical tale.<sup>54</sup> My discussion, by contrast,

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<sup>53</sup> As a correlative to the interrelation of arts, it was the poet Apollinaire who created the neologism Orphism as a branch of Cubism. The term was first made public in a lecture in Paris in 1912.

<sup>54</sup> See John and Rose Marie Beston, “The Several Lives of Theodora Goodman: The ‘Jardin Exotique’ Section of Patrick White’s *The Aunt’s Story*,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 9.3 (Apr. 1975): 1-13. The authors conclude, “the novel possesses an extraordinary unity of personages and events in spite of the initial impression of chaos in the central section; that the ‘Jardin Exotique’ is indeed an unusual realization [*sic*] of the vitality of conscious fantasy and of dreams; and, most importantly, that the nature of Theodora’s fantasy life underscores the reader’s impression of her in Part One as a woman of deep emotional disturbance, torn by conflicts born at Meroë and sustained throughout her adult relationships, until in Part Three she opts for total emotional retreat into schizophrenia” (11-12). This article was only located and read after I had completed writing Chapter Two.

focuses on the theory that Theodora suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID),<sup>55</sup> and I argue that most of the characters she encounters in the Hôtel du Midi are her “alter personalities” (Brennar 1996, 154). Notwithstanding the psychoanalytic theoretical stance, I also adopt a theory of spirituality, particularly in relation to the transcendent nature of Theodora’s attainment of self (Steven 13). Indeed, this thesis may appear to be taking an ambivalent doxastical approach. However, today’s psychoanalysts are increasingly adopting a more positive approach to psychological disorders, concentrating on emotions such as happiness and euphoria, rather than dwelling on the negative aspects of a person’s psyche. In essence, although their diagnostics could be argued to preclude this section’s mixed approach to White, they are adopting a more spiritually-aware methodology in their treatments.<sup>56</sup>

In *Voss* Laura Trevelyan and Johann Ulrich Voss share a unique relationship that confounds conventional wisdom. Again, previous analyses of the novel have not explored in depth how the representation of food illuminates the psychological implications of that relationship.<sup>57</sup> By analysing food and its consumption I will demonstrate that both Laura and Voss, though not necessarily suffering from a disorder *per se*, exhibit a profound preternatural phenomenon in their spiritual connection. As White himself wrote: “It is different from other grand passions in that it grows in the minds of the two people concerned more through the stimulus of their surroundings and through almost irrelevant incidents” (qtd. in Marr 313). Many such incidents in *Voss* revolve around food and its

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<sup>55</sup> I am especially indebted to Stephanie Homer for alerting me to the disorder DID.

<sup>56</sup> For a religious reading of transcendence and the role of the “Other,” see Damien Casey, “Lévinas and Buber: Transcendence and Society.” *Sophia* 38.2 (Sept.-Oct. 1999): 69-92. Casey asserts that the point of difference between the two philosophers lies in their “understanding of the social and ethical aspects of religion” (69). He contests the “alleged egalitarianism of the universal subject of the Enlightenment” and maintains that “an ethics of difference” is an exemplary vehicle for establishing an “asymmetry of relation” (70).

<sup>57</sup> Don Anderson alludes to their communal eating in “A Severed Leg,” in relation to Voss’ submission “to the necessity of communion” (405-6).

consumption. As a *chef manqué*, White affirms the disordered and potentially anarchic state of the individual psyche, thereby precluding a state of absolutism (Brady 1974, 49).

Thus, in conducting a close reading of segments of *The Aunt's Story* and *Voss* that relate to food and its consumption, I will explain how the representation of food in these novels elucidates the protagonists and other characters, both real and imagined. In other words, food in its many guises is a psychological puzzle that can be solved through textual analysis. Such a methodology was promulgated by Freud in his discussion of the art historian Ivan Lermolieff (a pseudonym of Giovanni Morelli): “[he] emphasises the secondary, minor details ... elements that usually pass unobserved ... I believe that this method is closely related to the technique adopted by the medical psychoanalyst. He [*sic*] too is accustomed to penetrating into hidden secrets on the basis of little-appreciated or unnoticed details of fragments and extraneous material” (qtd. in Bisaccia *et al* 319). Both novels exploit the material and spiritual realms of existence and highlight the dilemmas confronting protagonists who are faced with this duality (Stewart 1983, 41).

Indeed, in *The Aunt's Story* characterisation using food imagery connects the three sections of the novel, and I will show how the multiple representations of food define the multiple identities that Theodora exhibits.<sup>58</sup> John Healy points out that in *The Aunt's Story* White considers the “problem of reality from an epistemological and individual point of view,” whereas in *Voss* he analyses the “problem of reality in Australia, from a social, an historical, as well as an individual viewpoint” (204). Despite the fact that Theodora, Laura and Voss suffer mental anguish through their struggle to cope with an ordered social world, they ultimately transcend their parallel lives of order and disorder and achieve unique forms of peaceful understanding. As Robert Connell indicates, the psychiatrist R.D. Laing argued

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. *Memoirs of Many in One* to be discussed in Chapter Four.

that the ordered world of normalcy is often itself unbearable, but strength and restoration can be found in “other realities” (4).

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), described as producing “dreamlike altered states”, has been identified as “probably the most controversial entity in psychiatric history” (Brennar 154), since the diagnostic criteria preclude recognition of the condition. Whilst I acknowledge that such a statement could preclude the definition or interpretation of DID as a “disorder” that Theodora suffers from, symptoms that she exhibits have been identified in different contexts by literary critics (Burrows, Herring, Walsh). Primarily these are her capacity for empathy; her tendency towards introversion; and her appreciation of subtlety, all of which have been acknowledged as characteristics of DID (Brennar 155). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (DSM); a manual of nosology, describes a dissociative symptom as “a failure to integrate various aspects of identity, memory, and consciousness [where] each personality state may be experienced as if it has a distinct personal history, self-image and identity, including a separate name” (484). Furthermore, Schwartz considers DID as “both a chronic post-traumatic stress disorder and a complex, mixed character disorder syndrome” (194). It could be argued that Theodora’s emotional abuse by her mother as a child and adult is the catalyst for the emergence of DID in her psychological formation. However, I argue instead that the major catastrophic event that induces Theodora’s DID is when the local pastrycook kills his wife and three daughters and is subsequently arrested at Central Station, “asking for a ticket to a place of which he had forgotten the name” (96). That this seemingly irrelevant incident is crucial in the formation of the narrative is, I maintain, the foundation of Theodora’s disorder. That it uses symbolic food imagery reinforces that relevance.

Similarly, literal and metaphorical references to food reinforce Laura and Voss’ interconnectivity through the “country of the mind” (V 446). The symbolism inherent in the

metaphors of food reveals both their minds and the levels on which their minds operate. White subverts traditional notions of the alien, and by implication unknowable, vast interior of Australia, by exploring it through Voss' mind. Antithetically, Laura represents the quotidian of colonised Sydney, and her mind too is explored through food. That a fusion of their two minds occurs reveals an ability in the novel to explore and ultimately transcend racial, sexual and social prejudices, as these are reflected in the trope of food and its many culturally constructed meanings.

## **MEROË AND SYDNEY: SWEET, DRY AND BLAND**

### **First Encounters: *The Aunt's Story* and *Voss***

Like many of White's narratives, both *The Aunt's Story* and *Voss* are proleptic. He uses food to situate the characters in the narrative structure and alert the reader to what is to come. It has been argued that through the surrealistic juxtaposition, contrast and repetition of imagery in *The Aunt's Story* White constructs an ambiguous and fragmented fiction open to many metaphysical speculations and ontological interpretations (Herring 1990, 81-2). I will show, however, that the representation of food defines the fragmentary nature of the text and that it also relates to Theodora's "fragmented alters" (Herman 127). White said: "I can only endure the isolation and monotony of writing fiction by losing myself in a number of characters. I suppose this would not work if the writer's own character is not sufficiently fragmented'" (qtd. in Marr 1991, 151). Thus, through the seemingly fragmented characters and text the [re]reader is able to identify and interpret the food imagery in the initial pages of both novels and relate it to the text that follows.

For example, early food imagery prefigures Theodora's final train journey: "There was an old woman in the train,' said Lou, 'had her things tied up in a leopard skin. She had

a photo of her married daughter, and three cold mutton chops.<sup>59</sup> Her daughter's name was Mavis Forbes'" (AS 18). The literal representation of food highlights the significance of the number three, and I will elucidate the relevance of this numerical linkage with food and the way in which it binds the text throughout this section. Moreover, the identification of characters as marginalised and non-conformist is significant; Lou does not fit the paradigmatic femininity of young girls; Theodora never fits any paradigms; and the woman in the train is another non-conformist. Furthermore, the description above is replete with metaphorical relevance and inverts Theodora's own situation on the train at the culmination of the novel: she has no children, but the relevance of the stigmatisation of her non-motherhood and its relation to food are a key to understanding her disorder.

Similarly, in the opening chapter of *Voss*, the principal characters are introduced through food imagery. Laura and Voss' initial encounter is over wine and biscuits, introduced through Rose Portion whose own dubious past is made overt. Again, all three characters are outsiders who do not fit the paradigms dictated by colonialism. Much like Theodora they avoid companionship, even with one another. As Adamson points out, "in 'companionship' there's a loaf of bread, *panis*, to be shared" (105), but these characters do not share bread and wine, but biscuits and wine, a far more friable foodstuff: "Then, too, the squat maid had returned, bearing a tray of wine and biscuits; the noise itself was a distraction, the breathing of a third person, before the trembling wine subsided in its decanter into a steady jewel" (12). Again the metaphor of foodstuff as "jewel," and in this thesis wine will be categorised as such, foreshadows Voss and Laura's physical parting at the conclusion of Chapter 5, a mere quarter of the way through the novel: "and the light, touching the cumquats in the little bamboo table, turned these into precious stones, the perfection of which gave further cause for hope" (123). Notwithstanding their physically

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<sup>59</sup> In "The Severed Leg," Don Anderson refers to the "insistent presence" of mutton in its various guises in White's oeuvre (408).



fraught departure from one another, the metaphor exudes hope through imagination. The reference to transformation optimistically indicates a resolution to the complexities of the mind/body/self paradigm through allusion to the temporary nature of food. Effectively, that the light turns the cumquats into “precious stones” signifies the transformation from a fruit that will either rot or be consumed, to an object that will not rot. Through these shifts in imagery, White adds a permanent dimension to Voss and Laura’s relationship.

At this juncture Laura and Voss break biscuits together, but when Voss is in the desert and Laura has been textually acknowledged as the “mother” of Mercy, bread reappears with its traditional significance intact:

When finally she could bring herself to pray, she did not kneel, but crouched diffidently upon the edge of an upright chair. She formed the words very slowly and distinctly, hoping that, thus, they would transcend her mind. If she dared hope. But she did pray. Not for herself, she had abandoned herself, nor for her baby, who must, surely, be exempt at the last reckoning. She prayed for that being for whom the ark of her love was built. She prayed over and over, for JOHANN ULRICH VOSS, until, through the ordinary bread of words, she did receive divine sustenance. (306)

The capitalisation of Voss’ full name highlights the significance of the novel’s simplistic title. Irmtraud Petersson argues persuasively that Voss, pronounced in German with an *f*, links phonetically with the word “feldspar” in the following passage, itself “an etymological loan from German *Feldspat*” (246):

As for Voss, he had gone on to grapple with the future, in which undertaking he did not expect much of love, for all that is soft and yielding is easily hurt. He suspected it, but the mineral forms were an everlasting source of wonder; feldspar, for instance, was admirable, and his own name a crystal in his mouth. If he were to leave that name on the land, irrevocably, his material body swallowed by what it had named, it would be rather on some desert place, a perfect abstraction, that would rouse no feeling of tenderness in posterity. He had no more need for sentimental admiration than he had for love. He was complete. (41)

Petersson explains that there is no mineral “foss” in German, but that it does occur in words like phosphate, etymologically derived from compounds of the Greek word for light, *phos*

(246).<sup>60</sup> I would like to take her theory a step further and acknowledge that whilst light is a binding leitmotif in *Voss* the word *phosphate* is inextricably linked with food, the mouth, the process of eating, swallowing and ingestion. That link also extends to words. To elaborate: the word *nematic*, which means the mesomorphic state of matter between liquid and crystal, is etymologically derived from the Greek *nêma*, *nëmat-*. That thread, between liquid and crystal and its connotations in the above passage, is supported by Deleuze's theory that thinking means eating and speaking:

[B]ecause to eat is no longer an action nor to be eaten a passion, but rather the noematic attribute which corresponds to them in the verb, the mouth is somehow liberated for thought, which fills it with all possible words. The verb is, therefore, "*to speak*"; it means *to eat/to think*, on the metaphysical surface, and causes the event, as that which can be expressed by language, to happen to consumable things, and sense, as the expression of thought, to insist in language. Thus, "*to think*" also means *to eat/to speak* - to eat as the "result," to speak as "made possible." The struggle between the mouth and the brain comes to an end here. (Deleuze 1990, 240 qtd. in Martin 30)

Therefore not only is food ingested, but ideas too are ingested and regurgitated in words. Such a hypothesis is supported in the imagery in the above passage on Voss' name which is imbued with the metaphor of eating. It follows from the vignette in Voss' room where he announces the "immaterial, material things" of the impending expedition, while Harry Robarts and Frank Le Mesurier "wait for moral sustenance" (38): "Inspiration descends only in flashes, to clothe circumstances; it is not stored up in a barrel, like salt herrings, to be doled out. In the confused mirror of the darkening room, he was not astonished that his face should have gained in importance over all other reflected details" (38-9). The other characters invest Voss with a greatness that seems unwarranted. He does not offer them food when Mrs. Thompson, Topp's housekeeper, brings him "a nice sweetbread ... and a glass of wine that [Voss] knew would taste of cork" (Anderson 1980, 407):

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<sup>60</sup> See also James Bulman-May, *Patrick White and Alchemy* (Kew: Australian Scholarly, 2001): "Origin and Significance of the Name Voss" 108-116.

Voss was eating. There was no question of his offering anything to his two dependants. They were so far distant from him now in the fanciful light that they gloated over him without shame, and the crumbs that fell from his mouth.

'Is it nice, then?' asked Mrs. Thompson, who throve on the compliments of her gentlemen.

'Excellent,' said the German, as a matter of course.

Actually, he did not stop to think. The quicker done, the better. But he won her with his answers.

He is a greedy-looking pig, really, thought Frank Le Mesurier. A German swine. And was surprised at himself.

'You should eat slower,' said the old woman. 'A lady told me you should chew your food thirty-seven times.'

He was a handsome-looking man.

'And build yourself up.'

Thin about the face, with veins in the forehead. She recalled all the sick people she had ever nursed, especially her husband, who had been carried off by a consumption shortly after arrival on those shores. (39)

The conflation of raw foodstuffs in Le Mesurier's musings over Voss' character, "greedy-looking pig ... A German swine," with Voss' nationality adds complexity to Le Mesurier's sentiments. Indeed, the irony of Mrs. Thompson's husband being "carried off by a consumption" in the tubercular sense compounds that complexity, particularly if one considers "consumption" in relation to food intake. However, consumptive illness results in a wasting of the body, and such an allusion prefigures Voss' starvation. Immediately following the scene discussed above:

Voss had sat back and was picking his teeth of the sweetbread. He also belched once, as if he had been alone with his thoughts.

'I do meet scarcely a man here,' he said, 'who does not suspect he will be unmade by his country. Instead of knowing that he will make it into what he wishes.'

'It is no country of mine,' declared Topp, who had poured the wine, 'except by the unfortunate accident of my being here.'

Such was his emotion, he sloped the wine.

'Nor mine, frankly,' said Le Mesurier. 'I cannot think of it except as a bad joke.'

'I came here through idealism,' said Topp, feverish with his own situation, 'and a mistaken belief that I could bring nicety to barbarian minds. Here, even the gentry, or what passes for it, has eaten itself into a stupor of mutton.'

'I see nothing wrong with this country,' dared Harry Robarts, 'nor with havin' your belly full. Mine has been full since the day I landed, and I am glad.'

Then his courage failed, and he drank his wine down, right down, in a purple gurgle.  
'So all is well with Harry,' said Le Mesurier, 'who sees with his belly's eyes.' (40)

The dichotomy of the “rational [versus] . . . the experiential mode of viewing” is enacted through food (Moylan 140). The rationality of the intellectualising Topp and Le Mesurier is juxtaposed with Harry Robarts’ more basic assessment of life in Australia. Indeed, the metaphorical “stupor of mutton” epitomises White’s attitude to the vacuity of suburban life in nineteenth- and moreover twentieth-century Australia. It also reflects the drudgery of White’s early life as a jackeroo, when Sally Venables, “the motherly hag assigned to the young jackeroos,” prepared “terrible” food, “mostly shoulders of mutton and mashed swede” (Marr 95). The austerity that White endured during this period no doubt influenced his depiction of Voss’ trajectory into the vast Australian interior via the outback stations of Rhine Towers and Jildra:

At Barwon Vale he lived simply and by strict routine. At precisely the same time each night everyone sat down to a quick meal of mutton and potatoes. Once there was a dish of stewed nettles during a dearth of vegetables. Clem [White’s uncle] was a figure fanatic like his sister and held ‘soup days’ every now and again to keep his weight down. On these days he bolted from the table after a few minutes, unable to bear the sight of people eating” (106).

Clearly Voss’ refusal of food also relates to this incident, the relevance of which will be discussed shortly. Voss distances himself not only from communal eating but also “the passion” which threatens to undermine the imminent expedition (V 43): “It was not possible really, that anyone could damage the Idea, however much they scratched it. Some vomited words. Some coughed up their dry souls in rebounding pea-pellets. To no earthly avail” (44).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> For an examination of how travel narratives portrayed and shaped the knowledge of Australian Aborigines to those who resided on the periphery of Australia see Paul Miller, “Metamorphosis: Travel Narratives and Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal Relations in the 1930s.” *Journal of Australian Studies* (Sept. 2002): 85-96. Miller discusses both pro-colonial/anti-colonial, and pro-imperialist/anti-imperialist travel literature. See also Volker Raddatz, “Intercultural Encounters: Aborigines and White Explorers in Fiction and Non-Fiction,” *From Berlin to the Burdekin: The German Contribution to the Development of Australian Science, Exploration and*

Yet Voss does share wine and biscuits with Laura. Their communion is a social parody of the Communion service where the wafer and wine denote the body and blood of Christ. The ingestion of Christ's body and blood prefigures the depiction of Voss' character in the desert as Christ-like. Voss and Laura's subversive communion defies the conventions of Sydney society: other members are attending church at this juncture. Perhaps more symbolically, the biscuits represent the unleavened bread traditionally eaten during the Jewish Passover in commemoration of the matzo eaten by the Hebrews escaping from slavery in Egypt; by extension they therefore signify Voss and Laura's impending escape from the strictures of Sydney society. Leavened bread is forbidden at Passover because the bread taken from ovens in the Hebrews' exodus did not have time to rise. Thus a sense of urgency is implied.

Voss' impending departure is fraught with emotion not only in relation to Laura. Mr. Bonner senses that his fiscal power over Voss is ebbing and attempts to reassert his position as expedition benefactor. Amusingly, at the harbour he "hedged the German off against a crude wooden barrow on which lay some stone-coloured pumpkins, one of them split open in a blaze of orange" (111). The pumpkins symbolise the outer veneer of respectability that Mr. Bonner aspires to. One of the "stone-coloured" pumpkins, however, is "split open in a blaze of orange," a metaphor for Mr. Bonner's internal exposition. He appeals emotionally and physically to Voss. The crowd is impressed, and Mr. Bonner is satisfied with his reassertion of power. According to Cooper, in Roman times pumpkins symbolised stupidity, empty-headedness and insanity and here they represent Mr. Bonner's vacuity (134). Voss found their physical and emotional encounter "unreal" (V 111). He delves deeper into the pumpkin and "fingered the seeds" (111). As he philosophises on the nature of families, he arranges the pumpkin seeds and declares: "We have not yet learnt to

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*the Arts*, eds. David Walter and Jürgen Tampke (Australia: NSW UP, 1991) 228-240. The subject matter is self-evident from the title.

admit that destiny works independently of the womb” (112). At this juncture his and Laura’s “minds were again wrestling together” (112).

In this way then, the pumpkin seeds denote an inner, less superficial mode of philosophical existence. They act as correlative to Mr. Bonner’s earlier assertion that he remembered hunger. His hunger, however, transforms into a hunger for capital gain. The sense of nurturance evident in the seed imagery transforms Mr. Bonner’s hunger into Voss’ hunger. They are both symbolised by the pumpkin and its seeds, but the question of what constitutes a worthwhile existence lies at the core of that symbolism. For example, seeds represent latent power and in Hinduism the seed is the Divine Spirit (Cooper 146).

Moving back to Laura and Voss’ first encounter over biscuits and wine, the analepsis of an aversion to family, to potentiality and to latent power is evident in the “unreal” elements of Mr. Bonner and Voss’ encounter. Yet if one considers the most obvious symbolism of seeds, *semen virile*, the paradoxical nature of Voss and Laura’s developing relationship is made overt at their fleeting final encounter, where Voss barely acknowledges Laura, instead he “fingered the seeds of the orange pumpkin” (111). Their physicality is virtually non-existent and the possibility of a physical union becomes less likely as the narrative progresses. Nonetheless, Laura does become a mother, the significance of which is discussed later in conjunction with Theodora’s vicarious motherhood. The transitory order that this achieves is displaced: “Already she herself was threatening to disintegrate into the voices of the past” (12). Laura’s history is told in less than a paragraph. A brief re-entry into the quotidian interrupts her reverie: “‘I beg your pardon,’ said Laura Trevelyan, bending forward and twisting the stopper in the long neck of the decanter; glass or words grated. ‘I am forgetting to offer you wine.’” (13). In *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes concludes that “it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss” (67). Words, the black on white of text, empower

imagination, and both characters succumb to their intuitiveness: “His throat was suddenly swelling with wine and distance, for he was rather given to melancholy at the highest pitch of pleasure, and would at times even encourage a struggle, so that he might watch. So the past now swelled in distorting bubbles” (V 12-13). Voss’ history is likewise told in one, albeit slightly longer, paragraph. Both characters’ reflections on their past histories conclude with a poignantly insightful statement of what their futures hold.

However, like the later compression of Teresa Hawkins’ tale whilst she suffered from anorexia, the précis of Laura’s and Voss’ previous lives bears little textual relevance to their future exploration of the mind. Even the truth of those histories is called into question: the difficulty Voss experiences in swallowing his wine, an emotional response to his recollections, and the distortion of that past in the wine’s bubbles could be a metaphor for the fallibility of all history. The concomitant notion of Voss’ masochistic struggle with his disparate emotions foreshadows his continued unwillingness to face his past or indeed his future. Again, the dilemmas he faces in mind/body, past/present and present/future are overt, and the difficulties inherent in dealing with these disparities in words are also apparent. The anxieties at play are emphasised in the fact that either “glass or words grated.” This adds another binary opposition of liquid/solid, in which the aqueous analogy of glass highlights glass’ transient nature, but more ambiguously the historical inaccuracies of the written or spoken word.

The significance of words in relation to food and its consumption in *The Aunt’s Story* and *Voss* rewards closer analysis. For example, often that significance revolves around a lacuna in the text, as in the rationale behind the limited references to mutton or mutton fat in *The Aunt’s Story*, when one considers that these are a recurring trope in White’s novels. The paucity of mutton references probably stems from the fact that although the first section of the novel is situated in Australia, where the mutton imagery is

appropriate, another of the novel's preoccupations is with the decline of Europe and the imminence of the Second World War (Mackenzie 1963, 293). That the "crumbling" of Europe is largely depicted through food imagery in *The Aunt's Story* will become apparent, but this section concentrates on how the disintegration in the friable foods early in the novel is a metaphor for Theodora's fragmented selves.

Once again, the decline of Europe is prefigured by the description of Meroë, the Goodman homestead: "It was flat as a biscuit or a child's construction of blocks, and it had a kind of flat biscuit colour that stared surprised out of the landscape down at the road" (AS 20). Undoubtedly, the biscuit simile denotes an ability to "crumble" and the anthropomorphism of the homestead's "reaction" depicts not only its displacement in an Australian landscape, but an overt "surprise" at its own existence. Indeed, the biscuit description of Meroë is undeniably a metaphor for Theodora's own existence, even though she is "altogether unsurprised" (40). Her lack of surprise is a form of self-denial, or perhaps more accurately "self-avoidance" (Adamson 103). So, clearly the biscuit imagery prefigures the "crumbling" of Theodora's personality and exemplifies the ways in which White uses objects as metaphor to convey that disintegration: "Things were always tumbling down" (24). Such friable metaphors foreshadow not only Theodora's disintegration, but also the way in which she literally discards each of her "alters" on her ascent to the Johnson house at the culmination of her tale (Colmer 26). Significantly Meroë has two identities: the "flat biscuit" that had "eaten into the gnarled and aboriginal [*sic*] landscape" (20) and "a dead place, in the black country of Ethiopia" (23). That "black country" becomes, for Theodora, "a dim and accepted apprehension lying quietly at the back of her mind" (24).

This sub-section has related how the food imagery in these "first encounters" between the characters and the reader with the text situates the narrative to unfold. In *The*



*Aunt's Story* and *Voss* the representation of food highlights the fragmentary nature of the characters and indeed the text. Food is both mediator and adversarial, both symbolic and real. These contradictory characteristics offer a mode of understanding the densely and equally contradictory texts under analysis.

### ***Real Lives: The Aunt's Story***

The proleptic initial pages of both *Voss* and *The Aunt's Story* invite the [re]reader to analyse the food imagery in relation to the full meaning of the text. This sub-section examines the first section of *The Aunt's Story* in detail. An analysis of the formative stages of Theodora's condition shows how the characters she encounters in "Meroë" are a catalyst for her DID. In this first section of the novel White develops the *real* characters in Theodora's life who become projections of the alters in the central section, "Jardin Exotique." As mentioned, White prefigures Theodora's non-motherhood early, and its relation to food imagery is relevant to deciphering the puzzle posed by the novel. For instance, Theodora writes in her diary: "*At Our Place, ... there is an old apricot tree which does not have fruit*" (24). Apricot is a symbol of self-fertilising and the androgyne; in Chinese symbolism it denotes death and timidity (Cooper 14). Theodora's personal growth has been stultified by her demanding mother: "Since her mother's death, she could not say with conviction: I am I. But the touch of hands restores the lost identity. The children would ratify her freedom" (AS 13). Paul Lerner discusses a phenomenon called "*externalisation by parents*" which refers to a process whereby parents attribute unpalatable aspects of themselves to their children. These children tend to suffer low self-worth and a confused notion of self (195). Clearly, the "old apricot tree" is a metaphor for Theodora, who likewise does not "have fruit," except that the children, her niece and nephews, "ratify her freedom" (AS 13). The notion of physical barrenness is reiterated through the metaphor

of the apricot tree under which Theodora strokes Frank Parrott: “she unbent inside and stroked him as if he had been a dog’s head offering itself out of the darkness. Her hand passed and repassed over the coat of the red dog” (81).

Theodora feels suffocation from “the pressure of the red moon” (81). In Ben Jonson’s “The Masque of Queens” the red moon signifies the activity of witches, and the otherworldliness of Theodora’s situation is palpable through her marginalisation from society. Moreover, as an elementary symbol the moon stands for opposing values: female and male, fluid and volatile, constancy and inconstancy, through which Theodora’s inner oppositions ultimately exhibit as DID (de Vries 326). This notion of inner opposition is substantiated if one considers that in Jungian psychology the moon relates to aspects of the unconscious (de Vries 327). In this way, the combined imagery of apricot and moon is proleptic of Theodora’s physical barrenness. However, the self-fertilising aspect of the apricot indicates not only Theodora’s androgynous appearance, but also her ability to reproduce in her mind. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the barren apricot tree, metaphor for Theodora, with the moon as a symbol of fecundity (de Vries 326), clearly highlights the societal pressure to reproduce that she is subjected to. Ultimately, however, Theodora resists the pressures imposed by society on her body and as a result her sense of unity, or self, is fragmented.

In connection with that sense of fragmentation and moon symbolism a final notion to consider is that Lunar deities are frequently triune, especially as Fates (Cooper 107). Congruently the seasonal hare, affected by the lunar phases, is often three-legged, portraying past, present and future (107). Thus moon symbolism includes a numerical dimension. Such a diversity of symbolic meaning models the way in which food imagery also operates in *The Aunt’s Story*, emphasising multiplicity and indeed ambiguity. Unpicking that ambiguity depends on recognising how food signifies “the intuition of the

numerical dynamism that is always manifest in the slightest movement” (Poulet 146). For example, immediately following his encounter with Theodora under the apricot tree, Frank proposes to Fanny. However, he departs from Theodora “awkwardly, as if he would not leave her, as if he needed help, and she could only sit straight and impotent as the tree” (AS 82). Theodora becomes “thin and yellow” (83); in other words she does not bear children except imaginatively and vicariously through others (Herring 1990, 83). Significantly, in view of the number symbolism described, three vignettes depict Theodora’s vicarious motherhood in “Meroë.”

The first is when Fanny falls pregnant and Theodora is called upon to assist in the running of the household at Audley:

Emotions as deep as fear could not exist in the Parrotts’ elegant country house, in spite of the fact that Mr. Buchanan’s brains had once littered the floor. Fanny’s fear was seldom more than misgiving. If I were barren, Fanny had said. But there remained all the material advantages, blue velvet curtains in the boudoir, and kidneys in the silver chafing dish...There was very little privacy. Even in her wardrobe the contemptuous laughter of maids hung in the folds of her skirts ... Miss Goodman, an old maid, they said, a scarecrow in a mushroom hat. (112-113)

The Parrotts’ existence in an emotionally bereft house is itself “barren.” Although Fanny is consoled by “all the material advantages,” Theodora is unable to assimilate into such a cloying environment. A noteworthy link here to the traumatic experience for Theodora of the pastrycook incident, to be discussed in detail later, is the suicide of Mr. Buchanan. Through the omniscient point of view, the intrusive narrator reveals that it is Theodora who is aware of “Mr. Buchanan’s brains [that] had once littered the floor” whereby her emotional susceptibility and keen perception are made overt. That emotional susceptibility and its relation to the eradication of family motif in the novel are yet further signifiers of Theodora’s emerging DID. Theodora’s emotions are played out vicariously through the baby’s solemnity, thus investing her with an aesthetic appeal hitherto unacknowledged:

Theodora took the baby outside, where the landscape was less pink, and the baby learned to stare at her with solemn eyes. The baby's head trembled like a flower. It was reminiscent of the tender unprotected moments of her own retrospective awkwardness. So Theodora loved the child. Theodora became beautiful as stone, in her stone arms the gothic child. (114)

Furthermore, the baby's head that "trembled like a flower" prefigures the "doubtful rose [that] trembled" (287) on Theodora's hat at the novel's denouement (Herring 82-3). Jane Adamson contends that literature and figurative thinking help critically observe and thus identify difficult diagnostic mental disorders. She asserts that an individual's psyche is created in both preverbal and verbal conversations with close family members and peers. Theodora's emotional bonding with her niece here foreshadows her DID. Adamson states that the communicative mode for developing a complex psychic structure and notion of a self can also be employed to revive a fractured self (105). Theodora's DID accordingly manifests itself as a figurative solution to her fractured self. It also reveals Rimbaud's influence on White's writing. Rimbaud took the aesthetic stance of transforming humankind's existence by permeating it with the power of the Promethean imagination (Seigel 219). Whilst these recurring motifs do not concern food, White uses food as a signifier to alert the reader to Theodora's DID, itself represented through the metaphor of food.

The second vicarious motherhood vignette occurs when Theodora discusses the prize of the kewpie doll with her mother. In considering illegitimate birth up to the 1960s Jill Matthews points out that the only acceptable course of action was for the baby to be adopted. She goes on to say that the baby's removal was a punishment, because for women "[a] baby was a reward, and the status of motherhood a prize within the gender order" (180). *The Aunt's Story*, in which Theodora is a vehicle for transgressing the boundaries of normalcy, highlights the ideological nature of motherhood. The link between the kewpie

doll episode with its connection to food, and Theodora's contemplation of murdering her mother, is poignant:

'You must have looked a sight,' said Mrs. Goodman, 'carrying a vulgar doll through the crowd.' In her hate she would have hewn down this great wooden idol with the grotesque doll in its arms. 'I spared your sensibility,' Theodora said. 'I did not take my prize.' 'I cannot believe that I played even an indirect part in the incident,' said Mrs. Goodman. 'Mother, must you destroy?' 'Destroy?' asked Mrs. Goodman. 'Yes,' said Theodora. 'I believe you were born with an axe in your hand.' 'I do not understand what you mean. Axes? I have sat here all the afternoon. I am suffering from heartburn.' (121)

Alimentary ailments abound in both *The Aunt's Story* and *Voss*, where they define a notion of emotional detachment or a refusal to engage with emotions. This refusal to engage with self and others usually conveys an unwillingness to confront inner spiritual turmoils. Etymologically, the adjective *dyspeptic* comes from the Greek *peptos*, which means cooked or digested, and the noun *dyspeptic*, derived from the same root, denotes an irritable, bad-tempered person. This sense of *dyspepsia*, or perhaps more relevantly in the example below, *dysphoria*, a state of unease or mental discomfort, is evident in the final section, "Holstius," where Fanny and Frank Parrot are described thus:

'Theo is coming home,' announced Fanny Parrott. 'What is more, she appears to be quite mad.' Fanny dug at her cup, to sweeten her annoyance with the dregs of sugar. With the tips of her teeth she bit the half-melted sugar and looked apprehensively at her safe room. A room is safest at breakfast. At Audley the mail arrived in the afternoon, but Fanny had deferred Theodora's letter, waiting for the safer moment of stiff, sweet porridge, and the consoling complacency of bacon fat, when she too was stronger. Though even so. 'Well?' said Frank, who was fitting bacon, lean, fat, lean, half a kidney, a square of toast, and a little gravy, on to his fork. Thought was slow and comfortable as breakfast. No one should destroy Frank Parrott. He was stronger than Theodora. He wiped the gravy from his mouth. 'We are not committed to Theo,' he said. 'Theo has always led her own life.' If guilt stirred, and impinged on Frank Parrot's conscience, it quickly congealed. He swallowed down a mouthful of fat meat, and felt personally absolved... (256-57)

At this juncture in the novel Fanny's sweetness needs to be augmented and Frank's lassitude is palpable. He crams an inordinate amount of food into his mouth in order to procrastinate the assertion of his power, disillusioned as he is about his power. However, unlike *The Man who was Given his Dinner*, to be discussed shortly, his thought is "slow and comfortable." Bakhtin writes that "the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth" (317). The grotesque parody and satiric omniscient narrative of this passage adds dimension to the life of illusion and indeed self-delusion that characters such as Frank Parrott lead. He uses the process of swallowing as a form of absolution from any sense of commitment to Theodora who, the reader must remember, has *not* "led her own life." His mind is truly "congealed," but Theodora's has fragmented into "several lives" (71).

In this way the analeptic analogy of food as a character-defining signifier signals the importance of the food imagery and its relation to DID further. Indeed, sugar itself is fraught with ambiguous connotations and, as Sanjida O'Connell points out in her investigation into sugar, "[m]ore than any other crop, be it cotton or cocaine, sugar has shaped our culture, landscape, politics, geography, economics, race, music, health, the very food we eat and what we drink in a way that no other commodity has throughout human history" (4).<sup>62</sup> That Fanny is aligned with sugar imagery symbolises the complexities involved in motherhood and child-rearing and raises the concept of woman as commodity.

Moving back to Theodora's vicarious motherhood, the third vignette immediately follows the altercation between Theodora and her mother over the kewpie doll, where the inversion of the image of a child breast-feeding demonstrates Theodora's emotional trauma:

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<sup>62</sup> Refer to my comments in "Cannibalistic Love" regarding the socio-political impacts of food exportation (and exploitation).

At night Theodora Goodman would bring her mother cups of hot milk, which she drank with little soft complaining noises, and the milk skin hung from her lower lip. She was old and soft. Then it is I, said Theodora, I have a core of evil in me that is altogether hateful. But she could not overcome her repugnance for the skin that swung from her mother's lip, giving her the appearance of an old white goat. (121)

As food for the newborn, milk is used in initiation ceremonies as a symbol of rebirth (Cooper 105), but that notion is reversed in the scene above: Mrs. Goodman will die shortly but the mother-figure that Theodora represents will be reborn into a life of freedom. Indeed, White further subverts the notion of milk's fecundity by emphasising the grotesque image of the mother seen through the daughter's eyes.

The three baby/doll/baby vignettes just discussed are crucial for understanding how the "metamorphosis of an image in different contexts" elucidates the often ambiguous symbolism that White deploys (Herring 1990, 82). Furthermore, such triptych imagery mirrors the narrative structure of *The Aunt's Story* and adds dimension to its multifarious implications. Theodora's failure to split off her malignant side, her "core of evil," eventually presents as DID (AS 121). White meanwhile probes her self-delusions in seeking liberation from the Sydney quotidian, and that society's expectations of a "desiccated spinster" (Riemer 352). Fundamentally, these self-delusions are a "pain-management fantasy inspired by dread of guilt and shame" (Adamson 114). In sum, all three vignettes analysed above encompass food metaphors that foreshadow Theodora's final rejection of the fecundity of motherhood:

...the music which Moraitis had played was more tactile than the hot words of lovers spoken on a wild nasturtium bed, the violins had arms. This thing which had happened between Moraitis and herself she held close, like a woman holding her belly. She smiled. If I were an artist, she said, I would create something that would answer him. Or if I were meant to be a mother, it would soon smile in my face. But although she was neither of these, her contentment filled the morning. (112)

Indubitably, if one adopts a Jungian psychological perspective, Theodora unconsciously opts for the animus over the anima, whereby the somatic aspects of her physicality override her spirituality or any acceptance of [her]self. In other words, through a rejection of motherhood she implicitly adopts a more masculine persona. Physically, her moustache,<sup>63</sup> her wooden countenance, her sharp-shooting and her long strides, all reject paradigmatic femininity.<sup>64</sup>

Theodora's rejection of motherhood in *The Aunt's Story* is merely one contributor to the multi-layered complexity of her condition. Several other contributing facts linked to reproduction warrant discussion. The notion of food as metaphor for motherhood in the binary opposition of fecundity/barrenness is sustained throughout "Meroë" and validated in the definition of characters through food symbolism. For example, an earlier quote described Theodora as a "scarecrow in a mushroom hat" (113), which contrasts sharply with the following description of Pearl:

'What do you want?' asked Pearl.

Or she hissed. She hissed like a white and golden goose disturbed on its eggs beside the creek.

'We are looking for mushrooms,' said Theodora, right into Pearl's hissing face.

Sticks broke. Under Tom's feet. He was thinking where to put his hands.

'You run along,' said Pearl. 'There ain't no mushrooms here.'

And now you could see some strange and palpitating thing had taken place, unknown, or by accident, in Pearl's blouse. Pearl had burst, pinker than any split mushroom, white-cleft. (37)

According to de Vries the mushroom relates to the sun-god and mushrooms are the ritual tinder of the Ixion-Wheel (332). Thus, the symbolic food imagery alerts the reader to the nuances of this passage, if one considers the Greek myth. Zeus bound Ixion to a perpetually turning wheel as punishment for making sexual advances to his wife Hera, the goddess of

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<sup>63</sup> Susan Martin discusses gender confusion in "Why Do All These Women Have Moustaches? Gender Boundary and Frontier in *Such Is Life* and "Monsieur Caloche," *Southern Review* 25.1 (Mar. 1992): 68-77. Martin points out the threat that masculine females pose to patriarchal paradigms and concludes that "it is the reading of woman as signifying everything that may be most dangerous" (76).

<sup>64</sup> See John Beston, "Love and Sex in a Staid Spinster: *The Aunt's Story*," *Quadrant* 15.5 (Sept.-Oct. 1971): 22-27. Beston refers to the effect that Theodora's mother had on her sexuality.



marriage. The proleptic symbolism of the mushroom in *The Aunt's Story* anticipates the convoluted conundrum of marriage and fidelity in the Goodman household. Fire, of course, is an oft identified signifier in White's oeuvre, and the subtlety with which it is highlighted here epitomises the relevance of the hitherto unidentified signifier of food. Indeed, congruent with the image of the perpetually turning Ixion wheel and its link to immortality, the Egyptian pharaohs decreed mushrooms as food for royalty only, not only for their flavour, but also in the belief that eating mushrooms would render them immortal. Furthermore, the mushroom metaphor for breasts highlights and links to the milk imagery discussed earlier in relation to Theodora's vicarious motherhood. The embryonic symbolism predicts the impending discovery of Pearl's pregnancy, which is substantiated by the recurring egg motif. In this way Pearl's symbolic mushroom is multi-signified, yet Theodora merely wears a mushroom hat, a fashion of the early 1900s.<sup>65</sup> Although it could be construed that Tom Wilcocks (note the irony of the name) is the father (Beston 1971, 25), I contend that the text is not specific enough to endorse such a conclusion. The food imagery advances an enigmatic aspect to the passage, an observation which will be substantiated shortly.

Thus far I have discussed the relevance of food symbolism to Theodora's emerging DID, and how food defines the problems that she encounters (and will encounter). The following sub-section, "Dining Rooms," will analyse in detail the way in which key incidents that centre on food add further dimensions to the proleptic nature of White's novel. The incident below refers to *The Aunt's Story*, but a similar incident occurs in *Voss*, a vignette that will also be analysed closely in the following pages.

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<sup>65</sup> In his discussion about the recently acquired Patrick White papers by the NLA, David Marr alludes to a draft of *The Aunt's Story* which clearly aligns costume with character. Here, I argue more fully that character is aligned with food, in an incident where the blurring of food and costume is clearly significant.

## Dining Rooms: *The Aunt's Story* and *Voss*

*“England is very puzzling to me, the Spaniard said. I go into the houses of the rich ... I eat their food, I speak their language. It is like an unpleasant dream. The dream language, hinting at things. Sometimes I think, not hinting. It is an elaborate charade that meant something once, a long time ago. When the figures, the gestures were related to enthusiasms” (LD 214).*

The multiple contrasts between Theodora “a stick” and Pearl “pinker than any split mushroom” (AS 38), culminate in a pivotal incident that centres on the dining room following Theodora’s nude bathing:

Not long after this what happened, happened.

It was Sunday in the dining-room. The table blazed. And Father was carving mutton with the big knife. Sunday always filled the dining-room, and the dining-table never looked so shiny, nor so round. Week days were thin days, by comparison, thinly scattered with cold meat. Watching Father carve the mutton it was like somebody with music, someone with a 'cello in his hands. Father loved to carve the joint. It was his pride. Sunday was like this. It continued all along.

‘Take the joint to the kitchen, Pearl,’ said Father, ‘and keep it warm for you girls.’

‘Yes Mr. Goodman,’ Pearl said.

But this was where it happened. Pearl fell down. Between the table and the door Pearl Brawne fell, and there never was such a harvest, such a falling gold. Pearl lay on the carpet with the leg of mutton, and gravy on her face. What had happened was immense. (38-9)

The food elements that permeate this passage reflect both the fulsomeness of the dining-room and the “immense[ness]” of the incident. Indeed, the disruption of the “family” meal is symbolic and prefigures Theodora’s rejection of the traditional post-war family unit. As David Marshall points out: “It may be instructive to undertake more empirical research into the meal as object to examine the conventional nature of the meal and the extent to which the meal structures and formats are evident in a more representative sample” (82). Although Marshall’s research was based on British food practices, his observations are relevant to the colonised Anglocentric society that White depicts. Concomitant with the notion of an Anglicised society, Marshall also notes that food consumption and the social regulations

that surround it contain more meaning in “ordinary” meals than in elaborate dinner parties or banquets (82).

So if one adopts Marshall’s methodology and analyses the Sunday dinner as metaphor for the more opulent Pearl, as opposed to the “thin” weekdays that are evidently Theodora, Pearl is depicted as the *alter ego* to Theodora, representing the life that Theodora rejects. Indeed, this duality is perpetuated in the text; not only did Pearl fall literally, she has ‘fallen’ both pregnant and in the esteem of her employers. More significantly, by extending the metaphor of Pearl as the Sunday dinner, “the joint” that Father “loved to carve” is imbued with connotations of double entendre. That sense of doubleness or perhaps more accurately, duplicity and multiplicity, is revealed later when Theodora encounters Pearl in Sydney. Pearl’s baby boy died, but when Theodora enquires after Tom, whom she imagines was the father, Pearl expresses disdain for that assumption: “‘Why Tom?’ ... But Theodora would have blocked her ears with wax. She could not bear to face the islands from which Pearl sang” (AS 127).<sup>66</sup>

The immensity of the dining-room incident is overt in the lengthy passage quoted above, but “it was deeper than this” (39). Likewise the text is “deeper than this” in that Pearl’s name is significant if one considers that pearls are symbols of parthenogenesis (de Vries 361). It would appear that Mrs. Goodman would prefer to see Pearl’s pregnancy in this light and thus maintain the respectability that she craves. In this way White highlights the contrast between the androgynous Theodora and the fecund Pearl: Theodora’s form of reproduction is far more complicated. Furthermore in considering Pearl’s surname, brawn, as food, a mixture of chopped cooked meat, mainly from the head and feet of a hog, that is pressed into the form of a loaf or sausage and eaten cold, her ultimate fate is just as unpalatable to Sydney high society. Finally, the “shiny,” “round” dining-table neatly links

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<sup>66</sup> Note the allusion to Watteau’s *The Embarkation for Cythera*, discussed in relation to Teresa’s ideal of erotic love in Chapter One, as well as the allusion to Ulysses’ Sirens.

the spherical imagery of pearls, eggs, moon and the Ixion wheel, and adds to the immensity of the scene. Perhaps even more saliently, it could be said that the dining-room table is the sum of the spherical imagery that abounds in “Meroë.”

Dining-rooms and their attendant furniture are significant motifs in White’s oeuvre and it is useful at this juncture to refer back to *Voss*, a novel of “psychological complexities” (White 1981, 101). The incident in the following passage displays close parallels to that in *The Aunt’s Story*:

Soon after this it happened that Rose Portion, the Bonners’ servant, was taken suddenly sick. One afternoon, just after Mrs. Bonner and the young ladies had finished a luncheon of cold ham, with pickles, and white bread, and a little quince jelly, nothing heavy like, because of the Pringles’ picnic party that afternoon, Rose simply fell down. In her brown gown she looked a full sack, except that she was stirring and moaning, even retching. Dry, however. Mrs. Bonner, who was a Norfolk girl, remembered how cows used to fall into the dikes during the long winter nights, and moan there, so far off, and so monotonously; nothing, it seemed, would ever be done.

Yet here was Rose upon the floor, half in the dining-room, half in the passage to the pantry, and for Rose something must be done at once...

Aunt Emmy sounded and looked drained, although perhaps it was the salt-cellar, one of the good Waterford pair, that should never have been used, and of which she was now picking up the fragments; it could have been this that had caused her some pain.

Then Laura Trevelyan, her niece, who was still kneeling, understood otherwise. It was awful. And soon even Belle knew, who was young, but not too young. The instincts of all three women were embracing the same secret.

They knew that Rose Portion, the emancipist servant, was with child. (50-1)

The above incident, which again revolves around a dining-room, occurs soon after Voss’ final preparations for his journey, when the “whole town of Sydney wore a splendid and sufficient glaze” for him (50). Significant differences distinguish the episode from the dining-room incident in *The Aunt’s Story*. For example, it is implied that Jack Slipper is the father of the child. Both characters were discovered in the Bonners’ bamboo thicket by Laura, albeit at different times, but the implication of sexual activity is overt. Furthermore, Mr. Bonner is absent from the scene. It is worthwhile noting that in the *Aunt’s Story* meal the centre-piece is unquestionably the mutton, but in *Voss* the luncheon is described in great

detail, in third-person omniscient narrative. The simplicity of the meal is reflected in the fact that Rose “simply fell down.” Mrs Bonner ruminates upon her childhood, a “Norfolk girl,” signifying her less than salubrious upbringing substantiated by the vernacular of the narrative: “nothing heavy like.”

Typically, Mrs. Bonner’s immediate concern is with the fragmented Waterford salt-cellar which she hurries to restore.<sup>67</sup> In *The Secret Life of Food* Elkort elaborates on the properties of salt. It is a balance in the body; the tongue has special taste buds for salt; salt is essential for the body to survive, yet an excess can result in death. Elkort also points out that salt is used for the manufacture of glass and that it is mentioned in the Bible thirty times, mainly in the tale of Mrs. Lot who was turned into a salt pillar for her excessive curiosity (38). The symbolism of salt in paintings is discussed by Carmela Bisaccia, who asserts that, “[I]f the pyramids of salt are represented in paintings of religious or mythological subjects as a symbol of friendship, welcome and hospitality, there is no doubt that the salt-cellars, which occasionally substitute for them, also have a symbolic value” (330). The Waterford salt-cellar is a receptacle that embodies the contrasting characteristics of salt. Its fragmentation then is multi-signified, signalled not only by the broken glass but also by the diversity of meaning inherent in the symbolism of salt. Here, however, the multi-faceted imagery refers to Laura’s epiphany. She is on the threshold of womanhood<sup>68</sup> and her new understanding foreshadows the conception of her idea of adopting Mercy, Rose’s child. In this way the salt imagery prefigures both Mercy’s birth and Rose’s death.

Interestingly, the Irish Waterford factory closed in 1851 but was resurrected in the 1940s and 1950s following Irish independence. Waterford crystal in the nineteenth century symbolised wealth and aristocracy, hence Mrs. Bonner’s dismay at the destruction of her

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<sup>67</sup> See James Bulman-May, *Patrick White and Alchemy* (2001) 75-95. Here he discusses the alchemical crucible, the *vas*.

<sup>68</sup> Reflected in Rose’s literal position “Half in the dining-room, half in the passage to the pantry” – a position that is in itself symbolic.

symbolic wealth. Concomitantly with the symbolism of wealth, the fragmented salt-cellar signifies the fragmentation of the Bonners' respectability in nineteenth-century Sydney society: a pregnant serving-girl reflects badly on the morals of the entire household. Taken in conjunction with the pun on Rose's surname, Portion, and its relation to the dishing up of food, Mrs. Bonner attempts to apportion blame. Intriguingly, Rose "looked a full sack," where the simile denotes an association with food: a sack of potatoes; a sack of corn; a sack of flour, etc. That her appearance is described thus implies yet another sociological division (Harris 76). The Bonners have had a "luncheon of cold ham, with pickles, and white bread, and a little quince jelly," all foodstuffs of the "cultured" class. Indeed, "white bread" was the apotheosis of the affluent classes during the 1840s. Historically, the advent of steel rollers in wheat grinding in 1840 led to the production of flour minus the wheat germ and oil, which was fed to poultry and livestock (Elkort 24). Antithetically, the Great Famine in Ireland during 1845 was a result of potato rot. The paradoxical symbolism of the potato therefore raises further questions about Rose's "position" in the Bonner household.<sup>69</sup>

However the servant Rose, even in her plight, is nothing more than a "sack" or an animal. The delineation of social injustice could not be clearer. Laura's emotions after this incident are significant for the portrayal of her character and her empathetic, if at times enigmatic, affinity with Rose:

Now, when this calamity had felled the unfortunate Rose, Laura Trevelyan was more than ever unhappy. As life settled back, and the things were removed from the dining-table, and the smallest pieces of the Waterford salt-cellar had been recovered, she held herself rigid. Nobody noticed, however. Because she was practised in disguising her emotions, only someone with more than eyes in their head would have seen. (53)

Once again, social order is restored. Yet Laura's demeanour rebels against the strictures that society imposes in its ordering: "It is the bodies of these servants" (53) that compel

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<sup>69</sup> Potatoes are a recurring trope in White's oeuvre. Their significance will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

Laura. Mrs Bonner expresses relief: “‘It is providential that the dining-room does not communicate directly with the kitchen’” (53). The analeptic re-ordering recalls Laura’s comments regarding her aunt whilst partaking of wine and biscuits with Voss: “‘For my aunt,’ she said, ‘all things that *should* be done, *must* be done. Even so, she does not approve of wine for girls’” (14). Laura’s rebellious streak is obvious throughout the novel. In this earlier incident the vessel, the wine decanter, remains intact yet still symbolises subversion in that it is the receptacle for the wine that Laura consumes. Nevertheless, all three women intuited Rose’s condition. Nonetheless the inherent perception of the three women prefigures the psychic relationship between Voss and Laura. Furthermore, that such significant action takes place in the dining room substantiates its symbolic relevance to the narrative.

Indeed, White gives credence to intuitiveness in his oeuvre, and both *Voss* and *The Aunt’s Story* unravel the psychological intricacies of the human condition. In *The Aunt’s Story* Father is complacent and “Our Place” is enough for his “peace of mind” (24). He may have been “thick and mysterious as a tree, but also hollow” (26). But the Meroë that is “Our Place” is not enough for Theodora, who is unable to find “peace of mind” and needs to escape. Nor apparently is existence at Meroë enough for Mrs. Goodman: “‘I refuse to vegetate,’ said Mrs Goodman. ‘Let us go somewhere. Before we die.’ Her voice struck the dining-room door, beyond which lamps had just been lit, and the big hambone still glittered, and the apple peel Fanny had thrown across her shoulder lay coiled on the carpet” (26). The Edenic imagery in this passage is clear. However, I argue that the snake coiled on the carpet in the form of an apple peel clearly refers to Frank Parrott if one considers the Halloween superstition of peeling an apple from top to bottom then throwing the peel over

one's shoulder, where the initial it forms is the initial of the thrower's future mate.<sup>70</sup> An element of detritus is evident in the passage's food imagery. However, it is contrasted with the "big ham bone that glittered" which imparts a sense of hope. Like the threshold that Laura traverses in her realisation of Rose's pregnancy such food imagery symbolises the liminal: a lacuna ripe for interpretation. The threshold symbolises a point of departure, but at this juncture it is unclear whose departure it signifies, Laura's or Voss'. As an aside, the coiled apple could also symbolise the comet to be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

Interestingly, Theodora herself can only "go somewhere" after Mrs. Goodman dies. Meanwhile her mother enforcing her "to vegetate" (26) is made explicit through the food imagery, where even the verb *vegetate* has an ambiguous etymology. It is derived from the Latin *vegetare*, to enliven, but figuratively it denotes a sense of monotony. The tedious, unpleasant undercurrent of the Australian society that Theodora is a part of, particularly later in Sydney, is momentarily revealed under the "glitter" that bedazzles and obscures. This point is exemplified at Huntly Clarkson's dinner party, at which "the shallower moments prevailed" (107). The coruscant petrification of the fruits in the passage below recalls the moon symbolism discussed earlier, especially if one considers the associated cold imagery as well as the "glitter" that invariably correlates with the dining-room in White's oeuvre:

At the end of the dinner they brought with the dessert some very expensive crystallised fruits, which were no longer fruit but precious stones, hard, and their sweetness had a glitter. This was the apotheosis of the meal, in which the light brandished swords. You forgot the flat words in the glitter

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<sup>70</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (1991) 12. Marr elaborates on White's superstitious nature: "As a man he came to put his faith in many small superstitions, in saints and lucky charms, omens and coincidences. That he was born a Gemini meant a great deal to him, for the sign of the twins seemed an emblem of his own divided and often contradictory nature, not one man but a kaleidoscope of characters trapped in a body both blessed and cursed, proud and wracked by doubt, rich and mean, artist and housekeeper, a restless European rooted in the Australian soil, a Withycombe and White, man and woman. His trust in astrology was sustained in later years as he came across men and women who shared his stars and his divided nature. Three Geminis he felt in tune with from the moment of discovery were Pushkin, Henry Lawson and Marilyn Monroe."



of glass and diamonds, the big crystallised stones that hung from Marion Neville's body, and the angelic straps on Elsa Boileau's brown shoulders. The whole of Huntly Clarkson's life lay there on the table, crystallised, in front of Theodora Goodman, and she knew at such moments that there was nothing more to know. (107)

The dining-room scene in Sydney is transmogrified in the Hôtel du Midi, the significance of which is discussed in the chapter to follow. The harsh imagery in the passage above conveys the harsh reality of suburban existence that confronts Theodora. Even the "sweetness" of the petrified fruits is overridden by their "glitter," emphasised through the alliterative glass and conflation of glass and diamonds. Diamonds are multi-fractive and their vitrescent nature further highlights the vitriolic atmosphere that is thinly covered by the veneer of respectability. Furthermore, the metaphoric swords give depth to Theodora's figurative battle. The notion of glory however is ironically applied to the fruits, themselves something in disguise, transformed from their natural state to an emblem of class hierarchy. Moreover, "the flat words" are disregarded by the omniscient narrator, but they are evident to the reader. Huntly Clarkson typifies the conventional suburban existence that Theodora rejects: "she knew at such moments that there was nothing more to know."

An interesting connection between Theodora and Voss is that both are considered acquisitions by their materialistic hosts/benefactors. Both protagonists, however, resist the implied security of being bought, and challenge the power that constitutes that acquisitional impulse. In the reader's initial encounter with Voss, following his interaction with Laura, his disregard for social occasions is palpable:

'You must be feeling peckish,' the expectant Mr. Bonner remarked.

'Please?' asked Voss, perhaps to avoid making a decision.

'I dare say' – the merchant gave it extra weight – 'you could put away your share of dinner.'

'I am not prepared,' replied the German, who was again unhappy.

'Who ever had to prepare for a plate of prime beef and pudding!' said the merchant, already surging forth. 'Mrs. Bonner,' he called, 'our friend will stay for dinner.'

'So I anticipated,' said Mrs. Bonner, 'and Rose has laid a place.' (24)

Nineteenth-century Sydney society does not entertain the notion that dinner may be refused. Cultural expectations take precedence over character assessment: the Bonners' assumptive behaviour reflects the bigotry inherent in all social and cultural constructs that disregard outsiders or those who do not fit the cultural and social paradigms. Clearly, both Laura and Voss are foreigners; yet the irony lies in the fact that the Bonners too are foreigners, a fact that highlights their disregard for the Indigenous population that their society has excluded:

'Thank you, I will not stay,' Voss said, now in anger.

A rude man, saw Mrs. Bonner.

A foreigner, saw the P.s.

Someone to whom, after all, I am completely indifferent, saw Laura Trevelyan, although he is not here, to be sure, for my benefit. What is? She was compelled to add.

Laughter and the society of others would sometimes drive this young woman to the verge of self-pity; yet she had never asked for rescue from her isolation, and now averted her eyes from Mr. Voss in particular.

'You will not stay?' blustered the host, as if already potato-in-mouth.' (24)

That there is empathy between Voss and Laura is evident in the above passage; yet paradoxically she confers "indifference" on her attitude towards him. However, her refusal to ask Voss "for rescue from her isolation" gives currency to the notion that she is not indifferent to him and that she views him as an ally in her aversion to "[l]aughter and society." Concomitant with the notion of aversion, Mr. Bonner clearly has little empathy for Voss and is quick to dispatch the recipient of his patronage, whilst eagerly anticipating his dinner with "potato-in-mouth." The ironic humour of the scene ridicules the host and the participants of the dinner: "'Too bad, old Voss!' said the brisk Lieutenant, who would cheerfully have abandoned this unnecessary acquaintance, to rush in himself, slash with a

sword at the sirloin, and watch the red juices run” (25).<sup>71</sup> Instead it assigns authority to Voss, the outsider.

However, Mrs. Bonner is vindicated somewhat through her ever-present intuitiveness: “[s]he ... was groping after what her instinct knew” (28). She displays an affinity with Voss and recognises that he is “lost” and that “[h]is eyes cannot find their way” (28). Nonetheless, her intuitiveness is all too easily distracted by materialistic concerns, in this instance the arrival of the apple pie:

But Rose Portion had brought in a big apple-pie that was more important to some of those present. ‘Do not worry,’ said the merchant, as he watched his wife release the greeny, steamy apples from the pie. ‘There will be others with him,’ he said, ‘to hack a way.’  
‘Of course,’ said Mrs. Bonner, who loved all golden pastry-work, and especially when a scent of cloves was rising from it. ‘Nor did we really have time to understand Mr. Voss.’ (28)

Laura refuses to partake of the social niceties and when asked by Belle what Voss is like she replies:

‘I do not know,’ said Laura Trevelyan.  
I do not know Laura, Mrs Bonner realised. (28)

I have quoted the above two lines as they appear in the text to highlight both Laura’s response, which is mendacious, and Mrs. Bonner’s perceptiveness. That the words “I do not know” appear one on top of the other is interesting and denotes the multiplicity and duplicity of language both in its written and its spoken forms. However, as noted earlier, White is more interested in characters, and it is they who shape his novels. Words both shape the characters and convey their inimitable natures. So the Palethorpes are depicted as insignificant, yet their embarrassment speaks for all:

The Palethorpes coughed, and rearranged the goblets out of which they had gratefully sipped their wine. Then a silence fell amongst the flakes of pastry, and lay. Till Laura Trevelyan said:  
‘He does not intend to make his fortune out of this country, like other men. He is not all money talk.’

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<sup>71</sup> The relevance of swords in White’s oeuvre and their association with food will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

‘Other men are human,’ said her uncle, ‘and this is the country of the future. Who will not snap at an opportunity when he sees one? And get rich,’ he added, with sudden brutality of mouth. ‘This country,’ protested his full mouth. (28)

Once again Mr. Bonner, like Frank Parrott in *The Aunt’s Story*, articulates with a full mouth, which, if one uses Bahktin’s theory, suggests the grotesquery of his statement. Laura’s perceptiveness is evident: “‘Everyone is still afraid, or most of us, of this country, and will not say it. We are not yet possessed of understanding’” (28). Unlike Tom Radclyffe, who “snorted, to whom there was nothing to understand” (28), she realises that: “‘it will be some time, I expect, before I am able to grasp anything so foreign and incomprehensible. It is not my country, although I have lived in it’” (28). She challenges Tom Radclyffe’s naïve and cynical observation that the country does not belong to Voss by declaring, “‘It is his by right of vision,’” (28). Furthermore, that she is affected physically by her emotions adds depth and poignancy to her assertion. This is problematical, in that although she recognises that the country is not hers she also appears to deny any Indigenous claim to its ownership and seems to assert the misconception of *terra nullius*.<sup>72</sup> Taken in its historical and political context however, such a statement shows prescience and goes some way to acknowledging that the question of land ownership is fraught with complexities both in Laura’s context (1840s) and White’s (1950s). Mr. Bonner, on the other hand, has no such compunction:

‘Here we are talking about our Colony as if it did not exist until now,’ Mr. Bonner was forced to remark. ‘Or as if it has now begun to exist as something quite different. I do not understand what all this talk is about. We are not children. We have only to consider the progress we have made. Look at our homes and public edifices. Look at the devotion of our administrators, and the solid achievement of those men who are settling the land. Why, in this very room, look at the remains of the good dinner we have just eaten. I do not see what there is to be afraid of.’ (29)

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<sup>72</sup> The diversity of opinion that this problematical term generates will be discussed in depth at the conclusion of Chapter Three.

He is the embodiment of all that is odious about colonisation: he asserts his patriarchal and economic rationale and forecloses any further discussion. For the Mr. Bonners of this world “progress” is typified by a “good dinner.”

Just as Mr. Bonner’s body swells, in his case with over-indulgence, so does Rose’s in her pregnancy. Clearly though she feels “afraid” over her uncertain future. Indeed, the whole household is metaphorically feeling the weight of her condition. Mrs. Bonner consoles herself thus:

Then, she hit upon a cure, so simple, but infallible, at least to Mrs. Bonner, for to cure herself was to cure her patients. She would give a party. It would revive all spirits, soothe all nerves, even the frayed German ones. For Mrs. Bonner loved conviviality. She loved the way the mood would convey itself even to the candle-flames. She loved all pretty, coloured things; even the melancholy rinds of fruit, the slops of wine, the fragments of a party, recalled some past magic. Whether as a prospect or a memory, a party made her quite tipsy – figuratively speaking, that is – for Mrs. Bonner did not touch strong drink, unless on a very special occasion, a sip of champagne, or on hot evenings, a glass of delicious brandy punch, or sometimes of a morning, for the visitor’s sake a really *good* madeira, or thimbleful of dandelion wine. (77)

Mrs. Bonner’s duplicitous motivations are transparent. Her self delusively altruistic and grandiose posturings neatly encapsulate her character. The omniscient narrative elucidates her non-figurative tipsiness and her obvious partiality for alcohol, made explicit by the lengthy list of beverages that she enjoys imbibing. She persuades Mr. Bonner to hold a “party” for the expedition, which she refers to as “an historical occasion,” an event of “national significance.” Any emotional distress regarding her servant is obliterated in her all-encompassing thoughts at the prospect of a party. Ironically, she downsizes the event, in order both to placate her husband’s disdain for Voss and to cater to his economic rationalising:

‘I thought now,’ said his judicious wife, ‘ that we might give a little party, or not a party, something simple, a pair of birds and a round of beef, with a few nice side dishes. And a good wine. Or two. And as for the friends of Mr. Voss, I do not intend to invite all and sundry, for some, I understand, are just common men, but one or two who are *comme il foh*, and used to mix with ladies and young

girls. Belle has a new dress that nobody has seen, and Laura, of course, can look charming in anything.’ (78)

The description of the ambience of the evening in which the dinner-party later takes place is imbued with embryonic imagery. For example: “That night anything could happen. Two big lamps had transformed the drawing-room into a perfect, luminous egg, which soon contained all the guests. These were waiting to be hatched by some communication with one another” (80). The irony is evident: Mrs. Bonner holds the party to alleviate the household’s burdensome knowledge that Rose Portion is pregnant, but the whole evening is pregnant with possibilities. In this way, the event differs from the dining room incidents in both *Voss* and *The Aunt’s Story* discussed earlier. Here potentialities are paramount.<sup>73</sup>

These potentialities are metaphorically enmeshed in words as text. They appear in the form of a book of German verses that Voss “began to read. It was again a dream, Laura sensed, but of a different kind, in the solid egg of lamplight, from which they had not yet been born” (81). The German, however, refuses to translate the meaning of the poem he reads and declares it “too personal” (81).<sup>74</sup> Momentarily Laura feels threatened by the affinity she has felt for Voss: “[She] now turned her back. She had touched hands with the German, and exchanged smiles, but not those of recognition. She did not wish for this. He was rather sickly when moved by recollection of the past, as he was, in fact, when collected and in the present. She was glad when the dinner was served and they could give their attention to practical acts” (81). The omniscient narrator makes overt the fact that in all probability their smiles were “those of recognition.” This ability to recognise kindred spirits recalls Thea Astley’s observation that “the oddballs see and recognise each other across the no-miles and wave their understanding” (Astley 1976, 264). However, Laura attempts to

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<sup>73</sup> Chapter Three details the significance of meals as a departure point for questing in *Voss*.

<sup>74</sup> Glenn Nicholls, “Patrick White the Parodist: The German Romantic Tradition in *Voss*,” *Antipodes* 17 (Jun. 1996): 15-19. Nicholls identifies the poem as “*Abenddämmerung*” (“Evening Twilight”). He discusses the poem’s significance further, particularly its relevance to Laura and Voss’ relationship and the Sanderson homestead Rhine Towers.

deny that “recognition” by immersing herself in “practical acts.” The juxtaposition of the cerebral with the physical highlights the mind/body dilemma that confronts the couple and prefigures their enigmatic relationship. The dinner commences:

All went well, although Cassie had overdone the beef. Mr. Bonner frowned. Dishes were in profusion, and handed with unexpected skill, by Rose Portion, whose condition was not yet obvious beneath her best apron, and an elderly man, lent by Archdeacon Endicott who lived in the same road. The Archdeacon’s man was of awful respectability, in a kind of livery and cotton gloves, and only once put his cotton thumb in the soup. In addition to these, there was the invisible Edith, whose *oo-errr* was heard once from behind the doors, and who would gollop the remainders of puddings before walking home. (81-2)

Rose’s pregnancy is yet another metaphor for the developing relationship between Voss and Laura, placed within the quotidian grind of the servants, the relevance of which has been discussed.

Voss’ appetite is set in stark contrast to Edith’s, whose surreptitious “gollop[ing]” of the leftover puddings reveals her own hunger. Despite her earlier protestations to the contrary Laura is fascinated by Voss and his appetite: “Voss ate with appetite, taking everything for granted. That is how it ought to be, Laura had to tell herself. She was annoyed to find that she was fascinated by his method of using a knife and fork, and determined to make some effort to ignore” (82). Clearly Voss’ “method of using a knife and fork” further reveals his foreign nature. Yet Laura is not repelled by his different mode of eating, and is more annoyed at her own reaction and attraction. Indeed, her own foreign nature appears in her reaction to Tom Radclyffe’s pompous remark: “‘I would be curious to read little Laura’s thoughts’” (82). She responds with a lengthy dissemination which warrants quoting in full:

‘If I take you at your word, you may regret it,’ she replied, ‘because I have been thinking of nothing in particular. Which is another way of saying: almost everything. I was thinking how happy one can be sitting inside a conversation in which one is not compelled to take part. Words are only sympathetic when they are detached from their obligations. Under those conditions I am never able

to resist adding yet another to my collection, just as some people are moved to make collections of curious stones. Then, there was the pretty dish of jellied quinces that I saw in the kitchen this evening as I passed through. Then, if you still wish to hear, Miss Hollier's garnet brooch, which I understand she inherited from an aunt, and which I would like to think edible, like the quinces. And there was the poem read by Mr. Voss, which I did understand in a sense, if not the sense of the words. Just now, it was the drumstick on Mr. Palfreyman's plate. I was thinking of the bones of a dead man, uncovered by a fox, it was believed, that I once saw in Penrith churchyard as I walked there with Lucy Cox, and how I was not upset, as Lucy was. It is the thought of death that frightens me. Not its bones.'

Mrs. Bonner, who feared that the limits of convention had been exceeded, was making little signs to her niece, using her mouth and the corner of a discreet napkin. But Laura herself had no wish to continue. It was obvious that her last remark must be the final one.

'Dear me, if these educated young ladies are not the deuce,' said Tom Radclyffe, whose turn it was to hate.

Ideas disturbed his manliness.

'I am sorry, Tom, to have given you literally what you asked for,' Laura said. 'You must take care not to run the risk in future.' (82-3)

Again the emphasis on words is foremost in the above passage. Laura literalises Radclyffe's trivialisation of her imaginative peregrinations. In doing so she may be mendacious, but she subverts his banality. She places great importance on words and their multi-dimensional capabilities (Harris 77). Her reaction to Radclyffe's request parodies the normalised response of 'Nothing' to the query 'What are you thinking about?' But Laura elaborates to an embarrassing extent, at least to the dinner assemblage. Furthermore, the contradictory representation of the skeleton recalls the frequent motif in Roman dining rooms. There the mosaics or frescos of skeletons represented the mortality of humankind and served to encourage the diners to eat, drink and be merry. The Roman novelist Petronius satirises such greedy abandon in "Dinner with Trimalchio," when a slave arrives with a silver skeleton and flings it about the table into various postures (Anderson 2000, 2). Trimalchio then recites:

'O woe, woe, man is only a dot:  
Hell drags us off and that is the lot;



So let us live a little space,  
At least while we can feed our face.' (56)

Drawing on similar analogies of edacious ostentation White satirises *all* of the diners' existence: the shallow existence of the Bonners is the prime target yet, more subtly, all the diners are lampooned. Even Laura is exposed as a prevaricator, or perhaps her thoughts are as convoluted as they appear. White is attempting to achieve a literal play on words. He locates the action in the traditional setting of a pre-quest dinner. Yet the satire reveals that all is not as it appears. The medley of fruits in their various guises, alluding to the etymology of satire, is achieved by the words as part of an ever-extending paradigm: words/stones/jellied fruit/stones/jellied fruit/words. The paradigm extends but the subject matter is circular, words to words, a fact that denotes the fragmentary yet complete nature of the text.

Finally, Laura conflates Mr. Palfreyman's drumstick to an image of a dead man reduced to bones. The serious subject matter is tempered by ironic humour but highlighted through the grotesque. The grotesque however, is subverted in its turn, in that it is not the image of the dead man's bones that appears grotesque, but Mrs. Bonner's frantic gesticulations and silent mouthing. This imagery conveys her inability to articulate innermost thoughts, desires, or indeed fears. Laura, the subversive, mouths her fear of death, an intangible abstract concept, but Mrs. Bonner cannot even mouth her objections to what Laura enunciates.

Tom Radclyffe, the society imbecile, sees no place for educated women in *his* Sydney society: "Ideas disturbed his manliness." Laura rebukes his hatred with a veiled threat: "I am sorry, Tom, to have given you literally what you asked for ... You must take care not to run the risk in future.'" Laura has the last word in their altercation. She does not, however, have the last word on the subject. Miss Hillier "whom people invited when

they were in a scrape for an extra lady” (V 78), and who could also lay claim to having “a distant connexion of Mr. Sanderson of Rhine Towers” (79) retaliates: ““*I* am sorry that you should have such horrid thoughts on a jolly occasion. The bones of a dead man in a grave!’ ... ‘Mr. Palfreyman has been telling me such delightful, really interesting and instructive things about birds”” (83). The irony is made apparent when one considers that Mr. Palfreyman, an ornithologist, studies dead birds and of course their bones. Once again, the emphasis on words is highlighted in the repetition of “I am sorry” and the textual relevance is apparent in Miss Hollier’s italicised “*I*.” Laura gives Tom literally what he asks for, but Mr. Palfreyman has masked the grotesque elements of his ornithological pursuits. In this way Miss Hillier’s italicised “*I*” represents the apotheosis of deception: the veneer of “polite” society. Conversely, Laura’s “*I*” represents the unpalatable truth that the assemblage would rather not face. Although the dinner situates the characters *en masse*, White satirises them as culpable individuals, ultimately responsible for the consequences of their actions.

The recurring trope of Bakhtin’s grotesque discussed earlier encapsulates Mr. Palfreyman’s character. In this instance he recoils from Miss Hollier’s “shining teeth” but the omniscient narrator relays Palfreyman’s realisation that “he was wrong” (83). The proleptic statement: “He, on the other hand, must learn to overcome his impulse to retreat from kind hands,” foreshadows Voss’ ministrations as well as recalling Palfreyman’s assertions to Voss that he was strong enough to undertake the journey: ““I have been fed on eggs and cream by the wife and daughters of my friend Strang for I don’t know how many weeks”” (45).

As indicated previously, words as the subject of analysis are important in White’s oeuvre, that is words as objects to be analysed. In *For Love Alone* James Quick likewise conflates spoken and written words when he considers Teresa’s spoken language, with its

“pleasing idioms of the English he had read in English literature. He masticated them, ran over them with the tip of his tongue” (363). Similarly, White’s poetic prose conveys depth of meaning and rewards a close textual analysis. For example, during Mr. Palfreyman’s ruminations the final course has arrived:

Puddings had by this time been brought: brittlest baskets of caramel, great gobbets of meringue. When the big, thick, but somehow thoughtful woman who was waiting at table set down among them the jellied quinces, Voss saw that it was indeed a pretty dish, of garnet colour, with pale jade lozenges, and a somewhat clumsy star in that same stone, or angelica. (83)

The reductionist “puddings” contrasts with the Huntly Clarkson dining room scene in *The Aunt’s Story*, where for “dessert [there were] some very expensive crystallised fruits” (107). Indeed the poetic techniques in the above passage highlight its disparate themes. The alliterative “brittlest baskets” and “great gobbets” with their harsh consonance are metaphors for Rose Portion. According to *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* the word *gobbet* has two tangible meanings: the first, a piece, lump, or portion; a clot of slimy matter: the second, an extract from a text, especially one set for translation or comment in an examination. The etymology of *gobbet* is Middle English from the Old French *gobet* which derives from the word *gob*, the etymology of which is again Middle English from the Old French *go(u)be*, meaning mouthful. Significantly in this passage Rose Portion is unnamed, yet her situation is brittle, and her turgid condition is meringue-like, brittle on the outside yet insubstantial inside, which raises the issue of the patriarchal attitude towards illegitimacy. Such a notion is substantiated if one considers Belle’s depiction as a meringue and inverts the brittle/fluffy imagery to convey the insubstantiality of her existence in nineteenth-century Sydney: she exists merely to marry and breed. The irony of both Rose’s and Laura’s situations is evident and conveys the duplicitous machinations of a patriarchal society. As Wilson Harris points out, “the borderline between a pregnant body and an all-

consuming enlarged body subsists upon a distortion so complex one scarcely dwells upon it at all. Birth-wish/death-wish” (1981, 68).

The appearance of the jellied quinces recalls the altercation between Tom Radclyffe and Laura and succinctly places Laura outside patriarchal structures of nineteenth-century Sydney society. The juxtaposition of the “pudding” items and the meanings they convey highlight the disparities in the social hierarchies in which these characters reside and interact. Laura and Voss are ultimately willing to challenge and subvert these hierarchies, “terrible though the prospect was” (V 84).

At this juncture I would like to elaborate the notion that food and eating as social occasions often serve as a springboard to a quest. Such a narrative device extends back to medieval questing.<sup>75</sup> Voss’ initial refusal of food, from the Bonners and also from the man in the park who offered him bread, not only conveys his wilful personality, but also denotes the ill-equipped nature of his expedition. Similarly Teresa in *For Love Alone* eats little, an act of self-denial that has been shown to be imbued with multiple meanings. However, it is Voss’ vacillating egoism that sustains his motivation, not necessarily a quest for self-empowerment. His hunger derives from a desire to satisfy both his will and his knowledge: “The German began to think of the material world which his egoism had made him reject. In that world men and women sat at a round table and broke bread together. At times, he admitted, his hunger was almost unbearable” (36). Clearly Voss is not infallible yet his indifference to social interaction is overt; he prefers the natural world of “deadly rocks” over the material world of “words ... [that] leave him half-dead” (18). Characteristically, he views suffering as preferable to human interaction: “How much less destructive of the personality are thirst, fever, physical exhaustion, he thought, much less destructive than people” (18):

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. the feasts that prelude the quests of King Arthur’s knights, in for example *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory’s *Mort Darthur*.

Unseeing people walked the sandy earth, eating bread, or sat at meat in their houses of frail stone foundations, while the lean man, beneath his twisted tree, became familiar with each blade of withered grass at which he stared, even the joints in the body of the ant.

Knowing so much, I shall know everything, he assured himself, and lay down in time, and was asleep, slowly breathing the sultry air of the new country that was being revealed to him. (27)

Voss considers abstinence from food as a way to spiritual insight through an affinity with nature. It is thus related to both his drive to transcendence and his egoism. Such paradoxes are evident if one considers the symbolism of the “twisted tree” and the “withered grass.” They denote an element of imperfection, yet Voss has an affinity with them. However, his egoism is evident in the fact that the omniscient narrator refers to the “twisted tree” as “his,” Voss’ tree. Yet that dichotomy of perfection/imperfection is in itself problematical if one reflects on Deleuze’s theory discussed earlier. Such paradoxes could be explained if one considers that essentially the essence of satisfying hunger is the inability to resist. As Irwin points out in his analysis of Simone Weil’s philosophy:

Hunger brings the daily demonstration that our will is not free, that our bodies are inhabited-constituted – by forces over which we can exert only the most limited and fleeting control. ... For her part, Simone Weil made hunger and eating central to her inquiries into all dimensions of the human condition. Food, she observed in a notebook entry, is ‘the irreducible.’ (260).

The irreducible elements at play in *Voss* and *The Aunt’s Story* lead back to the vacuous characters delineated in the Sydney dinner parties in both novels: Theodora and Laura too suffer similar emotions in response to an untenable suburban existence. For example, when the *Osprey* sets sail from Sydney, Laura experiences conflicting feelings where:

the whole scene that their vision embraced became distinct and dancing, beautiful but sad. Yet ... those moments of her life which had been of most importance were both indistinct and ugly. The incident with the German in the garden had been indescribably ugly, untidy, painful. She could not help recalling that, and in doing so, there came into her mouth a bad taste, as of blood oozing, as if she had lost a tooth.” (122)

The repetition of “ugly” adds dimension to the unpalatable memory of her pseudo-romantic encounter in the garden with Voss (Harris 72-3). She too has “nothing – nothing to tell” (V 122). In other words she is unable to articulate her euphoric and contradictory emotions.

The whole scene is fraught with contradictions epitomised in the reversed transubstantiation. Whether literally or psychosomatically, Laura tastes blood in her mouth, a sensation that prefigures her phlebotomy and recalls her initial encounter with Voss. The recollection of Voss and Laura’s first encounter also alerts the reader to repetition of cumquats as the *Osprey* sets sail: “dish of preserved cumquats in her hand” (120); “‘Oh, I will pray for them,’ exclaimed Rose Portion, clutching the saucer with the cumquats”

(121):

‘These are a few cumquats that I was bringin’ to you for a taste, when I saw the ship had sailed.’ And she set the saucer, with two forks, upon a little bamboo table, and went softly away.

Neither girl thanked the woman for her trouble, except in spirit, for the words had been absorbed from them. (121)

This repetition surreptitiously introduces another “foreign” element to the text. Many Chinese migrated to Australia in the mid-1800s to work on the goldfields. As tireless workers they were reviled by other gold-diggers as well as by the government. Two years before his death White continued to lament the impact on humanity of social hegemony: “‘I believe most people hunger after spirituality, even if that hunger remains in many cases unconscious. If those who dragoon us ignore that longing of the human psyche, they are running a great risk. ... That society could – quite simply – die’” (qtd. in Marr 635). That the Chinese “foreigners” are an absent presence in *Voss* subtly conveys the xenophobic appropriation of their lifestyles. To elaborate: “cumquat” is a Cantonese variant of the Chinese *kin kü*, golden orange. The cumquat is also metaphor for the acidic interior of Sydney society enveloped by a sweet rind.

Objectified cumquats are equally symbolic in *The Aunt's Story*. To reiterate: objects are always important in White's oeuvre and if one considers the "object relations model" that psychologists such as Davies and Frawley have applied to DID, then that significance and its relation to food is a useful one to pursue in analysing Theodora's condition. They assert that DID sufferers exhibit "a completely separate organization of self and object representations," and contend that "events become incorporated and ultimately understood vis-à-vis the particular matrices of self and object experience within which they are ensconced, and that they are bound together and organised with particular regard to the intense emotional experiences that accompany them" (qtd. in Brenner 1996, 159). Furthermore, adopting Marshall's theory of the meal as object, one can "point to the paradoxical nature of existence, the reign of necessity Simone Weil speaks of which co-exists also with the longing for infinity and, by definition, for freedom" (Brady 1978, 111).

Indeed, in *The Aunt's Story* White sets a mathematical problem for his readers through food as signifier and it is only at the dénouement that the reader understands the complexity of that problem. As Theodora says: 'I am afraid that I have set you a problem ... [a]ctually I do exist'" (AS 287). This statement itself is ambiguous and contradictory: at the conclusion of the novel Theodora has taken on the persona of Miss Pilkington who, as Mr. Johnson asserts to his wife: "perhaps you fell for Miss Pilkington. Perhaps you ain't seen her," (286). The "problem" is whether Theodora does exist or whether her identity is ultimately subsumed by Miss Pilkington. That Pilkington is the name of a large glass-manufacturer in the UK (Lawson 1992, 14) adds emphasis to the food and glass imagery to be discussed in the following section. Perhaps it could be argued that the meaning is transparent if one disseminates the text using the many food motifs that proliferate in *The Aunt's Story*. As Brady points out, White's characters seek "[u]nity, not division into separate selfhood" (1983 179). In *The Tree of Man* (1974) Stan Parker realises that "It was

clear that One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums” (477). The paradoxical properties of glass, liquid and solid depending on temperature, invisible yet substantial, mirror Theodora’s personality and both her exterior and interior states.

I have highlighted and discussed two dining room incidents in order to show how these vignettes are proleptic. The scenes are shaping metaphors for the character development of Laura, Voss and Theodora, and for the narratives of *Voss* and *The Aunt’s Story* yet to unfold. The incidents to be discussed in the following sub-section are equally proleptic and, I maintain, signify the relevance of food imagery to the emergence of Theodora’s DID.

### **Antonomasia and Antagonistic Alimentation: *The Aunt’s Story***

The brief interludes of excitement at Meroë are prolepses for Theodora’s imaginative escape. For example, she escapes the “pastry board” flatness of the quotidian, a lack of excitement that depicts the “tragedy of domesticity” (AS 29) through her encounter with the Syrian travelling vendor. However, the Syrian offers goods for consumption, not foodstuffs. The inversion of goods and pastry, here the secondary referent, is a simulacrum for pastry’s transformation into the *bouchée à la reine* in the dining room at the Hôtel du Midi; a semiotic system in which the increasing fragility of Theodora’s mind becomes progressively apparent. Concomitant with that notion of fragility, Theodora’s position in Australian society is itself fragile, and that she identifies with other outsiders, those who do not fit societal paradigms, adds dimension to her alterity. Once again, however, the preoccupation with what constitutes consumption in the vignette with the Syrian presages the link between the consumption of food and the consumption of goods that is parodied in the “Jardin Exotique” section of the novel. Indeed the analepsis made explicit by Miss Grigg’s statement in the hotel dining room, “you never knew with pastry, it was always



something in disguise” adds dimension to my argument (153). As Marshall enunciates, “food is extraordinary in its ordinariness, exceptional in the extent to which we treat it as mundane, and outstanding as a focus for the study of consumption” (69). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier the many references to pastry presage the incident that is the cornerstone of Theodora’s ailment and underscores the importance of pastry in the narrative.

### **The Man who was Given his Dinner: *The Aunt’s Story***

Thus far the discussion has focussed on foodstuffs and the way in which symbolically they impact on the human condition. Furthermore, the argument has demonstrated the symbolic relevance of eating and consumption. In *The Aunt’s Story* ‘The Man who was Given his Dinner’ incident disrupts the idealised domestic bliss and the pervasive veneer of respectability typified by the Goodman household. Furthermore, the antagonism that is inherent at mealtimes is made overt in the following:

Mother sat on the sofa. She twisted her rings round. She rolled her hands in a tight ball and said, ‘It is no use, George. I refuse to sit down to table with every tramp that comes along. I will not. I will not.’

Then you knew that Mother had won, in spite of Father breathing hard. It was terrible, the strength of Mother. All your own weakness came flowing back. Mother was more terrible than lightning that had struck the tree.

‘But we can give him his dinner,’ Theodora dared. ‘We can give it him on the closed veranda. Round the side. Gertie can hand it through the window of the spare room.’

Short of turning her face, to avoid what she could not avoid, what she had just seen, she had to say something, and she said this.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ said Mother sharply. ‘I did not see you were there. Yes,’ she said, ‘Theodora seems to have solved the problem. Let him have it on the closed veranda. Round the side.’

‘Let Gertie hand it through the spare-room window. To the leper,’ Father said.

Then he left the room. (42-43)

Theodora’s challenge to the mealtime dilemma posed by the arrival of the “tramp” indicates her empathetic nature. She is subsumed by “the strength of Mother,” but combats

what she perceives as injustice. Her empathy and intuitiveness are clear. Moreover, that this incident occurs on Theodora's twelfth birthday is significant. On this day "the big oak in front was struck by lightning, and from three hundred yards Theodora was thrown to the ground" (40). As Brenner points out in his deconstruction of DID, one of "the influences that have come to light so far through analytic exploration [is] near death experiences in childhood, i.e., out-of-body, telepathic-like phenomena" (1999, 345). Clearly the lightning strike is important to Theodora's situation. However, taken in conjunction with 'The Man who was Given his Dinner,' the event is more important to her developing character. As White comments: "Characters interest me more than situations ... But I always think of my novels as being the lives of the characters" (qtd. in Lawson 1994, 273). *The Aunt's Story* takes that concept to its ultimate level: it deals with the lives of the characters and is also a novel about the life of a character and the many lives that she lives.<sup>76</sup>

Food defines and presages White's characters' destinies:

But the man who came was given his dinner.

'You eat an awful lot,' said Fanny.

'Because my belly's empty,' the man said, as he continued to put into his mouth boiled beef, dumplings, carrots, cabbage, squares of bread, and draughts of tea.

'I'm hungry,' he said. 'And I like eating.'

'I like meringues best,' said Fanny.

'And you?' said the man to Theodora.

'I don't know,' she said.

Under cover of the conversation between Fanny and the Man who was Given his Dinner, Theodora had withdrawn, and now she felt shy. She would have preferred the man's silence, or else the cracking of his jaws as he chewed and swallowed the boiled beef. She could not see him eat too much, because his act covered their shame. (43)

Fanny is a meringue; Theodora does not know what foodstuff she prefers, but she clearly enjoys silence, introspection and observation of others. The Man who was Given his Dinner, however, is identified with a plethora of foodstuffs. Most important though, is his

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<sup>76</sup> This concept will be discussed in relation to *Memoirs of Many in One* in Chapter Four.

eating, the way he eats and what his hunger symbolises. The image of him ravenously devouring his gift of food recalls Magwitch in *Great Expectations*:

He was gobbling mincemeat, meat-bone, bread, cheese, and pork pie, all at once: staring distrustfully while he did so at the mist all round us, and often stopping – even stopping his jaws – to listen... I had often watched a large dog of ours eating his food; and I now noticed a decided similarity between the dog's way of eating, and the man's. The man took strong sharp sudden bites, just like the dog. He swallowed, or rather snapped up, every mouthful, too soon and too fast; and he looked sideways here and there while he ate, as if he thought there was danger in every direction, of somebody's coming to take the pie away. He was altogether too unsettled in his mind over it, to appreciate it comfortably, I thought, or to have anybody to dine with him, without making a chop with his jaws at the visitor. In all of which particulars he was very like the dog. (Dickens 19)

Both characters are marginalised and their hunger is palpable. Both consume the food in liminal spaces: the Man on the verandah, Magwitch in a graveyard. These spaces reflect their situations: the Man exists on the boundary of nature and civilisation; Magwitch barely exists between life and death or humanity and bestiality. Clearly, their situations contrast sharply with the dining room scenes discussed earlier. As with these two characters, food and its consumption play a major role in Theodora's life. They also presage the characters and events outlined below in "Jardin Exotique."

Food is a synecdoche for consumption, and as Falk notes, "oral consumption ... eating implies the consumption (dissolving, using up) of the food but it is also simultaneously as process of production – or better, construction ... reproducing or constructing life on all levels, from the physical to the social" (95). Congruent with the notion of consumption and its attendant materialism, another form of denial that Theodora exhibits is an unwillingness to participate in the social niceties of Sydney culture. Her union with things is not for materialistic but rather for aesthetic advantage (Walsh 1977, 25).

Following the consumption of his meal, The Man who was Given his Dinner regales Fanny and Theodora with tales of when George and he were prospecting "down

Kiandra way” (AS 43) and got lost in the snow and cold. They spent the night fearing the ghost of a man who had got lost in similar circumstances, yet next morning found they were right next to the track. Clearly the journey(s) signal Theodora’s journey to transcendental freedom: the signifier of quest by food is subverted here though, and relays the perverse nature of Theodora’s impending quest:

The Man who was Given his Dinner laughed now. He brushed his beard with the back of his hand. Sun fell through the shaggy tree, and things were good to touch.

‘I could tell you a lot of things,’ said the man.

He said it, Theodora knew, to her, in spite of Fanny, and Gertie Stepper, who stood at the spare-room window holding the crumbs.

‘Why don’t you stay and tell us?’ asked Fanny.

But looking at Theodora, the man’s mouth opened and closed, as if it was mouthing a great potato.

Then at last it closed on words. ‘I got to be making tracks,’ he said. (44)

The perversity of Theodora’s quest is substantiated by the potato imagery that recalls not only Pearl Brawne who “was meant to swell, and ripen, and burst” (35), but also Mr. Bonner’s reaction to Voss’ insistence on not staying to dinner. The Man who was Given his Dinner is unable to articulate his intuitive theory about Theodora’s future quest: “But inside the man’s silence, Theodora could feel his closeness. The sleeve of his coat touched her cheek. The sleeve of his coat smelt of dust, and mutton fat, and sweat, but it stroked her, and she bit her tongue” (44).

Furthermore, the symbolism of the potato is fraught with contradictory signifiers: it is a sign for poverty and also for lust, especially because the Spanish or sweet potato is considered an aphrodisiac (de Vries 372). Leopold Bloom carried one in his pocket in *Ulysses* – a metonym for the Great Famine as well as a folkloric talisman. A tenuous link between the black, wood-like potato talisman is White’s obsession with wood. Another less tenuous association is the relevance of talismanic properties in the stone and jewel transmogrifiers of food. Thus, the heuristic nature of both *The Aunt’s Story* and *Voss* invite

a detailed analysis of the tropes of food and how the transformative accretion of those tropes relate to character development.

### **The Isolating Incident: *The Aunt's Story***

As mentioned previously, the isolating incident that contributes to Theodora's DID is the pastrycook incident. Theodora's response to her father's death prefigures her reaction to this symbolic event:

She was as thin as grey light, as if she had just died. She would not wake the others. It was still too terrible to tell, too private an experience. As if she were to go into the room and say: Mother, I am dead, I am dead, Meroë has crumbled. So she went outside where the grey light was as thin as water and Meroë had in fact, dissolved. Cocks were crowing the legend of day, but only the legend. Meroë was grey water, grey ash. Then Theodora Goodman cried. (85)

The imagery in the quote above is redolent of Henry Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans*. His "Cock-Crowing" is symbolic of the perennial theme of germination in his poetry. In the context of this discussion Theodora's physical flowing clearly depicts the ineluctability of the passage of time despite the fact that her father's death is such a momentous event in her emotional life. The preceding quote occurs at the end of Chapter 4 where it is immediately followed by Theodora's letter to Violet Adams – a neat summation of what has occurred to facilitate the move to Sydney, the next stage of Theodora's life. Congruent with the food imagery, it is significant that the quote below falls in the middle of Mrs. Goodman's tea-drinking, where the omniscient narrator recalls the sale of Meroë to the MacKenzies:

So that Theodora did not expect there was much more to be said for Meroë. It was swallowed by Mr. MacKenzie, and the mouths of the people at the general sale, the red, round, and greedy, or the brown, hatchety, suspicious faces, that gobbled or snapped at LOTS. Because objects had lost their identity and become numbers. It was doubtful whether, even with the ticket soaked off, identity would ever be restored. (88)

Marxist theorist Trevor Williams states: “[t]he single achievement of capitalism is its ability to furnish many of us with consumer durables and, as anyone in Eastern Europe will tell you, it is no use belittling that achievement” (94). However, he goes on to delineate the paradoxical nature of achieving such an apotheosis. Capitalism, with its inherent dissatisfaction and quest for more, underlines not only the environmental tragedy it engenders but also the “spiritual devastation that capitalism has wrought through alienation in the work place, its system of winners and losers, its reification of a fragmentation of people and functions, and, above all, through its emphasis on the isolated individual relating in the first instance to objects and only secondarily, if at all to human beings” (94). Theodora symbolically rejects the capitalist quest in her disembarkation from the train, and from Jake’s truck, and finally when she discards the “strips and sheaves of tickets” (263) on her ascent to the Johnson household.

Reverting back to the sale of Meroë: textually such interstices indicate their importance to the narrative. Theodora does not really listen to what her mother is saying whilst drinking tea, but again reflects:

But Mother had not embarked. Her world had always been enclosed by walls, her Ithaca, and here she would have kept the suitors at bay, not through love and patience, but with suitable conversation and a stick. Mother would have said in the end: Oh, here you are, and about time too, I was bored. What, you have seen witches and killed giants? Ah, but Ianthe, a good cook, though a horrid girl, has beaten an octopus a hundred and forty times on a stone and simmered it for eight hours in wine, and I have offered a calf to Aphrodite if she will produce six yards of purple out of the air. (89)

Clearly, Theodora is escaping through her extremely fertile imagination. The imagery in the above passage, replete with Greek mythology and food, imparts the dualisms inherent in story-telling. For example, Ianthe was a Cretan girl who was betrothed to Iphis. Iphis was a woman in love with Ianthe who prayed to the gods to allow the two women to marry. She was changed by Isis into a man, and became Ianthe’s husband. The text’s enigmatic nature, an imaginary tale within a narrative, highlights the multiplicity of meaning that can be

derived from such a narrative. The reference to Aphrodite conveys, I believe, Theodora's own position in relation to her mother. She is the Golden Calf, the illusory idol, whose nature is subsumed in the purple prose of White's narrative.

Mrs. Goodman's life, by contrast, is ingrained in the quotidian. She "had not embarked," but is willing to stay within the confines of the tea-drinking, bread and butter-consuming Sydney society (89). However, it is not necessarily a physical embarkation that she forgoes – indeed, she and her husband travelled widely – but a mental one, an aspect that clearly attracts Theodora in her quest. Moreover, the fact that the pastrycook incident falls between the deaths of Father, who incidentally just prior to his death becomes George Goodman in the narrative for Theodora, and of Mrs. Goodman, adds to its significance. It is worthwhile quoting the whole incident in full:

It was after the war some time, a year or two perhaps, that people began to talk about the tragedy of Jack Frost. Frost was a pastrycook. He kept a shop in George Street to which people went, the people who had names and good addresses, but Jack Frost himself lived in a street in Clovelly which was just a street. One Sunday Jack Frost cut the throats of his wife and three little girls. Just like that. Then, when he had locked his house, he walked to Central Station, where he was taken, asking for a ticket to a place of which he had forgotten the name.

The Jack Frost case caused quite a stir. People talked. They saw the shop. It was painted a dark green. And inside the window cakes stood on stiff stands, puffs blowing clouds of cream, and tarts high with black cherries, with paper doilies underneath. When the Jack Frost tragedy occurred, people were reminded of themselves in the shop, buying the murderer's cakes, and passing the time of day. But it was horrible. Always so decent and polite, under it all Frost was mad, to kill his wife and three little girls. Unhinged by the war, of course. He had served, the papers said, in France. And *Truth*, which people began to buy, not from their newsagents, but over the garden fence, *Truth* had a full account, with photographs. It had a letter which Jack Frost wrote in his madness before he did the deed.

Dear All (wrote Jack Frost),

It come to this. I come home this evening, I seen your faces Winnie, Evelyn, Thelma, and Zoe, I see us all sitting round the table buttering our scones for Sunday tea. I saw as you didn't know what was in the next room. Then I say meself I will pin up them smiles so as we can all walk out, though maybe the Judge won't agree.

Dear All, you will forgive me, yes I know, because it is already done, and now, my dears, we shall see.

Your ever loving dad and husband,

Jack Frost

It was terrible, they said, and indecent, to print madness for the public to read. People were moved far more deeply than they were by the bodies of lumpy girls, which appear so monotonously and anonymously on wasteland in the suburbs. The Frost case was worse, they said. They felt his cakes in their stomachs. They saw the dark hairs on his wrist as he handed back the change. The Frost case was very close, and for that reason they felt sick, and could not understand. (96-7)

This lengthy passage is replete with food analogies and rewards a close analysis. The grotesque incident also serves as a time locator in the narrative, and the fact that it is discussed in detail at one of Mrs. Goodman's little social gatherings adds substance to its importance in the novel. Indeed, it is at this juncture that Huntly Clarkson, the family solicitor, first becomes interested in Theodora.

Referring back to the passage quoted above: the disparity between the social-standing of the pastrycook and his customers is overt. Ironically, though the text names Jack Frost, "the people who had names and good addresses" are nameless. Moreover, Jack resides "in a street in Clovelly which was just a street." So not only is time conceptualised but place too. Continuing with the temporal aspect of this passage, the fact that Jack Frost commits murder on a Sunday "just like that" is vital to an understanding of the diachronic importance of the incident to the text. It is clear from my earlier discussion that Sunday, in the context of *The Aunt's Story* and *Voss* at least, is "family" day. Clearly Jack Frost has to work on a Sunday, but is able to join his family for "Sunday tea"; and it is quite probable that, like Voss and Laura in *Voss*, he does not attend church on a Sunday. His confectionery creations are aesthetic masterpieces, a metaphor for his creative anima. His sensitivity was unable to sustain him in the war to which he was conscripted to fight. He became "unhinged," unlike the boorish Frank Parrott whose position on the land was deemed more important. Jack Frost's sensibilities were unable to deal with the horrors he evidently experienced "in France" and this inexorably culminated in disaster. Clearly he was unable



to assimilate the disparate and foreign experiences of war into the quotidian life of a pastrycook and family man.

All of Sydney who had access to the news item detailing Jack Frost's dilemma were able to read his open letter, yet it would appear none suffered the same profound effects as Theodora. Much as the music of Moräitis moved Theodora in different ways, the murder and the explanatory letter reveal her deep empathy and her ability to think abstractly.

Jack Frost's letter is enigmatic and his name is ironically symbolic. "Jack Frost" is thought to originate in Norse mythology where *Jokul* meant "icicle," *Frosti* "frost." He imagines that by murdering his family he will "pin up" their image as a close-knit family and thereby preserve them from the inhumanity that he has witnessed in war. That notion of freezing an image in time, another symbolic significance in Jack Frost's name, was prefigured during Theodora's stint in the war canteen. Then a soldier showed her "a picture he had taken from a Hun":

It was a photograph of two girls, two sisters, of whom the elder was wearing a locket. Staring and smiling out of the cracks of the soldier's hand, the faces of the girls expressed a belief in continuity, at least up to the moment when the photographer had squeezed the bulb. Theodora remembered the picture, and sometimes wondered at what point the illusion of individual will had succumbed to the universal dream. (91)

Paradoxically, Jack Frost is under "the illusion of individual will" but he does not "succumb ... to the universal dream." He is under no illusion about the barbarity of humankind exposed during his wartime experience and can only succumb to "individual will" in his illusory desire to preserve his family's *status quo*. Theodora sees herself preserved in the photographic image, yet like Jack Frost her "illusion of individual will" will not accommodate the "universal dream."

By presenting the image of families through photography or art White invites the reader to question the illusory as well as the static nature of such images, and thereby

question the image or notional ideal of “family” itself. By juxtaposing individual and universal White extends that question further to include not only family ideals in the “universal dream” but political ideals too: in war the individual will is subsumed. Moreover, the grammar embedded in the passage about Jack Frost is equally photographic. The short, sharp sentences convey the clicking of a camera. The pastrycook incident represents the tenebrous underbelly of humanity that most humans are unwilling to confront. Symbolically, those like Jack Frost who do confront this dark image are unable to assimilate that knowledge into their quotidian. In other words they cannot resolve the dilemma with which they are confronted through normative practice. Indeed, the entire quote presents a tableaux of images: Jack Frost’s shop; the many images that his customers create of themselves; the newspaper article itself, complete with photographs; and his letter.

Moving back to the enigmatic nature of the letter: Jack Frost reiterates “Dear All,” the inclusiveness of which is evident. What is remarkable, however, is the referent of the address: who is “Dear All”? Following the initial “Dear All,” Jack Frost paints two pictures; one of domestic bliss, the other a grotesque parody of its perpetuation. The room imagery that links the two pictures is also significant and relates closely to my analysis of Theodora’s disorder. DID sufferers are able to compartmentalise their fears into alters, and although Jack Frost was aware of “what was in the next room,” he could not reconcile those horrors with a family life. Theodora too rejects a family life, but she has the perspicacity to avoid or even outwardly deny family as a conscious choice. She is thus able to confront her own horrors in a unique manner. Moreover, the evocation of Frost’s three daughters’ names recalls Theodora’s three vicarious motherhood incidents. Yet Theodora is not emblematic of Frost’s wife: subliminally Theodora would rather see Winnie Frost’s fate as Mrs. Goodman’s fate, and she soon comes to recognise that “core of evil” within herself (121).

In the second “Dear All” the simplistic prose is poetic-like in its form, especially if written thus:

Dear All,  
you will forgive me,  
yes I know,  
because it is already done,  
and now,  
my dears, we shall see.

There is a loose rhyme scheme that highlights the nature of Frost’s dilemma, the uncertainty with which he views his actions. This uncertainty is further emphasised in the imperative “you will forgive me” which is disavowed immediately in the following line “yes I know/because it is already done.” The juxtaposition of the two statements is paradoxical and raises two questions: have his family forgiven him because they are beyond articulating otherwise? Or did they forgive him before he murdered them? The irregular and stilted rhythm of Frost’s poem-like missive conveys this uncertainty, a notion articulated in the final line. Although the narrator explicitly cites the letter as having been written before Frost committed the murder, the letter itself does not make this clear and invites the reader to question its content.

Moreover, the close of Jack Frost’s letter situates his position for the reader(s), who clearly cannot be his murdered family: “Your ever loving dad and husband.” This is not a suicide note, however, and Frost’s fate is as uncertain as his letter. This pivotal incident is important to the narrative of *The Aunt’s Story* and the uncertainty that envelops the incident invites the reader to justify its purpose. Presciently, that Jack Frost is arrested prior to purchasing his ticket “to a place of which he had forgotten the name” is significant. In the novel’s coda Theodora embarks on a monumental journey of self-discovery both literally and metaphorically, and her venture is fraught with as much uncertainty and ambiguity as surrounds the pastrycook incident.

Later, when Huntley Clarkson asks Theodora's opinion of the Jack Frost incident at Mrs. Goodman's gathering, she states: "It is very personal. I find it difficult. Quite honestly. Difficult to discuss. I have thought about it. And it is still so close. Like something one has done oneself" ... Theodora continued to see Jack Frost's irreproachable façade, through which Frost himself had finally dared to pitch the stone" (98). Theodora clearly identifies with Frost, who served the bourgeoisie of Sydney: "In Theodora's world a wet finger could have pressed the cardboard church, and pressed, until the smoking sky showed through" (96). The stilted language in her response not only mirrors Frost's letter but also conveys her inability to articulate the obvious empathy she has for the pastrycook and the untenable position that he found himself in. Moreover, the incident neatly encapsulates Theodora's situation. She is unlike the other people who discuss it and "felt his cakes in their stomachs" and who, because "the Frost case was very close, ... felt sick." Theodora does understand his motives and probes more deeply into the incident than the superficial bourgeoisie of Sydney. She meditates on the philosophy of the drunk she encountered whilst walking "whose face was a green lozenge" and who advises her to abandon too much intellectualising because, as he says: "'Thinkin' leads to all this perpendicular emotion. You must listen to your belly and the soles of your feet.'" (90). Ultimately though Theodora's empathy does lead to "perpendicular emotion," but her DID eventually enables her to resolve both her inner turmoil and her notion of what constitutes her way of being and knowing in an inhospitable environment.

### **Lozenges: *The Aunt's Story* and *Voss***

In White's oeuvre lozenges are used to describe both people and situations. Not only do female characters literally suck lozenges, and the act itself is heavily symbolic, but upon closer analysis such an innocuous act projects several meanings. Indeed the word "lozenge"

has two meanings. Whilst stretching the metaphor somewhat, I argue that the multitudinous interpretations of the word “lozenge” invite the reader to undertake a closer analysis of the instances that it occurs in White’s oeuvre. Over the next few paragraphs I will analyse White’s use of the word “lozenge” in the two novels under consideration, and show its textual relevance regarding food and eating. A lozenge is of course, a small medicated sweet that is dissolved in the mouth to soothe an irritated throat. According to *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* the other meaning of “lozenge” is more relevant to the mathematical trope that White employs in *Voss* and in particular *The Aunt’s Story*. It is a four-sided planar figure with a diamond-like shape, a rhombus. This parallelogram with four equal sides, a diamond, where the diagonals are perpendicular to each other (i.e. oblique angles), is the Greek word for something that spins.<sup>77</sup> The word “rhombus” is Latin for flatfish and magician’s circle and is derived from the Greek *rhombos*, (rhombus). Finally, to close the circle of meanings, the word diamond is actually derived from an alteration of the Latin *adamās* which means adamant. The word “adamant” is from Middle English and means a hard precious stone. It is derived from Old French *adamaunt*, from the Latin *adamās*, *adamant-*, from Greek, unconquerable, hard steel, diamond.

In the following passage the Goodmans delineate their daughters:

‘Fanny is the *artistic* one, Mrs. Parrott,’ Mother said.

‘But Theodora,’ said Father, ‘has great understanding.’

‘Of course,’ said Mrs. Parrott, who looked frightened, as if it were the first time she had been given this to eat.

‘Theodora,’ she said, ‘is a good, bright girl. She is always very polite.’

Mrs. Parrott had a weak voice. To assist it she had to suck a lozenge, of which she kept a supply in a little silver box. Her bag was full of rich things, but she was a thin and sandy woman, pale, like her voice, and the pale things she said. (31)

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<sup>77</sup> “The word “rhomboid,” which means rhom-like, was commonly used in the 19th century for a parallelogram which was neither a rectangle nor a rhombus. Today it is more often used for a solid figure with six faces in which each face is a parallelogram and opposite faces in pairs lie in parallel planes. Some crystals are formed in 3D rhomboids. It is also sometimes called a rhombic prism. The term shows up frequently in science terminology referring to both its two and three dimensional meaning” (<http://www.pballew.net/rhomb.html>) - accessed 12.56 p.m. 10.11.05).

Theodora's lack of artistic endeavour is alluded to several times. Her creative imagination is in fact stultified by the social and cultural paradigms that restrict and inhibit her. Fanny has no reservations about her allotted future in the new millennium signalled in her "broidery":

She stitched a man in a cocked hat, and a train with smoke in its funnel, and a border of morning glories. And in the middle of it all she stitched:

FANNY GOODMAN

1899

'There, Theodora. Look at your sister,' said Mother. (30-1)

Fanny's artistic imagination complies with patriarchal paradigms and she is primed for home-making and motherhood, based on self-centredness. Theodora's "awkwardness" (13) elicits her inability to conform to societal norms and expectations, but she does not rebel: she endures.

Furthermore, with reference to the earlier quote, Mrs. Parrott's weak voice reiterates the attenuation of women's voices in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It evinces an image of Laura in the final scene of *Voss*, her power diminished not only through Voss' death but by her incapacity to convey her convictions:

'Voss did not die,' Miss Trevelyan replied. 'He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it.'

'Come, come. If we are not certain of the facts, how is it possible to give the answers?'

'The air will tell us,' Miss Trevelyan said.

By which time she had grown hoarse, and fell to wondering aloud whether she had brought her lozenges. (448)

Laura has become a parody of the "pale" Mrs. Parrott, whose name conveys a sense of the inane chatter she engages in. However, what Laura enunciates is enigmatic and the lack of closure that she conveys intuits a deeper meaning within the text. White has "written down" the legend of Voss and is clearly "troubled by it." But it is not the legend of Voss, or

Leichhardt, that necessarily troubles him; what does is the exploration motif that is at the heart of the novel. Food and quest is, of course, the overarching theme of this chapter. Here, the foodstuff under discussion is enigmatic and conveys the puzzling nature of exploration and humankind's eternal quest for more. Whatever that "more" may be resides in the paradoxical endings of White's novels. In *Voss* because of the cultural and societal strictures that Laura faced in mid-nineteenth century Australia she is unable to express herself other than vicariously through Voss: his death symbolises the death of her imaginative capacities. Yet paradoxically the imagery stimulates the reader's imaginative capabilities and opens up realms of meaning.

In a similar way Theodora's difficulty in expressing herself excites the reader's imagination. Although Theodora is bound by her mother, whom she clearly despises, the fact that she did not reveal her final encounter with Pearl to her mother "because it was far too secret" (AS 128) is significant. During this encounter Theodora finally discovers the truth of the "immense" incident in the dining-room that resulted in Pearl's dismissal. After she has perjured herself:

At this point, Theodora sometimes said, I should begin to read Gibbon, or find religion, instead of speaking to myself in my own room. But words, whether written or spoken, were at most frail slat bridges over chasms, and Mrs. Goodman had never encouraged religion, as she herself was God. So it will not be by these means, Theodora said, that the great monster Self will be destroyed, and that desirable state achieved, which resembles, one would imagine, nothing more than air or water. She did not doubt that the years would contribute, rubbing and extracting, but never enough. Her body still clanged and rang when the voice struck.

'Theo-dor-a!' (128)

Thus both quotes show how Theodora and Laura have an affinity with the natural elements of "air or water" and, as Brady points out: "White's novels work towards that wisdom Simone Weil speaks of, 'of becoming master of myself and knowing that I am not God'" (qtd. by Brady 1978, 109). Theodora is deprived of that denial of "greedy subjectivity" for

as long as she must interact with other humans who distract and restrict her purpose (Walsh 1977, 24). As Walsh points out in the same article, “human beings crave to know, to include and ingest” (24), but Theodora lives her life according to a pre-determined pattern in much the same way as Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*.

Theodora’s recollections of people and situations rely on objects that are often associated, although somewhat tenuously, with food. For example, when Fanny and Theodora arrive at Spofforths’ school and encounter their roommate:

It was Grace Parrott, who was a familiar face at least. Theodora remembered her mother’s handbag, and the lozenges in the little box that came to Mrs. Parrott’s rescue when her pale voice could not find words. And now Grace Parrott was a copper-coloured lozenge which they seized with relief on the landing at Spofforths’ and were comforted. (48)

So the fragmentation of the imagery and the recurring food symbols expose Theodora’s unconscious processes, but clearly in the opening “Meroë” section she is not yet able to integrate them into her own consciousness. Eventually, however, she is able, not through domesticity, which is parodied in “Holstius,” but through an acceptance of her state of mind and being, to inscribe her meaning onto the “pastry board” flatness of the quotidian (29). It is through the death of her mother that Theodora is able to achieve “an absolute state of solitude” (Poulet 159). Although that solitariness results in DID, in undergoing such tribulations Theodora comes to transcend the quotidian and consolidate the many dilemmas that she has confronted in her life.

### **Conclusion:**

To maintain the food theme, Chapter One has essentially formed a pastry base for further discussion about food in the novels of Stead, White and Astley. The argument has shown how food and quest are firmly linked in *For Love Alone*, *The Aunt’s Story* and *A Fringe of Leaves*. The food imagery in these novels reveals the protagonists’ innermost nadirs, faced



in their individual quests for a sense of understanding the self. Furthermore, food symbolism reveals these characters' emotional worlds through their acquaintance with the ancillary characters who inhabit the physical world that surrounds them. The disorder(s) that result from the abuttal of the imaginary with the real offer(s) a resolution to the traumas encountered by the protagonists. Food and its variable properties – aesthetic, necessary, existing in and out of the corporeal, its transformative stages from living to rotting – have all contributed to the ambiguously complex structure of the texts under discussion. As I will continue to assert, however, not all is pessimistic. The sense of order[ing] achieved through disturbance and disorder is one that I argue is achievable through a close analysis of the representation of food. In this chapter I have shown how food is closely related to quest. The following chapter examines how, in the central section of *The Aunt's Story*, a hermeneutic analysis of symbolic food and its consumption continues the quest for a deeper knowledge of the complexities of the human condition.

## CHAPTER TWO: FOOD AND THE MIND: *The Aunt's Story*

*“There is no lifeline to other lives. I shall go, said Theodora, I have already gone. The simplicity of what ultimately happens hollowed her out. She was part of a surprising world in which hands, for reasons no longer obvious, had put tables and chairs” (AS 132).*

### JARDIN EXOTIQUE

In her critical essay, “Odyssey of a Spinster: A Study of *the Aunt's Story*,” Thelma Herring highlights suffering in a quest for knowledge as a theme of the novel, and sets it in context with White’s earlier novels, in particular *Happy Valley* (1939) and *The Living and the Dead* (1941). As she points out, “[a]dverse criticism has tended to concentrate on Part Two; Vincent Buckley for instance has applied the phrase ‘a soft cocoon of imprecision’ to the prose here” (83). Herring admits that the central section of *The Aunt's Story* is difficult. Like other critics she suggests that in “Jardin Exotique” Theodora builds fantasies of the past through the characters she encounters in the Hôtel du Midi.<sup>1</sup> In his biography of White David Marr cites James Stern, the *New York Times* book reviewer who, “found the novel brilliant, original, highly intelligent, gay, witty, tragic, profound.” However Stern went on to assert that Theodora Goodman’s story is “hard to read” and suggests that good literature is like good wine, it needs to be savoured slowly (qtd in Marr 1991, 254). Likewise Herring’s essay concludes by asserting that “*The Aunt's Story* asks careful reading; that it deserves it is the proof of its quality” (84). This longer section of my thesis will honour that assertion and offer a new reading of what is unequivocally one of White’s most complex and experimental novels.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Marjorie Barnard, “The Four Novels of Patrick White,” *Meanjin* 15.2 (June 1956): 156-70 and A.P. Riemer, “Back to the Abyss: Patrick White’s Early Novel,” *Southerly* 47 (1987): 347-69: “It is impossible not to be struck by the gusto and verve with which he brings off this complicated literary feat” (366).

J.F. Burrows refers to the central phase of *The Aunt's Story* as Theodora's "fugue-life" where she projects herself into the lives of the characters she encounters in the Hôtel du Midi. He does not view these lives as "retreats from 'reality'" (90). Whilst concurring with Burrows' interpretation of Theodora's "fugue-life" I intend to explore it as a "fugue state"; that is, from a psychoanalytical standpoint rather than in the musical sense, and contend that her condition is in effect a "retreat from 'reality.'" To elaborate: fugue has two meanings: a musical form in which a theme is first stated, then repeated and varied with accompanying contrapuntal lines; and, a disordered state of mind, in which somebody typically wanders from home and experiences a loss of memory relating only to the previous, rejected, environment. Marjorie Barnard refers to the characters in the Hôtel du Midi as being "nearer to the figments of a disordered imagination than to flesh and blood" (163) and the novel as "overstuffed psychologically" (165). Likewise, Bulman-May alludes to Theodora's condition as "resembling schizophrenia" but does not elaborate on the psychological implications (43). Whilst acknowledging that a psychoanalytical reading of "Jardin Exotique" could be construed as antithetical to what constitutes artistic creation, I aim to elucidate that it is the patriarchal values inherent within a confined Sydney society that ultimately affect Theodora's state of mind.

The epigraph to this section of my thesis, taken from the conclusion to "Meroë," reflects the microcosm that is Theodora's mind. It encapsulates my theory that the phantasmagoric characters Theodora meets in the Hôtel du Midi are figments of her imagination, an artistic construct subconsciously produced in order to defer confronting challenging situations and notions. These sub-conscious character constructs are referred to as "dissociative alters" by clinical psychologists. In applying the DID diagnostic criteria as a methodological approach I will show how such a unique analysis of the text is feasible. Whilst acknowledging that categorising this flight of imagination as a disorder is

problematic, the following discussion demonstrates that identifying Theodora's condition as exhibiting symptoms of DID provides a decisive link to the food imagery under interrogation.

Indeed the confusion of "the surprising world" (AS 132) in which she finds herself succinctly portends her "fugue state" at the commencement of "Jardin Exotique." Moreover, the confusion of tenses in the epigraph anticipates Theodora's ultimate rejection of her alters and her resultant recovery from DID. Clearly words and linguistic constructs are a focus of this study. I contend that it is impossible to produce a linear text on the basis of a non-linear text. Thus the fragmentary nature of "Jardin Exotique" invites a somewhat fragmentary analysis. Indeed White's epigraph to "Jardin Exotique," taken from Henry Miller, signifies the disconnected text:

Henceforward we walk split into myriad fragments, like an insect with a hundred feet, a centipede with soft-stirring feet that drinks in the atmosphere; we walk with sensitive filaments that drink avidly of past and future, and all things melt into music and sorrow; we walk against a united world, asserting our dividedness. All things, as we walk, splitting with us into a myriad iridescent fragments. The great fragmentation of maturity. (133)

In the following discussion I argue that the fragmentary nature of *The Aunt's Story* reflects Theodora's mind, and that the inherent food symbolism offers a method to analyse and define her condition.

## **Dissociative Identity Disorder**

As outlined earlier, since its inception as a diagnostically identifiable disorder, DID has courted controversy. In emphasising the futility of the debate surrounding what is real and not real in Western society, Ivan Leudar and Wes Sharrock state: "The claim that 'reality is a social construct' may, then, provide no more than a license to engage in the study of the assorted practices whereby persons determine the reality or otherwise of specific

phenomena” (456). They go on to assert that the arguments surrounding psychiatric assessment, both for and against, and its relations to the social construction of natural phenomena are in themselves “ontologically and epistemologically innocuous” (456). They conclude: “all the paper expended on arguments over these matters might prove to involve much ado about not very much” (456). Rather, as Jane Adamson asserts, I will contend that in assessing trauma it is important to recognise that all humans “experience events differently, at different intensities, and react in very different ways (some far more adversely than others, for example)” (106). So although an original trauma has some bearing on an individual’s development, more important is “the idiosyncratic way the individual has reacted to traumatic stimuli and continues to react” (106). In effect, individuals construct their own realities where the intensity of emotional impact develops at varying rates.

Clearly, Theodora’s cumulative experiences of death, culminating in the liberating death of her mother, continue to affect her behaviour even in her alleged freedom. The opening paragraph of “Jardin Exotique” establishes a psychological framework, where the “places to which apparently she had been,” taken in context with her almost hallucinatory recollections, not only establish the Gothic-like nature of the central segment of *The Aunt’s Story*, but also conceptualise the foundation for a psychological interpretation of Theodora’s state of mind:

Theodora looked at her labels, at all those places to which apparently she had been. In all those places, she realised, people were behaving still, opening umbrellas, switching off the light, singing Wagner, kissing, looking out of open windows for something they had not yet discovered, buying a ticket for the metro, eating salted almonds and feeling a thirst. But now that she sat in the hall of the Hotel du Midi and waited, none of those acts was what one would call relevant, if it ever had been. She touched the old dark ugly furniture that had a dark and lingering smell of olives, the same sombre glare. There is perhaps no more complete a reality than a chair and a table. Still, there will always also be people, Theodora Goodman said, and she continued to wait with something of the superior acceptance of mahogany for fresh acts. (135)

In her emotional detachment Theodora shows symptoms of a dissociative fugue, the aetiology of which is a desire to eradicate agonising emotional incidents by literally withdrawing from the site of the experience. Here the term “fugue” refers to the fact that the sufferer has travelled away from home without any clear memory of her previous identity. Although sufferers of fugue-states often take on new identities, these are not as pronounced as those of DID sufferers (Sadock and Sadock 679). Theodora too has “not yet discovered” and still thirsts for a revelatory experience that may or may not inform her sense of being and knowing in an increasingly alien world. Although she has deliberately forsaken “the tenets of femininity,” throughout her life she has suffered as a result (Jill Matthews 201). The depth of the associated trauma and its many manifestations are explored in the following.

In their synopsis of psychiatric disorders Sadock and Sadock assert that the “differential diagnosis” for DID “includes two other dissociative disorders, dissociative amnesia and dissociative fugue.” DID, however, is an extension of those disorders in that the shifts in identity are more pronounced and show awareness of the original identity (683). Thus I will contend that the Hôtel du Midi is the locus for the transitional state that Theodora has to endure in order to achieve her as yet unidentifiable objective. She is caught in the flux between latent and manifest memory. Her mounting anxiety, that she has hitherto suppressed, is palpable. As Brenner observed in one of his DID case studies: “Over time, it became clearer that she would ‘switch’ spontaneously as a result of anxiety in the sessions. This observation supported my contention that dissociation could change in its function from a response to external trauma to a defensive operation in response to anxiety from intrapsychic” (Brenner 1999, 360). Such a paradigm exposes Theodora’s inability to deal with her past traumas. It highlights the way in which her current anxieties mobilise her dissociative alters and thus enable the reader to identify those past experiences. Much like a

psychotherapist, the reader is able to reconstruct Theodora's past, from which she distances herself through the construction of her alters. Thereby the reader can establish "contact with those heretofore inaccessible reaches of her shattered psyche" (Brenner 1999, 360):

Somewhere, Theodora remembered, there would also be the *jardin exotique*. She considered its possibility, smiling for her own weakness. ... Somewhere at the back, unsuspected, without the assistance of the management's brochure, fantastic forms were aping the gestures of tree and flower. Theodora listened to the silence, to hear it sawn at by the teeth of the *jardin exotique*, but instead feet began to come down the passage. (136)

The possibility of peaceful acceptance is besieged by Theodora's "shattered psyche," metaphorically encapsulated in the sawing "teeth of the *jardin exotique*." In itself this is an all-encompassing symbol, both as the central episode of the novel and as central to Theodora's inner contemplation. Combined with the consuming metaphor of teeth and jaws, which is oft repeated, the symbolic relevance is substantiated even further. For example, Theodora, "[e]ncouraged by the thought of the garden, ... could not escape too soon from the closed room, retreating from the jaws of roses, avoiding the brown door, of which the brass teeth bristled to consume the last shreds of personality, when already she was stripped enough" (138-9). I contend that the "closed room" is an analepsis for the "thin house" where she lived with her mother who literally stripped Theodora's identity (92). Paradoxically, it is also proleptic for the "thin house ... [that was] like a lantern" (274) in which she encounters the enigmatic Holstius.

In his *Casebook of Psychological Disorders*, Steven Schwartzberg theorises that DID develops in childhood as a means of coping with repeated abuse, whether mental or physical, where the abused child develops the ability to enter into a dissociative state. In so doing other identities are created over a gradual period of time, "rather than a sudden or dramatic transformation in identity and consciousness" (5-6). Thus, the events in "Jardin Exotique" are both literally and metaphorically the first stage of Theodora's reclaiming her

identity from the dissociative states she has unwittingly created. Her multifaceted flights from reality have paradoxically created a situation in which she is embroiled in the necessity for yet another flight. This time, however, her escape will be enacted through her alters. In the following paragraphs I will show more distinctly how the nexus of characters from “Meroë” to those in “Jardin Exotique,” in other words the personalities created through the sublimation of Theodora’s traumas, is defined through food. Often the relationship between the characters and food is relevant to Theodora’s traumas, where the horrors she experienced have been transmuted into DID.

Firstly, to situate the text more graphically from my theoretical perspective, it is necessary to define the Hôtel du Midi in context. As with the whole of this central episode of *The Aunt’s Story* all is not as it appears. In fact, it is only after several readings from a psychological perspective that it becomes apparent that the Hôtel du Midi is an institution for the mentally disturbed. This conceit is substantiated etymologically if one considers that “hotel” is from Latin *hospes* (host), which is also the etymological root for hospital. Because Monsieur Durand mentions both Mrs. Rapallo and General Sokolnikov to Theodora in their initial encounter, it could be argued that they are real in terms of White’s fiction. However, I will contend that the surreal, fragmentary text supports the hypothesis that they are in fact imaginary and that Monsieur Durand is a vehicle for Theodora to enter into her alters: he “would persuade that things exist” (136). The dualistic nature of Monsieur Durand as imperative “persuade[r]” and as the author of the *jardin exotique* blurb nevertheless poses a conundrum. He represents the institutionalised conformity that the Surrealist art movement vehemently opposed, but he is also creator of the elaborately written *jardin exotique*. Fundamental to solving the conundrum is to explore those who *are* as opposed to those who are *represented*.



By exploring what or who could be constituted as real and determining what or who is imaginary, I aim to unravel some of the enigmas of “Jardin Exotique.” These have been alluded to in critical literature previously, but an in-depth analysis has largely been avoided. At the beginning of this paradoxical central section of *The Aunt’s Story* the General and Mrs. Rapallo – Theodora’s dominant alter – are already morphing into existence as alters. Theodora “was afraid that she might meet too soon, before she had washed her hands, on the stairs, for instance, Mrs. Rapallo, on whose face she had not yet decided, but it wore a purple bloom” (136). Monsieur Durand, however, as mediator is clearly a *real* character in White’s fiction.

As Sadock and Sadock have noted, DID patients’ transition from one alter to another can be “sudden and dramatic.” They go on to write:

During each personality state, patients generally are amnesic about other states and the events that took place when another personality was dominant. Sometimes, however, one personality state is not bound by such amnesia and retains complete awareness of the existence, qualities, and activities of the other personalities. (682)

I contend that the General and Mrs. Rapallo are two alters of Theodora whose characteristics follow such a paradigm. Their characterisation also highlights the fact that: “[i]n classic cases, each personality has a fully integrated, highly complex set of associated memories and characteristic attitudes, personal relationships, and behaviour patterns. Most often the personalities have proper names; occasionally, one or more is given the name of its function – for example, the protector” (Sadock and Sadock 682). The General then, is quite literally an amalgamation, or more poignantly a *generalisation*, of the male characters from Meroë. However, as already enunciated, everything in “Jardin Exotique” is not as it seems, since textually there is a tension between articulation and incomprehensibility.

Indeed, it is in “Jardin Exotique” that Theodora’s other alters come into her psychic awareness. For example, when Katina enters her psychic consciousness the reference to her

“parents,” whose motives she does not “understand, without faces,” points to the fact that “[t]ruth is often ungrateful” (AS 141). Theodora had earlier been considering her relations and her attempts to recall their “features.” This “did give some indication of continuity, of being. But even though more voluble, they were hardly more explanatory than the darning egg or moist sponge with which she invested each new room” (138). Although at this juncture Theodora regrets “the age of symbols” she is prepared to invest emotion in “objects” (138). Poignantly, White emphasises the features that characterise Theodora’s relations. As discussed earlier these are largely identifiable by food. More significantly even the “objects” – a “darning *egg* [and a] moist *sponge* (emphasis mine)” – with which Theodora establishes her identity in her room are defined by food. Although such links may appear tenuous, when taken as a whole they add up to a symbolic strength.

So in establishing the Hôtel du Midi as a hospice, the *jardin exotique* becomes the hospital grounds, “very pure and still,” where “the abstracted forms ... could only be equalled by silences. The garden was completely static, rigid, the equation of a garden. Slugs linked its symbols with ribbons of silver” (139). Theodora is “afraid [that] she had returned to where she had begun,” a sentiment reminiscent of T.S. Eliot’s “In my beginning is my end” (15). This is derived from Mary Queen of Scots’ motto, *En ma fin git mon commencement*, (“In my end is my beginning”), embroidered with an emblem of her mother, Mary Guise, and quoted in a letter from William Drummond of Hawthornden to Ben Jonson in 1619 (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 500).<sup>2</sup> Circularity is endemic to both statements, yet their point of departure is vastly different. Theodora is afraid to confront either a beginning or an end, and that is her dilemma in “Jardin Exotique”:

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<sup>2</sup> Veronica Brady discusses the concepts of heroism and circularity in “In My End is My Beginning: Laura as Heroine of *Voss*.” *Southerly* 35.1 (Mar. 1975): 16-32. She purports that *Voss* is a tragic, nihilistic character and the true element of quest in the novel is reached by Laura, whose position at the commencement and dénouement of the novel is paramount to a positive reading, where she survives in a world of masculine absolutes.

Only in the *jardin exotique*, because silence had been intensified, and extraneous objects considerably reduced, thoughts would fall more loudly, and the soul, left with little to hide behind, must forsake its queer opaque manner of life and come out into the open. If, of course, the soul ventured in. Theodora found her bench. (140)

Without the distractions of “extraneous objects” and immersed in the silence of the hospital grounds, Theodora becomes more introspective. A feature of DID is for the sufferer to become “withdrawn [and] silent,” after which he or she emerges as a different persona, in an episode of dissociation (Schwartzberg 81). Although Theodora craves tactile human interaction, this is denied her (Driesen 83-4). However, her other senses are extremely heightened, in particular her aural senses.

To revert to Katina who wants to return home, before she has “quite forgotten. There was an earthquake, do you remember? And we ran and lay on the beach. There was a black island that shook” (AS 142). Katina, and I must keep alluding to her status as alter, wants to escape from the confines of Theodora’s parallel consciousness where the liminal space of the littoral echoes Theodora’s own situation in the Hôtel du Midi. She “trembled for the black island ... The earth was a capsule waiting for some gigantic event to swallow it down. Theodora looked at the island and waited for it to move” (142). She is, quite literally, waiting for the earth to move but metaphorically it, the “earth [as] a capsule,” conveys the anodyne aspects of the hospice. Katina, as alter, prefigures her own disintegration: “‘If we are ever to die,’ Katina said, ‘I think it will be an island, in which there are many pines, and we shall make a long picnic in a little cart, to the Temple of Athena, and the water will be cold, cold, amongst the stones’” (144). The Temple of Athena is the Parthenon, and thus highlights Theodora’s virginity; *parthenos* is Greek for virgin. The site for the proposed picnic also offers a clue to the reader in that it augments the parthenogenesis concept discussed in Chapter One. If one recalls, that discussion highlighted Mrs. Goodman’s reluctance to acknowledge Pearl’s pregnancy; in disavowing

Pearl's state she was able to distance herself from the knowledge that Mr. Goodman was the father. Furthermore, the picnic is proleptic for the event that catalyses Theodora's condition. However, at this juncture the notion of a non-fertilizing principle invites an investigation of Theodora's sexuality and how it is played out through her alters.

Later, the General establishes a sexually ambiguous relationship with Katina in the "little transparent wintergarden" (220). In this instance Theodora is depicted as a chair and she "waited to be pushed around" (216), after which Katina emerges. The repetition of the phrase "waited to be pushed around" is then followed by the emergence of the General. The General refers to Katina as "dabchick," "moorhen" (217) and "popinjay" (218). The imbrication of the bird references echoes Mrs. Parrott from "Meroë," a real character, as well as Mrs. Rapallo as alter who is consistently aligned with bird imagery. What is particularly disturbing about this scene, however, is the tension that Theodora undergoes in experiencing the encounter between her alters. An incestuous element pervades the narrative, although of course the General and Katina are not related. There is no evidence of an incestuous encounter for Theodora in her *real* life, but she was clearly afraid of any form of sexual interaction.

As Brenner concludes in his essay on the characterological aspects of DID:

An organising influence which contributes to seemingly separate identities is that of perverse sexuality. It appears that a number of dissociated sexual pathways may be followed in the same individual, which encapsulate aggression, childhood trauma, anxiety, and a sense of self. When this exceedingly complex psychic structure is successful, it may then free up some ego to proceed with aspects of healthy development." (1996,165)

Fundamentally, Brenner forms a "therapeutic alliance" with a patient where the alters become involved in the therapeutic process. Theodora facilitates a similar process by "encapsulating and disowning the negative aspects" of her own character. Her aptitude for

empathy and abstract thinking, which has already been established, “might be explained by this mechanism” (Brenner 163).

To conceptualise this theory in context with the food symbolism it is necessary to invoke White’s obsession with the *Monstera deliciosa* in his novels. As the General explains to Katina in “the little transparent wintergarden” (AS 220), the fruit of the *Monstera deliciosa* can only be eaten when it is “black, and one would say, almost putrid” (218). The observation denotes a sense of moral decay. That its description is immediately followed by the General giving Katina a box of marshmallows, “a prize for prettiness,” further emphasises the lasciviousness of the General’s advances upon Katina. She recalls receiving the same gift from her parents, which she, “ate till [she] was sick,” perversely finding the event “quite lovely” (219). However, Katina rejoices in the “ridiculousness” of their encounter and proposes to “call [the General] my *Monstera deliciosa*. But you are not yet putrid enough” (219). Theodora felt that “they were all three considerably exposed” (220). She has indeed exposed her innermost fear of perverse sexuality through the play of her alters.

In order to contextualise the perverse sexuality of Theodora’s alters, it is necessary to re-invoke an incident from her childhood. The emergence of the ambiguous sexual encounter among her alters could be a manifestation of her real-life encounter with The Man who was Given his Dinner, who claimed:

‘You’ll see a lot of funny things, Theodora Goodman. You’ll see them because you’ve eyes to see. And they’ll break you. But perhaps you’ll survive. No girl that was thrown down by lightning on her twelfth birthday, and then got up again, is going to be swallowed easy by rivers of fire.’  
And now Theodora began to think that perhaps the man was a little bit mad, but she loved him for his madness even, for it made her warm. (45)

The Man’s proleptic speech incorporates many recurring notions: Theodora’s ability “to see” and the fact that what she sees will “break” her; the lightning incident as a catalyst for

her DID; and embedded in the lightning, again etymologically speaking, the notion of éclair, a tenuous link with that other significant event, the pastrycook incident. However, on her twelfth birthday Theodora was as hollow as choux pastry and had yet to “see a lot of funny things.” The pathetic fallacy of “swallowed easy by rivers of fire” prefigures the destruction by fire and Theodora’s escape from her alters at her temporary hospice, the Hôtel du Midi.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, it is probably no coincidence that the “nameless” man predicts Theodora’s mental condition. It is also worthwhile noting that the analogy between “to be swallowed easy by rivers of fire” and the volcanic fires vignette support the hypothesis that DID suffers resurrect incidents from their childhood that have been suppressed through the emergence of the dissociated alter. Theodora does have “eyes to see” but what she sees effectively breaks her. She survives, however, by creating parallel “eyes” in order to sublimate her trauma. Indeed, the motif of eyes links Theodora with her alters, for example: “[Theodora’s and Katina’s] eyes were interchangeable, like two distant, unrelated lives mingling for a moment in sleep” (142) and “their hearts beat openly and together” (144); the “eyes of several ladies” (150), which denote both Katina and Ludmilla; the General, “their common eye, measuring the inches over many years. More than this. Without stethoscope she heard the heart muttering and ticking under scruffy serge. For the General was a good deal spotted by gravy and *béchamel*” (171); and the “floating in Mrs. Rapallo’s eyes” (242). As can be perceived from these quotes, the eyes are interconnected with the heart, the seat of emotion.

Following the imaginary volcanic eruption the recurring trope of doors is evoked: “We like to imagine doors that we can shut, because we are afraid of space, decided

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<sup>3</sup> According to Lévi-Strauss the Pueblo Indians believed that one struck by lightning “entered into conjunction with celestial fire” (*The Raw and the Cooked* 337), curative treatment for which involved raw food.

Theodora” (145). The epiphany that she experiences when she recognises that she must not be “afraid of space” reflects her willingness to explore hitherto repressed memories. As in fantasy narratives such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, doors symbolise escape into a fantasy world, a flight into the imagination. Later, upon the arrival of Mrs. Rapallo, “now the doors had begun to be thrown open, from some distance, you could hear, many doors.” This indicates the emergence of Theodora’s alters (154). However, earlier Huntly Clarkson was unable to penetrate Theodora’s psychic imagination: “[s]he closed doors, and he was left standing on his handsome mahogany interior, which was external, fatally external, outside Theodora Goodman’s closed door” (108). And at the Easter Agricultural Show, when Theodora shot the clay ducks “as if each time a secret life was shattered” and “[t]hey all gathered, watched, spoke, but they were speaking now at a door that had closed tight ... It was something mysterious, shameful and grotesque” (119). Significantly though, as Katina, Theodora “remember[s] the revolving doors of many-starred hotels” (251), even though as herself Theodora appears unable to remember “all those places to which apparently she had been” (135).

A parallel to White’s obsession with doors is the experimentalist artist Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant donnés: 1. La Chute d’eau/ 2. Le Gaz d’éclairage* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall/ 2. The Illuminating Gas*), the construction of which took twenty years. This piece consists of a door with a peep-hole through which a diorama is viewed. In his comprehensive analysis of Duchamp’s work, Arturo Schwarz writes that “[t]here is no short cut to its [the beauty and complexity of this work] enjoyment. The shock of discovering the piece cannot be captured by a photo or a description. Viewing the item is indeed a unique and untranslatable experience” (557). Similarly, White offers a peephole through the door of Theodora’s parallel consciousness and at times his bold written experiment is barely translatable.

## DINING ROOM DELUSIONS

### The Reality and Performance of Food

The peephole to the dining room at the Hôtel du Midi offers an approach to the performative aspects of food and its consumption and how it relates to Theodora's DID. Elaine Martin states that the representation of food has "undercut traditional thinking about genres ... [and] also provided new challenges to the reality vs. performance dichotomy (reality/fiction, reality/art). Eating includes the *performance of eating*, and cooking includes *the performance of cooking*; as such both are integral parts of how food constitutes identity" (39). Using the representation of food as a springboard to analysing fiction creates a unique investigative tool to probe into the dichotomies of reality/fiction and reality/art. Essentially the performative aspects of the tableau that is "Jardin Exotique" permit the reader to identify and meld those dichotomies and to gain an insight into Theodora's state of mind.

The dining room at the Hôtel du Midi is multi-signified. It is the literal site for the luncheon that reveals the emergence of Theodora's alters. Thus it connotes the reality element of the dichotomy, reality/performance. Yet I contend that the interior of the dining room is also a metaphor for Theodora's mental processes. Thus, paradoxically it denotes the performative aspects of the luncheon vignette. All the imaginative encounters to be discussed in "Dining Room Delusions" are envisioned at the luncheon. Indeed, many of the interactions with Theodora's alters evoke the *real* encounters that she faced in "Meroë," thereby exposing the ersatz elements of her alters, and the inextricable link between food and performance.



Martin draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the performative elements of eating and how it represents "gender, social class, and self-identity" (39). There is no denying that "the crudely material reality of the act of eating" is largely absent from "Jardin Exotique." However, the performative aspects of food and eating are symbolically relevant and form a narrative framework to the construction and final destruction of Theodora's alters. Textually, "Jardin Exotique" shifts from "substance and function" to "form and manner" and thus refutes "reality" (Finkelstein 1998, 203 qtd. in Martin 39).

The illusory aspects of "Jardin Exotique" are elicited frequently in the anfractuous prose. Yet in the dining room vignette the performative traits of the General are alluded to but not enacted. He is of course an illusion in the fiction of "Jardin Exotique," but the reality/performance dichotomy is evoked through his reluctance to acknowledge his emotional traumas. He articulates that he is "upset, ... [with] either ... the indigestion, or ..." (AS 153). The unarticulated other is revealed through Theodora's realisation that, "soon ... he would unlock his solitude. Soon he would not bear the loneliness. He would look out" (153). Clearly, the General's physical wellbeing is threatened by his emotions. However, he goes on to assert that it is indigestion that is causing him pain. Mademoiselle Bloch – along with her alter – suggests remedies for his condition, to which the General "peevisly" responds, "I shall try nothing ... And if that woman [Mrs. Rapallo] is a countess I am a cook" (153). In this way Theodora, through her alter the General, re-enacts the stultification of her emotions in response to the traumas she endured in childhood and early adulthood.

To move briefly from the dining room in order to connect the non-performative cook: later, after Theodora has witnessed Lieselotte destroying her "canvases," Theodora retires to the garden where she encounters the General. He refers to Lieselotte as a "bitch" and asserts:

'Her *pictures*, did you say?' said Sokolnikov. 'She is mad.'  
But Theodora had now found the answer.  
'Only chairs and tables,' she said, 'are sane.'  
'She is no more an artist than I am a cook,' the General said. (168)

This passage links the performative aspects of cooking with the art side of the dichotomy reality/art that Martin refers to. These techniques function to question what constitutes reality, especially when that *reality* is a fictional construct. That slippage of real/unreal re-emphasises the fragmentary nature of both the text and Theodora's state of mind and the complexities that lie therein.

Likewise, the emphasis on the surface imagery in the following quote evinces the depth of both Theodora's psyche and of the text itself:

Then they began again to sit in the silences of their separate tables, between which *le petit* spun his own resentful, wavy pattern. Many unfinished situations complicated the surface of the dining room, or lay folded, passive, and half recognised amongst the table napkins. They had not yet given Theodora a big white envelope for her napkin, so that for the present she could remain detached, count the fishbones and the sighs of other people. (149)

That aura of silence and separateness also signals the impending emergence of an alter or alters. Indeed, in "Meroë" silence for Theodora was invariably connected with an act of regret, for example, when she shot the rabbit after Frank had missed: "[t]here was no subtraction from the scrambling of the rabbit scuts" (69). Following Theodora's success, "[t]he silence trembled, ticked, ran. It had begun again" (69). Theodora deliberately missed her subsequent shots: "[s]he did not altogether like her power. So she listened to his breathing dominate her silence, and this was better" (70). Regrettably, an enduring Victorian prescription for femininity is passivity. Theodora's attempts to assert her power are subsumed in the existence of Frank, whose "breathing dominate[d] her silence." That she finds "this ... better" highlights her ability to compartmentalise her emotions and adds

credence to my contention that these formative incidents are re-evoked in her dining room delusions.

As I have already maintained, the interior of the dining room at the Hôtel du Midi is metaphor for Theodora's mental processes. Moreover, the luncheon meal is fraught with allusion. As Visser points out: "A meal is an artistic social construct, ordering the foodstuffs which comprise it into a complex dramatic whole, as a play organises actions and words into component parts. ... However humble it may be, a meal has a definite plot, the intention of which is to intrigue, stimulate, and satisfy" (qtd. in Telfer 2002, 22). The drama that is enacted in this vignette, however, is multi-illusional. Essentially it is intuitive rather than cerebral. Furthermore, the fact that the meal is not a cohesive "dramatic whole" implies a sense of disintegration. In other words, that each diner sits either alone or with one other person implies separateness that disrupts the whole.

I have used this perception of separateness as a method to determine which character is real within White's fictional representation. For example, the Demoiselles Bloch dine together, but I contend that "they" are in fact one person only: another inmate of the hospice. This theory is substantiated by the vocabulary and imagery used in their introduction where the convoluted mathematics categorically states that two is one:

'My name is Bloch,' said the pince-nez. 'And this is my sister Berthe. It is not necessary for me to explain that we are twins.'

It was not. You saw, now, the one was two. But in reverse. It was obvious, subtract one from two and the answer would be nought. (146)

Indeed, following the Demoiselles Bloch into the dining room, "Theodora felt in her the opening of many old wounds" (148), a phrase which alludes to her emerging condition. Likewise, Miss Grigg dines with Katina, established above as an alter, and I maintain that Miss Grigg is in fact real and is one of the medical staff of the hospice. *Le petit* the waiter and Henriette the cook are characters essential to the basic functioning of the dining room

at the Hôtel du Midi hospice. They are also key to the “reality” elements of this surreal central section of the novel.

In order to validate this claim further, it is necessary to return to the significance of the number three. To reiterate: the number three is paradoxical. It symbolises unity – heaven, earth, humanity; mother, father, child; body soul and spirit – yet in White’s oeuvre the number more often symbolises disunity. Three represents fragmentation and discordance between the three elements that supposedly convey unity: in other words a scission. In the passage below Henriette as cook calculates the number of diners in the *salle à manger*: three – Theodora, Mademoiselle Bloch and Miss Grigg:

‘*Un, deux, trrrr-ois,*’ called Henriette, the leather voice through the hatch.

It appeared that she would cry soon. Her tongue had swelled.

‘*Il n’y a pas de pâté de fois gras de Strasbourg?*’ asked the General.

‘*Non, je vous dis, il n’y en a pas. In n’y en a jamais. Qu’est-ce que vous voulez? A prix fixe!*’

‘*Merde!*’ said the General.

‘I would like to remind you, General Sokolnikov, that there are ladies present,’ said the square woman with the girl.

‘*Merde, merde, et mille fois merde!*’ said the General. ‘Shame on Miss Grigg. A lady is a woman’s *pis aller*.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ said the square woman. ‘But there are some things that are not nice.’

(148-49)

Extending the metaphor of numbers, it is worthwhile to consider the General’s repetition of “*merde*.” Taken in context, that is examining the symbolic relevance of pastry, it is within the realms of the text to summon another pastry, mille-feuille, which is phonetically not dissimilar to “mille fois”: mille feuille is a dessert or pastry consisting of several layers of puff pastry with a filling of cream and fruit preserves, topped with confectioners’ sugar or frosting. The pastrycook incident thus pervades Theodora’s subconscious, and the many references in *The Aunt’s Story* to pastry in its various guises bear a symbolic relevance to Theodora’s state of mind, the uncertainty of which is enunciated shortly afterwards by Miss Grigg: “you never knew with pastry, it was always something in disguise” (153). At the

risk of employing a logocentric methodology, words and their meanings *are* important. However, in refuting the charge of logocentrism words and meanings are clearly important to White, as acknowledged author, too.

Indeed, the vitriolic altercation between the General, who one must remember is Theodora's alter, and Miss Grigg, who is a real character, further highlights Theodora's confusion about her sexuality and androgynous appearance, especially if one considers the following:

'Even my sister, a reasonable soul, and a spinster, whom I respected, God knows,' sighed the General, 'even my sister Ludmilla was not a lady. She took snuff, and spat in the corners and wore boots like a Cossack under her long skirts.'

Theodora smiled. Because the General was expecting it. And because her boots rang hollow on the cold yellow grass, and in her armpit she felt the firmness of her little rifle.

'But not all reasonable,' the General said. 'Religious too. She went on a pilgrimage to Kiev. She drank like a man. She said that it brought her face to face with God.'

'Eat your lunch, Katina,' said the square woman to the girl. (149)

Theodora's alters seem to be challenging her right to exist in a culture that does not tolerate androgynous, non-fertile women. She has dissociated herself from earlier traumatic situations that arose from her inability to conform to the androcentric paradigms of mid-twentieth-century Australia. Not only has she been compelled to leave Australia so as to escape that androcentric paradigm, ultimately she is unable to situate herself in any Western society that promotes and adheres to such restrictive mores. The alter Ludmilla manifests as a result of Theodora's attempt to position herself, but God is not *her* solution. In this way the text invokes a possible spiritual reading but does not necessarily endorse it.

What the text does endorse is the fragmentary and confusing representation of past, present and future in the dining room vignette in particular. Indeed, temporality is an enduring theme in literature and its paradoxical inconsistencies continue to frustrate humankind. *The Aunt's Story* is no exception but in this context I will argue that the perversity of time, in "Jardin Exotique" in particular, alludes to Theodora's DID. Indeed,

distortion of time is symptomatic of DID, where the sufferer often has no recollection of past events. In fact, in one of his case studies Schwartzberg outlines the importance of “self-monitoring” through the use of a wristwatch alarm to repeat at regular intervals (82). The one character who is synonymous with time is the waiter, *le petit*, who one must remember is a *real* character in the fictional Hôtel du Midi. He is always fluid and temporally he represents the irrecoverable loss and fluidity of time, but narratively he represents the harmonious interludes of Theodora’s transitional state. His fluidity also signifies the ambiguity of the stasis and flux of time, an unresolved dilemma in all aspects of life, but one of particular importance to sufferers of DID where the slippage among parallel conscious states confuses time even further. The veneer of the dining room clearly contains “many unfinished situations” (AS 149), the complexity of which lie in Theodora’s imagination or delusional state. To an extent *le petit* also embodies the modes of motion synthesised in the term “simultaneism,” literally representing “separate but interrelated states of being” (Seigel 57). The same term applies to Cubist art, where two aspects of the human face, profile and face-on, are shown (Hewitt 2002, 24). By contrast, orphism embraced “simultaneism” as being “the mind’s grasp of the simultaneous existence of an infinitude of interrelated states of being” (Spate 3). Theodora, however, cannot grasp the concept of “interrelated states of being.” Instead the concept is enacted through the orphism of *le petit*, thus connoting the “mystery and poetry” that Shattuck alludes to (216).

Thus the six *real* characters in “Jardin Exotique,” consist of Mademoiselle Bloch and Theodora as patients, and the four least enigmatic characters, Monsieur Durand, Miss Grigg, *le petit* and Henriette as functionaries in the Hôtel du Midi hospice. However, Wetherby is another of Theodora’s alters, created as I maintain in the trauma of the “dining room incident” at Meroë:

‘*Où est Madame la Comtesse?*’ asked the young man who came and stood in the doorway, his face shaped like a scooped bone, though seen flat on it was not unlike a ’cello.

*'Madame la Comtesse,' replied le petit, 'est partie, on ne sait jamais où, avec un paquet de sandwiches et sa liberté.'*

'Of course. She told me,' said the scooped bone.

But twice told, it did not mitigate the strain. He went away, leaving a patch of silence by the door.  
(153)

I postulate that Wetherby is an incarnation of Pearl, who was metaphorically depicted in that incident of the Sunday roast as a cello: "Watching Father carve the mutton it was like somebody with music, someone with a 'cello in his hands. Father loved to carve the joint. It was his pride. Sunday was like this. It continued all along" (39). Sub-consciously Theodora recognises the complexity of Pearl's pregnancy and Mrs. Goodman's non-acknowledgement of the father. Thus Pearl is masculinised in the alter Wetherby, a fact which signifies further distance from motherhood. The recurring cello highlights the distraction of music. Indeed, life at Meroë was punctuated with musical incidents, but music was more significant in Theodora's life in Sydney. There her palpable means of escape was through the music of Moraïtis. Yet even then her discordant nature clashed with the rest of Sydney society. The contrapuntal theme of music highlights Theodora's dilemma: she loved music for its escapism; the rest of Sydney society loved music for its affirmation of their social status.

Yet, as this sub-section has demonstrated, the discordant contrapuntal theme overarches all performance, in particular the performance of eating. Through a close reading of the dining vignettes in "Jardin Exotique," I have elucidated the contradictory nature of food and reality and explored the relevance of that contradiction in the context of Theodora's condition. The nexus between performance/reality/mind/food is found in the fugue states experienced by DID sufferers. The transitional elements of both meanings of fugue are essential to understanding Theodora's condition and how it is symbolised through food.

## ***Bouchée à la Reine***

The focus of this section is to determine how the fugue-states relate to DID rather than to fugue in the musical sense. To get to the crux of the food symbolism and its relation to DID I argue here that the *bouchée à la reine* is the omphalos of the novel. As Lawson states with reference to *The Aunt's Story*: “fragmentation is an essential part not only of the meaning of the text but also of the way in which the text *enacts* (his emphasis) its meaning” (1992, 9). The references to pastry in its various guises in “Meroë” and “Jardin Exotique” coalesce into the *bouchée à la reine*. Indeed, the key to the puzzle that White sets is Miss Grigg’s aphorism already referred to, but worth repeating: “you never knew with pastry, it was always something in disguise” (AS 153). White here draws on Marcel Duchamp’s theory, that an artist “might use anything ... to say what he [*sic*] wanted to say,” by using a cryptogram of symbols to convey ideas (qtd. in Seigel, 74). White and Duchamp were contemporaneous artists and both attempted to “embody psychological experience” in their art (Spate 3). Duchamp was the first painter to use Cubism surrealistically, “by employing its ambiguous object-sensations to evoke disturbing but undefinable states of mind” (276). Likewise, White in his experimental novel employs the *bouchée à la reine* to evoke a disturbingly undefinable state of mind. In the dining room vignette, the *bouchée à la reine* is referred to five times. Its literal purpose is to connect the dissociative interludes that Theodora experiences whilst in the dining room and thus ground the text in the quotidian. However, paradoxically the *bouchée à la reine* is also a metaphor for Theodora’s fragmentary mind. Therefore it is worthwhile delineating its representation in some depth.

Initially *le petit* insults Henriette and then asks the whereabouts of the *bouchées à la reine* (150). The enquiry is immediately followed by: “Through so much business, of dialogue and forks the General’s note still floated. Its madness shocked the room into an appearance of reality” (AS 150). In the second instance *le petit* asks the General if he would



like a *bouchée à la reine*, to which the General replies that he wants everything, and Theodora hears “the cardboard castle of the *bouchée à la reine* crumble and crash beneath the General’s fork” (151). The penultimate reference is when *le petit* asks Theodora the same question, couched in different terms. The negation of “*Vous ne voulez pas de bouchée à la reine?*” (152), implies that the question has already been asked of Theodora and she has declined, thus substantiating the claim that the General is an alter. Significantly, in the final reference the *bouchée* is anthropomorphised at the dénouement of Chapter 7: “She [Theodora] began to walk across the carpet through the walnut shells and the extinct smiles. Upstairs they had gone to sleep, unconcerned by the growth of the garden. Because it is something that happens and happens, sighed the *bouchées à la reine*” (161). The *bouchée à la reine* has also multiplied; it is now plural, a fact that adds import to Theodora’s multiplying alters.

Elaine Martin identifies food as the “mediator between the self and other” (33). Taking that idea further in context with the symbolically morphing pastry, the croissant originated as a symbol in 1683 following the repulsion of the Ottoman Turks. The shape, constructed by the Viennese bakers, is derived from the crescent moon on the flag of their enemies. So not only does the croissant represent the enemy, but it is meant to be devoured. Thus ingestion re-enacts the defeat of the Turks: a symbol of Christianity defeating Islam (Korsmeyer 31). So food can also serve symbolically as a method of authentication. Significantly, the *bouchée à la reine* is never depicted as being ingested by the General, but as I have noted, Theodora hears “the cardboard castle of the *bouchée à la reine* crumble and crash beneath the General’s fork” (AS 151). Thus, it could be argued that aurally she is aware of her fragmented state of mind yet, “[i]t was obvious now that clocks were keeping another time” (151). The General, who desires “*tout, tout!*” threatens to subsume Theodora, but textually he does not ingest the *bouchée à la reine*, Theodora’s symbolic

psyche. Thus, I maintain that the General becomes the symbolic mediator between Theodora's "great monster Self" (128) that she is afraid of revealing, or indeed, becoming. Furthermore, the apostrophic exclamation conveys the avarice that Theodora has difficulty coming to terms with, and together with the allusion to appetite – it is implied that the General desires to eat all – conflates the notion of consumption. She has compartmentalised her inability to confront her avarice in a parallel consciousness that she has created. Metaphorically that inability to confront the negative aspects of her personality is "put ... in a box" (151). In other words, compartmentalised in Theodora's mind. However, there are literal moments when Theodora admits to herself that, "it is necessary to return to the boxes for which we are made" (196).

Therefore, by invoking the symbolic nature of the *bouchée à la reine* and its implicit relevance to Theodora's state of mind the fragmentary nature of the General's "characterological entity" (Brenner 1996, 154) is evoked: "the General had become quite fragmentary. 'I am breaking,' he screamed. And the room released him" (AS 157). However, at this juncture Theodora's powerlessness is palpable and, "[c]ast up out of other people's emotions, she felt her features had diminished, she was round, and smooth, and not particularly distinguished" (157). Indeed, the third-person omniscient narrative permits the reader to identify with Theodora's alters and endure the vertiginous vastness that her parallel consciousness experiences. The symbolic "dark walls" (151) of the dining room depict Theodora's interiority, while the sombre mood of the narrative reflects her inner disenchantment, which she has yet to acknowledge.

On the "Sculpture Moderne et Art Contemporain" webpage under a quote from Duchamp, "Le grand ennemi de l'art, c'est le bon gout," are a series of photographs of an unacknowledged sculpture entitled "Bouchée à la reine." Duchamp abhorred the notion of limiting his imagination through restrictive modes of operation in his approach to art: "Not

to be engaged in any groove is very important for me ... I want to be free, and I want to be free for myself, foremost” (qtd. in Schwarz 193).



Fig. 1. Sculpture from Anonymous, “Sculpture Moderne et Art Contemporain.” 8 Apr. 2006. <http://www.smac.com/>.

White operates on a similar premise in his approach to the central section of *The Aunt's Story*. Although Helen Hewitt offered a detailed artistic analogy in *Painter Manqué*, she did not identify Duchamp as an influence on White's work. Rather than using a more concrete absolute method, White probes the boundaries of art, much like Duchamp, in the way he explores ideas in his work. The high level of artifice in such an approach opens up several avenues of interpretation, and I contend that applying a DID diagnosis to Theodora's state of mind offers a valid interpretation of this convoluted section. Indeed, the subjective aspects that each reader brings to an interpretation of “Jardin Exotique” has resulted in widely diverse and often inconclusive insights into what it all means.

Just as Duchamp abhorred the idea that good taste precluded good art, White challenges the notion of what constitutes good writing. The sculpture above further subverts good taste, the *bouchée à la reine* is literally a bite-sized king. Furthermore, the lolling tongue and carnivorous teeth emphasise the concept of bad taste. Once again, on a literal level, the whole idea of consuming a king's head is replete with abhorrence.

The overt allusion to Duchamp in the above unacknowledged sculpture is perpetuated in Theodora's ultimate realisation that the *staff* of the Hôtel du Midi are unable to facilitate her recovery: "That is all very well, and true, Monsieur Durand, Theodora would have said, but you forget how you bared your teeth one morning in the glass, and wondered whether their desperation would bite, or whether your tongue, branching suddenly and peculiarly from your mouth, might not be uprooted by the hand like any other fungus" (AS 231). As discussed earlier, mushrooms are multi-signifiers in *The Aunt's Story* and here the simile extends to a macabre muting. It is only through inner contemplation that Theodora can confront and overcome DID. The trajectory of self-help is perpetuated in the scene when Katina and Theodora "re-entered the territory of Dubonnet and Suze" (240), where the palliative elements of the tonics are made overt and are analeptic of the "capsule" (142) to be discussed later in relation to Theodora's mother.

### **Delusions of Glass**

As discussed in "Meroë and Sydney," glass and its multitudinous symbolic meanings serve as a thread that interweaves throughout *The Aunt's Story*, connecting the often tenuous food symbolism and its relevance to Theodora's state of mind. For example, when considering her relationship with her sister and other relations Theodora recalls that Fanny "puts down eggs in water-glass. And twice she has had the Governor to lunch" (187). Her melancholic rumination on the uncomfortable elements of relations follows. Here the glass transforms into "[m]irrors ... [that] expressed doubt. We like to believe that we believe was multiplied in glass" (187).

Through such enigmatic aphorisms the text interrogates the tenet of human existence and its delusory aspects. Indeed, existential angst pervades "Jardin Exotique." However, by adopting a psychoanalytical methodology and applying DID diagnostic

criteria to Theodora's actions one is able to extract further meaning from such enigmatic aphorisms, as in the following dining room passage:

Theodora heard her boots on the bare boards. She sat with her legs apart, like a man, on equal terms with the saints. Sometimes, very late, when the darkness was full of clocks, the world was a little crystal ball that she could hold in her hand, and stroke and stroke.

'Everything is nothing, and nothing is everything.'

As if it were necessary to grumble, at that hour. She could hear his voice falling, and the skeins of smoke, and the intermediate silences, and snow. She held her little crystal comfort in her hand. (151-52)

This conflates Theodora by name with a description of Ludmilla, physically transforming her. Once again her aural and tactile senses are heightened, and congruent with the glass imagery her solace is through the tangibility of an object, the "little crystal ball." The simile "like a man" exhibits Theodora's Jungian animus, while her masculine pose universally aligns and consolidates her position (Bulman-May 50). Furthermore, that Theodora and Ludmilla inhabit the same body is given credence by the phrase: "Theodora heard her boots on the bare boards," where the ambiguous possessive pronoun leaves the question of identity open to conjecture. Through her alter Ludmilla, Theodora acknowledges the sexual discrimination that precluded her pursuing the masculine-oriented activities to which she was attracted approaching puberty. As alluded to in relation to Frank Parrott, on the rare occasions that she was tempted to reveal her shooting prowess in adulthood she suffered emotionally. As Theodora's alter, Ludmilla finds consolation in the "little crystal ball": the world is literally and metaphorically at her fingertips. Furthermore, the stroking action recalls Theodora stroking Frank Parrot's head and the attendant imagery of the spherical moon discussed earlier. Indeed, the multi-signified time discussed in relation to Theodora's alter, the General, is evoked through the analeptic moon as well as through the verb "stroke" that as noun refers to the single sound of a striking clock.

The allusion to clocks in the passage just quoted is analogous with the time element already discussed in relation to DID. Moreover, Sokolnikov's (the General's) enigmatic

utterance: “Everything is nothing, and nothing is everything,” highlights the nihilistic nature of the text and the question of existence. That notion of existence is perpetuated in the tangibility of objects, and the tactile sense they engender, and is linked to the glass receptacle imagery that pervades the text (Bulman-May 79). The Surrealism that infuses the central section of the novel is seen in the assertion that Theodora as Ludmilla can *hear* the “skeins of smoke, and the intermediate silences, and snow.” The senses coalesce into one sense that does not operate logically. The visual imagery surrounding “Jardin Exotique” is influenced by Dadaism, whose techniques of questioning traditional concepts through chance laid the ground for the Surrealists. Both artistic movements have particular relevance to “Jardin Exotique” exemplified in the recurring clock and rubber imagery, “It was too late for clocks. It was the hour for rubber words” (199). Such imagery evokes two of Salvador Dali’s paintings in particular, namely “The Persistence of Memory” (1931) and “Clock Explosion” (1954).

Effectively, for Theodora and her alters “everything” does become “nothing”:

‘Whereas, if nothing were nothing,’ his voice said.

‘Go to bed, Alyosha Sergei. It is late. And you begin to repeat yourself. You are drunk,’ Theodora said.

‘Drunk? In a moment, Ludmilla, you will talk to me about religion.’

‘I shall not be so unwise,’ she said.

But she knew and smiled, because the world was a little crystal ball.

‘But you believe in God,’ said Alyosha Sergei.

‘I believe in this table,’ she said.

‘A vulgar yellow thing that we have because we have nothing else.’

‘But convincing,’ she said. ‘It has such touching legs.’

And because she knew, she smiled. (152)

As Sempruch elucidates in her discussion of Spivak’s allusion to Western homogeneity:

“‘[t]he person who *knows* has all the problems of selfhood,’ but the person who is *known* (objectified) ‘somehow seems not to have a problematic self.’ Only the dominant self can be problematic; the self of the Other is authentic without a problem. Naturally available to

all kinds of complications. This is very frightening” (qtd in Sempruch 48). However, for Theodora her belief in the tangibility of objects complicates and obscures the concept of inner knowledge or even what constitutes *knowledge*. Notionally, if one conceptualises the fictional representation of the characters in the Hôtel du Midi, real or imagined, they could all be considered “Other”: they are the marginalised and alienated. However, Theodora does not fit that paradigm absolutely. Paradoxically she is “Other” but in the passage above she also “*knows*.”

The ambiguity of her position emerges most effectively in the abstract imagery which defines and validates the reification of the food and dining room in “Jardin Exotique.” Theodora, always through her alters at this stage of her existence, is the “vulgar yellow thing because we have nothing else.” Yet, enigmatically, much like the Mona Lisa, she smiles, she is “convinced” of her own existence. Perhaps too, she is acknowledging and accepting the animus of *her self*, not yet integrated but acknowledged. Thus the enigmatic text sets up a tension between what appears to be and what is not understood, or what is only partially understood.

There are many underlying factors that contribute to the emergence of Theodora’s alters in this context. As Steven Angelides points out in his analysis of some of Freud’s theories on the production of traumatic symptoms, there are many “additional psychological factors in the context of that person’s particular biography and psychological functioning” (36). Freud, of course, also alludes to the disastrous consequences of the “return of the repressed” (Brady 1974, 50). Similarly Dieter Vaitl *et al.* in their discussion of the psychobiological symptoms of the emergence of alters, highlight the “anomalous processing” of sensory data and the resultant confusion between present and past events (112).

Basically, the elements of multiplicity and fragmentation evident in the property of glass indicate the complex nature of Theodora's condition. Her confusion over what constitutes her reality is multifracted. Past, present and future combine to form a myriad of unclear representations. However, unity is found in the "little crystal ball" (152), but the fragile object is a tenuous symbol of stability.

## **Linen Linguistics**

Taking these anomalies into consideration, the repetition of the napkin imagery in the quotes below is redolent of the handkerchief simile introduced earlier in the first appearance of an alter vignette, Katina: "clouds like handkerchiefs" (AS 145). The significance is flagged further with Theodora's first communication with the alter Katina also involving a handkerchief: "'Look,' said Theodora to the girl, 'you have dropped your handkerchief'" (145). The transformative contradictory imagery of linen reflects Theodora's state of mind and indicates the "anomalous processing" that it undergoes. Such imagery is reminiscent of Gwen Harwood's poem "Mother Who Gave Me Life," in which the refrain of linen evokes a nostalgic love for a dead mother. The poem is a tribute to mothers and motherhood in general, "women bearing/women" (Tranter 113). However, in this central section of *The Aunt's Story* letters, napkins, envelopes and handkerchiefs metamorphose into one another. For example, in the surreal dining room Theodora awaits "a big white envelope for her napkin," and in her detached state she contemplates the "fishbones" (AS 149). Earlier Mademoiselle Bloch had referred to the General's penchant for sardines, yet it is Theodora, who presumably has not yet eaten, who sits in front of the remains of the sardines. Such subtle allusions within the dining room alert the reader to their relevance in deciphering the enigmatic text. Here, I contend, the imagery not only alludes to the General as being Theodora's alter but also serves as a link to motherhood and Theodora's relationship with her mother.



Wetherby's mother, the "Perennial Blue" (164), is part of the "history of Wetherby" (163) as alter, and is a fragmentary reconstruction of Theodora's mother: "[I]acking the intuition of furniture, she did not grasp that this was more than a letter, the garrotter's handkerchief and the umbilical cord" (164). The barbaric imagery of mothers raises many questions, but this thesis will assert that Theodora's subconscious thought processes reflect the emotional cruelty that her mother subjected her to. Indeed, the napkin motif in the dining room of the Hôtel du Midi connotes a mapping of Theodora's state of mind. That mapping concept is further validated if one considers that the word *napkin* comes from the Old French *nappe*, which is derived from the Latin *mappa*.

However, the mapping of Theodora's mind is a complex objective. In the following passage the General, as alter, emphasises internal rather than external exploration:

After he had sighed a lot and counted his prawn shells several times, the General wrote Theodora a note:

Madame,

Physical geography is deceptive. I advise you, therefore, not to explore my face. The others, and particularly Mrs. Rapallo, will tell you I am mad, a charlatan, a boor, a drunkard, a sensualist, and an old man. Admitting to something of all these charges, I throw myself on your sympathy and understanding, which I can sense across the dining-room, and suggest that some time we discuss each other. I would hand you my soul on this plate if it would do either of us good.

Alyosha Sergei Sokolnikov

*Le petit* brought to Theodora the General's note, which was written distinctly on an envelope, as well as in the eyes of several ladies. (149-50)

This passage not only encapsulates the napkin imagery discussed above but the allusion to "count[ing] ... prawn shells" recalls the incident between Theodora and Huntly Clarkson. Prior to his perfunctory marriage proposal, "they ate big whiskered prawns," and he "trod the empty prawn shells into the sand and trodden grass" (115). At that juncture Theodora is depicted as the "Respected Aunt" who could "make a dancer with a handkerchief" as well as the "Respected Friend" of Huntly Clarkson. However, she "remained obscure. He could not read her. And she made him conscious of this illiteracy, amongst his other limitations"

(115). On the ferry returning from lunch, following Huntly's assertion that she is a "most difficult woman," Theodora declares that to herself she is "fatally simple." She suggests that instead they "talk instead about the prawns." Their words are "blown out of the mouth, blurred, and tossed back" (115), but in the Hôtel du Midi dining room words are transformed into objects for analysis. Moreover, in obliterating her conscious processes Theodora "can almost accept the illusion" (116) of the marriage proposal. That diffusion of her emotional and social obligations is compounded in the emergence of her DID: the words are indeed proleptic and are reinforced by the pun on her refusal "[t]he farce had not screamed" (116).

Their puzzling relationship is respectful, but Huntly Clarkson feels threatened by Theodora's power. She "broke the corners of his self-esteem, the most brittle of his valuable possessions" (115). Huntly Clarkson intuitively senses Theodora's mental capacities which he attempts to possess: he, "did not altogether believe that Theodora Goodman would reject the yellow façade ... of his great stone house" (117). He admits that sometimes "stone will crumble" but maintained a "faith in its continuity and strength" (117). He is unable to define what "small mental service" he actually wants to possess (117). Ultimately he recognises that it "was not small, but great. Either way it was invisible and strange" (117). Like the other signified houses in *The Aunt's Story*, Huntly Clarkson's is biscuit-like and apt to crumble, a pastry in disguise. He can, however, neither conceptualise nor possess the intricacies of Theodora's "strange" mind.

Thus, through repetition and interconnectivity to foodstuffs the letter/napkin/envelope/handkerchief imagery links with Theodora's mental processes. This device deftly demonstrates the powerful signification that these symbols bear and how, for example, a simple note can be fraught with meaning.

## Existential Angst

The General, whose initials are the same as Theodora's, "trounce[s] Theodora's modest message" in his anger at her simple appraisal of the situation. Yet "[a]nyone questioning the vastness denied the existence of Sokolnikov. Sensing extinction the General frowned" (151). It is unclear whether Theodora's simplistic approach means that she is not "questioning the vastness" and therefore accepts "the existence of Sokolnikov" or vice-versa, but clearly the uncertainty is intended to unsettle notions of existence. I contend further that the General's multi-nomenclature also questions the notion of existence. Furthermore, the epistolary elements of the text augment my hypothesis that Theodora's condition is analogous to DID. Differences in handwriting between various alters have been identified as a symptom of DID. Indeed, a prescribed psychotherapy for DID patients is to encourage the "different alter personalities to communicate with each other," usually through notes or diaries (Schwartzberg 82).

In this way, the multi-referential signifiers function to coalesce the enigmatic text. For example, prawn shells are re-evoked in the dining room of the Hôtel du Midi. Thus food symbolism indicates Theodora's subconscious mental processes:

Across the distance she could see also the swelling ducts of Henriette, as she gathered prawn shells from other people's plates. The prawn shells rustled and creaked, rustled and creaked. In the hands of Henriette the dream became a purgatory. For choice she would have worn the body of a tango, sleek and supple, violet-scented. She would have sat in chairs of which the flesh returned the pressure of her thighs. But Henriette was the everlasting *vache*. Stung by the example of the General's gadfly note, she breathed, and shifted weight, but she still failed to dissolve *le petit* in the melancholy of her cow eyes. (150)

Taken in conjunction with the trodden prawn shells of Huntly Clarkson already discussed, these prawn shells appear to be a metaphor for dreams, themselves another realm of consciousness. Congruent with Theodora's DID is the notion of distance: Theodora is emerging from her dissociated state, the vehicle for which is the "rustl[ing] and creak[ing]"

of the prawn shells, reiterated for emphasis. The dream is analeptic and reconfigures Theodora's refusal of Huntly's marriage proposal. She sees her decision vindicated through the "dream [that becomes] a purgatory," a reality represented through the *real* character of Henriette, whose presence cannot "dissolve" the *real* waiter, *le petit*. Theodora's recollection of her past, "when behaviour was more predictable," is her attempt to situate herself in her present dilemma. However, "she liked to think she could remember, but she suspected the only certainty is death," but clearly her recollections are imprecise (150).

This blurring of what constitutes reality undermines the dichotomies of reality/art and reality/fiction discussed earlier. Food is necessary for survival as has already been pointed out. However, food taken in the context of *reality* as necessity, and transposed into fiction, therefore rendering it not *real* or textually necessary, raises the question of its relevance to the body of the text. In the quote above it is unclear whether Henriette desires the body of *le petit* in a carnal sense or whether she lusts after becoming the body of *le petit*. Poststructuralists argue that all language is a social construct, but rather than follow that method of reasoning I maintain that representations of a tangible "reality" are essential for humankind to function. The disordered body of text that is this central section of *The Aunt's Story* is not only symbolic of Theodora's mind. It is also symbolic of her body. To elaborate: the "body" of text is itself a separate entity to the words it contains. The words and more accurately, their meanings, are symbolic of Theodora's mind. As Seigel notes, T.S. Eliot referred to the symbols that modernists employ as "'objective correlatives,' particularized [*sic*] equivalents for inner states, whose power over the imagination grows in response to the impossibility of finding life as a whole to be meaningful" (182).

Psychological theory is another response by humankind to the imperative to find the meaning of life. Theodora's inner states reflect a cultural as well as a social dissociation. Locating the text in its political context evinces a similar cultural dissociation: "[f]or the

Demoiselles Bloch there was much doubt beyond the bounds of their duplicated self” (AS 147), *they* too, are perplexed, but by the fear of either Communists or Fascists. ‘They’ are in fact Jews. ‘They’ ask Theodora what she is:

‘I have never really stopped to think,’ said Theodora.

And now the sun on her eyelids disposed her to believe that this was the desired state.

‘That is dreadful!’ said Mademoiselle Berthe.

‘It means you are a crypto-something,’ sighed Mademoiselle Marthe. ‘However. Shall we go in to lunch? There is always food and conversation. The amiable little stylo that I received from the President of the Republic is proof that these can overcome even racial prejudice.’ (148)

Theodora admits that she has “never really stopped to think”; instead she has employed an “an autohypnotic defensive altered state of consciousness” (Brenner 1996, 165). Moreover, the “crypto-something” is a further clue to her ailment. That it is an open-ended definition invites speculation, but the secretive aspect of Theodora’s personality is undeniable: it is clearly a symbol with a secret meaning or significance. It is up to the reader to become the cryptanalyst and decipher the coded text in “Jardin Exotique.” Indeed, White was quite adept at cryptography, having written in code to Manoly Lascaris<sup>4</sup> during their service years (FG 103).

The ambiguity that pervades the whole central section of *The Aunt’s Story* reflects the inability to ascertain what constitutes *reality*. As Schwartzberg points out: “Ross (1997) maintains that most skeptics – and even adherents – fail to grasp ‘the central paradox’ of DID: that *it is real and not real at the same time*” (qtd. in Schwartzberg 86-7). Fundamentally, White’s text functions on the same level. It is both *real* as a tangible object and *not real* as fiction. However, where the fiction itself addresses existential angst “Jardin Exotique” probes more deeply into the question of what constitutes *reality*. In this way, the elusive nature of the text slides between the various alters of Theodora’s personality and elucidates the complexity of her DID.

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<sup>4</sup> White’s partner.

## Knives, Swords and Pens

That probing of existential angst emerges through the sword motif, which is linked with knives throughout the novel (Herring 81). For example, in the dining room at the Hôtel du Midi, “[s]words and braided ancestors hung on the dark walls” (AS 151); and in the altercation between the General and Mrs. Rapallo: “[m]eeting somewhere about the centre of the room, you waited for their impact, the hard thick thwack of rubber and the stiff slash of the magenta sword” (156); and in the letter Wetherby receives from Mrs. Leese-Leese that is full of absence, destruction, avarice and brutality, where she refers to his poem as “a sword” (164); and in Wetherby’s assertion of existence, “‘I am a poet.’ ... ‘Or a sword,’ he said, ‘hacking at a pylon’” (165); and in Theodora’s surreal encounter with the General, the walls in *his* room, a metaphoric compartment of her mind, “had naked swords, but the blades jagged from attacking the heads of bottles, and the wires from which they hung had rusted in the sea air” (201); and finally in the picnic vignette where “[t]here will be stuffed eggs, and conversation, and silences, and swords” (221). In particular, the recurring sword imagery echoes the Sunday roast at Meroë: the “apotheosis of the meal, in which the light brandished swords” (107). Symbolically the lacerative effects of swords and knives represent the painful therapeutic process of acknowledging her alters that Theodora must undergo to facilitate her self-recovery from DID.

So, the symbolic sword connects the multidimensional narrative but its literal value cannot be dismissed. Swords are “tempered” (164) to kill and the sword imagery invites a thanatological methodology. *The Aunt’s Story* is fraught with images of death and decay which are invariably linked with avarice. Indeed, Theodora’s mother was the paragon of avarice and the sword imagery not only recalls the Sunday roast carved by Father, but also, in the form of the diminutive knife, recalls the “pastrycook incident” as well as Theodora’s

pseudo-murder of Mrs. Goodman. Contemplating her sleeping mother, “for some inexorable reason,” Theodora realises that, “[l]ove and hate ... are alternate breaths falling from the same breast” (122). She acknowledges to herself that she cannot love her mother for what she is, only for what she represents. Indeed, she conceptualises her dichotomous emotions as a mind/body duality. The realisation causes her to imagine, “If I were to open my mouth ... as wide as it will go, and scream from the bottom of my stomach to the top of my voice. Aaahhhhhhhhhhh!” (122). Her palpable frustration and despair echo the sense of bleak isolation and fear in Munch’s “The Scream,” which I will allude to shortly. However, “she did not do it. She trembled for the idea” (122). She is unable to “avoid thought” and:

She went into the kitchen. Outside there was a wind sawing and rasping, a thin gritty wind of morning, blowing off concrete and damp brick. The light was so thin in the kitchen that it was not quite moonlight, not quite morning. It glittered on the zinc. The skins of the onions rustled.

Theodora took up the thin knife, very thin and impervious, from where it lay in the zinc light. Now she remembered most distinctly the last counsel Jack Frost had held with the meat-knife in the kitchen. She remembered him standing by the dresser. She could see the black hairs on his wrist as he weighed the pros instead of biscuits.

But this, she trembled, does not cut the knot. She threw back the thin knife, which fell and clattered on the zinc, where it had been put originally to be washed. There was the cup too, which the knife nosed, the empty cup which Mrs. Goodman held to her chin and its trembling beard of white skin.

It has been close, felt Theodora, I have put out my hand and almost touched death. She could see its eyelashes, pale as a goat’s, and the tongue clapping like a bell.

Bells rang across the bay for morning. Theodora Goodman went upstairs. She paused on the landing, halted by the wave of her mother’s unarrested sleep. Light slashed the face of Theodora Goodman to the bone. I am guilty of a murder that has not been done, she said, it is the same thing, blood is only an accompaniment. She went on to her own room, away from the act she had not committed, while her mother continued to sleep.

‘Theodora, you look as if you have seen a murder,’ said Mrs. Goodman when she woke.

‘I did not sleep, Mother. I shall take an aspirin.’

‘Ah, where would we be without aspirin!’ Mrs. Goodman said. (122-3)

This passage offers a psychological insight into Theodora’s imaginative realms. The metaphors for the wind and light evoke the image of a poniard as well as echoing Alexander Pope’s “Eloisa to Abelard.” Furthermore, the recurring trope of death indicates

Theodora's mental processes and her impending dissolution into DID. Most important, however, is the image it creates in Theodora's mind and her evident empathy for Jack Frost. The sense of guilt that is at the base of her thoughts for "the act she had not committed" reveals the way in which she compartmentalises her fears. Poignantly, she "went on to her own room"<sup>5</sup> where metaphorically she dissociates from the *reality* she cannot confront. The emotional intensity is palpable and is substantiated by the "sawing and rasping" wind and the liminal space and time of "not quite moonlight, not quite morning." Theodora is at the threshold of escape from the quotidian that binds her guilt. Indeed, the "sawing and rasping" wind prefigures the *jardin exotique* discussed earlier, again in relation to the turmoil she undergoes. Moreover, the passage anticipates the Gothic-like elements of "Jardin Exotique" where Theodora's condition is manifested.

The symbolism of the onions in the above passage reflects the multiplicity of the *bouchée à la reine*. Yet the symbolic onion appears only here in *The Aunt's Story*. Significantly, however, White deploys it again in both "The Twitching Colonel" and *Riders in the Chariot*. The retired Indian Army officer, Colonel Trevellick, decides, "I shall strip myself, the onion-folds of prejudice, till standing naked though conscious I see myself complete or else consumed like the Hindu conjuror who is translated into space" (Lawson 1994, 7). And Miss Hare in *Riders in the Chariot* uses a similar image: "Eventually I shall discover what is at the centre, if enough of me is peeled away" (RC 59). However, as Lawson points out, "when one peels an onion one only discovers more layers, there is not actually a kernel" (1992, 12). There may not be a kernel in an onion, but a recurring symbolic food in White's oeuvre is the nut, which is indeed a kernel, the relevance of which will be discussed shortly. The anthropomorphic "rustl[ing]" of the onion skins, taken in conjunction with the tremulous imagery used in the passage above, reinforces the notion

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<sup>5</sup> A phrase which for this reader echoes Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.



of Theodora being on the threshold of emotional discovery. Moreover, the verb anticipates the rustle of the prawn shells discussed above. More tenuously one of the meanings for *rustle* is to forage food.

Indeed, the layers of the onion do need to be peeled away, since they represent the accretion of Theodora's as yet unacknowledged alters. Once that process has been completed, she is able to transcend the novel's fictional *reality*. To supplement my argument, it is useful to quote the Colonel again: "Only in dissolution is salvation from illusion, in dream perhaps that is shadow of death, or decomposition of substance, the frail symbol of reality which man clutches, holding himself by the throat, strangling himself through fear while denying suicide, this is man, this is also Maya, this imperfection that is man denying his shadow as day lengthens ..." (Lawson 1994, 9). The passage illustrates Theodora's own "painful ... mental dissolution ... [A] route to reality which is not cerebral, or traditional, or conventional, or even sane. It shows the solitary spirit utterly stripped and lonely" (Walsh 1977, 18). Substance, "the frail symbol of reality," is arguably lacking in "Jardin Exotique." However, the analysis of food symbolism and its relevance to DID offers insight into Theodora's *illusions*. Indeed, as the General later declares to Theodora: "'You can also create the illusion of other people, but once created, they choose their own realities'" (237).

As Herring contends: "White clearly wants his symbols to work by poetic suggestion rather than the rigid consistency of allegory; the risks involved are ambiguity and obscurity" (81). There is no denying that the central episode of *The Aunt's Story* is ambiguous; an equally valid spiritual reading could be extrapolated. Yet I argue that diagnosing Theodora as suffering DID renders the textual "poetic suggestion" less obscure. By juxtaposing the images of the "sawing and rasping" wind; the "glitter[ing] light; the "biscuits," the "trembling beard of white skin," the "tongue clapping" and Theodora's face

“slashed” to “the bone,” White enriches their meaning and unifies the text. As Herring states: “The imagery alone tells much about the state of Theodora’s feeling” (82). It is indeed proleptic of her emerging condition.

Returning to the significance of the sword/knife imagery, the traditional association between the sword and the pen is emphasised through a repetition of pen imagery. By evoking that association it is possible to establish a textual circularity through an epistolary link with napkins. Thus the identification and analysis of food symbolism defines the fragmentary text and creates a symbolic whole. For example the letter that Wetherby/Theodora reads is not only fraught with recurring symbolic imagery, but encompasses a wealth of information that, analysed in depth, elucidates the meaning and relevance of the passage in relation to Theodora’s alters:

Through her narrow brown face, Theodora watched his hands breaking a letter.

...that Saturday was your day, and we waited, though sensing our defeat. Why are you so cruel, Wetherby, when you can afford to be kind? I can only think that this is the privilege of genius. Now it is Monday, and the others are all gone. The garden is full of absence and burning leaves. I lie here on the terrace, with the old grey shawl covering my knees, and have been reading Proust to steady my nerves. *Mais ça m’énervé plus*. It is a great ball of wool. I have been remembering, in contrast, your poem, the one that I like to think mine, because it was the fruit of that long and trying afternoon when you accused *me* of destruction, and said that you preferred to be smothered by feather pillows. Quite often I speak it to myself, my poem. Today, after Proust, it was a sword. My dear, it is *brutal*, but I am proud. I tempered you ... (164)

Firstly, the evocation of Marcel Proust and his symbolic *petit madeleine* rewards closer analysis, particularly if one considers that the symbol is closely aligned with pastry and its various guises discussed above in “Jardin Exotique.” Proust subscribed to the view that time consists of two aspects: *temps perdu*, lost time that vanishes; and *temps-durée*, time that endures, which he considered psychological time. This is the immeasurable sensory experience in which the past is synthesised in the present (Lowen 60). Furthermore, as Lowen explains, “[r]esurrection of the past as the aftermath of an accidental, involuntary physical sensation is the keystone of Proust’s conception of life and art. It combines past

and present” (60). Moreover, the physiological aspects of the *petit madeleine* olfactory experience are also relevant to an understanding of Theodora’s condition. The sense of smell “has a direct, evolutionarily primitive connection to the hypothalamus not shared by other sensory systems, which gives odors [*sic*] a special power to trigger memories in some detail” (Lowen 61). Significantly, Proust foresaw the psychological theory of reconstructive memory and its relevance to DID.

Obviously, psychological time is more relevant to this discussion than the concept of *temps perdu*. However *temps perdu* rewards closer analysis in the context of the nihilistic element in “Jardin Exotique.” As Schwarz points out, “[o]ne of Jung’s comments on [the missing link] is that “‘Nothing is evidently ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose,’ and it is only called Nothing because it does not appear in the world of the senses, but is only its organizer [*sic*]” (qtd. in Schwarz 197). When White extends the nihilistic nature of his text, the text itself invites the reader to explore the gaps that exist and project a meaning onto the “abyss.” In essence the reader explores what Duchamp refers to as the “‘art coefficient,’ an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed” (Schwarz 196).

In her imagination Theodora physically appropriates Wetherby’s past by metaphorically digesting his letters. She is the cupboard, and as the cupboard she ingests the letters that he stores, “so that some day, someone with devotion and tact might fit together the pieces of the puzzle. He put the bundle in a cupboard. Theodora felt her stomach turning and turning to digest” (AS 164). Thus, the nihilistic text raises the notion of existence and, like the Dadaists shocks and disturbs the onlooker/reader into adopting a revolutionary anti-rationalist approach to interpretation. Indeed, the somewhat irrational notion of an alter having an alter is open to contention. However, according to Sadock and Sadock, occasionally an alter personality can also suffer from DID, so that personality is

compromised in its turn (684). Thus it is within the realms of the diagnostic criteria for DID that an alter, for example in *The Aunt's Story* Wetherby and the General, can have another alter with whom they communicate. So, for example, much as Wetherby is Theodora's alter, Lieselotte manifests as Wetherby's alter, and Ludmilla as the General's alter. However, notionally, neither the General nor Wetherby exist except as alters. Such a convoluted notion as alters having alters is substantiated by the text when Lieselotte declares to Wetherby just prior to the fire: "'When I look into your eye I can see myself,' [to which he responds] 'That is why you are so necessary to my existence'" (196). Neither can exist without the other, nor can they exist without Theodora. However, Theodora does exist, so her existence is merely put at risk through her alters. Once she commences the process of finally discarding these other personalities she becomes unlimited, a fact emphasised through the corn imagery on her final train journey. Indeed, this journey is prefigured when Theodora ponders on the soul and eternity: "The landscape was a state of interminable being, hope and despair devouring and disgorging endlessly, and the faces, whether Katina Pavlou, or Sokolnikov, or Mrs. Rapallo or Wetherby, only slightly different aspects of the same state" (179-80). Her sentiments are closely aligned with Laura's statement at the dénouement of *Voss*: "'Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind" (V 446): in other words, the breadth of experience does not necessarily constitute knowledge.

Moving back to the letter from Mrs. Leese-Leese, my second point in relation to the sword imagery introduced earlier, is that it is laden with ambiguity and surreal imagery. It would appear that metaphorically Wetherby is the sword that Mrs. Leese-Leese tempered, and of course one cannot avoid the aphorism, "Beneath the rule of men entirely great, the pen is mightier than the sword" from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's play *Richelieu*. I contend that sword/pen imagery conveys the marital antagonism that Theodora has witnessed

throughout her life. To take the analogy further it is worthwhile alluding to the history of Lord Lytton, whose aphorism endures. He was physically abusive to his wife Rosina Doyle Wheeler, while Rosina's mother, Anna, also endured an abusive marriage for twelve years before escaping with her two daughters to Guernsey. Following the abusive trauma she collaborated with William Thompson on a text advocating civil and political rights for women (Cory 106).

Ironically, Rosina endured an even more acrimonious marriage and divorce than her mother when, in 1858, Bulwer-Lytton kidnapped her and had her committed to a lunatic asylum in an endeavour to silence her public accusations over his lifestyle whilst he was running for Parliament (108). That his oeuvre endures and has more credence in written history reveals much about the state of women's rights that Rosina's mother fought so hard for. It could be argued that White appropriates the female voice in writing Theodora's story, but this thesis will contend that as White asserted, his homosexuality gave him an affinity with the marginalisation of those who did (do) not conform to the capitalist patriarchy (FG 80-1). The gendered power dynamics at play in *The Aunt's Story* give a sympathetic voice to the feminist cause, and highlight how assiduous women must continue to be in their endeavour to ensure that their rights are not lost in a political quagmire. White's prophetic texts anticipated an Australian culture dominated by the capitalist free market. The twenty-first century, with its emphasis on profit yield, spin and consumption, is rapidly losing sight of a quest for truth. Only by acknowledging this market dominance and its attendant empty materialism through creating spaces for exploration via diversity, debate and altruism will Australian society and culture heal themselves.

## Food and the Gothic

As mentioned earlier, the nexus between food and the Gothic in “Jardin Exotique” provides another methodological approach for interpreting Theodora’s state of mind. Here the term Gothic refers to the macabre, fantastic, portentously gloomy and horrifying. The discussion also addresses Oscar Wilde’s aphorism that “Moderation is a fatal thing. Nothing succeeds like excess” (<http://en.thinkexist.com>), since the excessive symbolism in “Jardin Exotique” invites an analysis from a Gothic perspective. In adopting this framework I will argue that through the excessive nature of the text White creates an atmosphere conducive to anxieties for the protagonist. As Michelle Massé notes in her essay “Psychoanalysis and the Gothic,” “the ‘silence, solitude, and darkness’ in which the uncanny thrives come from infantile anxiety or fear – the same fear that resides at the heart of the Gothic” (232). As discussed earlier, *all* the imagery in “Jardin Exotique” represents Theodora’s state of mind. In this way White’s experimental approach to the psyche incorporates elements of the Gothic, where “[t]he literal haunted castle, cathedral, monster was often transformed into some natural setting conducive to unrest and fears, or, in yet another kind of development, to a haunted mind which required *no castle* (emphasis mine) or frowning mansion to stimulate terrors, the corridors of the psyche sufficing to engender such a frisson” (Fisher 75). Likewise, the corridors of Theodora’s psyche are encompassed in an allusion to symbolic castles in the *bouchée à la reine*, and the repetitious references in “Jardin Exotique” to houses, rooms, windows and doors that are metaphors for Theodora’s compartmentalised alters.

Invariably these metaphors incorporate food imagery. For example, following the feast with “Aloysha Sergei” in his room, Theodora and the General are transposed in a dreamlike sequence to a Russian room:

It was unequal, because the room, with the ceiling which had been fumed over by Aloysha Sergei’s voice, and the black portraits, and the golden saints, and the other rooms, which creaked with emptiness and mice, the whole empty, expectant house was full of that desperate affection which she had never quite been able to give. So that now, on the point of leaving, her mouth trembled, and expressed something shapeless that was neither hatred nor love. (202)

Moreover, the oxymoronic description of the interior of the “expectant house” re-emphasises Theodora’s own confused state of mind. However, the incident describes Ludmilla’s emotions, the General’s alter. Ludmilla is “on the point of leaving” and does not in fact return to the house. The duality of the room imagery indicates the duality of Theodora’s alters, not as only being dualistic manifestations of Theodora’s traumas, but also as dualistic in having alters themselves. The intrapsychic conflicts that the alters engage in has a “dreamlike quality to it that may correspond to previous trauma but also be subject to some secondary revision” (Brenner 1996, 165).

It is useful to employ a heuristic analysis of these dream-like dissociations, in which Ludmilla/Theodora realises that: “she was not sure that the ridiculousness of this game which is called life, whether it is played in a *salon*, or on a battlefield, or in a forest clearing, does not invariably prevail” (AS 208). At this juncture the reader learns that Ludmilla is dead, although she continues to appear as an alter. The General “was a victim of something undefined” (208). As the alter who experiences Ludmilla, that indefinable something is left unresolved.

Theodora’s response to “her” death by execution emphasises the Gothic-like evocation of the supernatural. She counterpoints the General’s assertion that he found her death traumatic by declaring that death is not emotional. She states that, ““It is as simple as a bottle ... And as clear ... and as empty” (209). If one considers the triple similes then

symbolically the bottle is neither simple, clear nor empty, an observation that renders Theodora's statement unclear. Theodora's contradictory assertion, then, reveals her inability to cope with death and her tendency to obfuscate her emotions through dissociation. The General destroys the vodka bottle and announces that, "Now there is nothing ... But there must be something ... or an illusion of something" (209). The only illusion remaining for the General, as alter, is the nautilus shell, which too is fraught with symbolic meaning. So, at the General's bidding Theodora goes to Mrs. Rapallo's room to steal the nautilus. In the room there is "a gingerbread heart on which Theodora read *Ich liebe dich*, in dust or sugar" (211). The stale heart symbolises Theodora's relationship with her mother, the woman who "gave [her] life" (Tranter 113) and engendered an innate love, but also the woman who emotionally abused her and engendered a passionate hatred.

Prior to the final encounter between the General and Mrs. Rapallo, Theodora realises that, "she knew that it must [happen] ... Her heart turned in her side, because, she knew, the nautilus is made to break" (AS 213). The imagery coalesces the symbolic heart and nautilus and signifies Theodora's realisation that she must abandon her traumatic childhood memories. However, "[s]he could not explain. She could explain nothing, least of all her several lives. She could not explain that where there is more than one it is inevitable always to betray" (213). It is as if the appearance of Theodora's alters, themselves an imaginative construct, compound her imaginative guilt. Effectively she must betray them in order to transcend that sense of guilt, which has undermined her assertive self. Both the *bouchée à la reine* and the nautilus are symbolic of that intuitive betrayal: they must be destroyed along with her "great monster Self" (128). As R.D. Laing asserts "what is labelled madness is often the only escape that a child has from psychotic parents or a psychologically constrictive environment" (Colmer 23).



Extending the macabre symbolism further, in the “*jardin exotique*” (AS 145)

Theodora’s escapist strategies are made overt:

To Theodora, who continued to sit in the garden, where black flies collected on the crimson flowers that the limbs of the cactus oozed, the air was no longer altogether dry and hostile. It stroked her. It said: See, we offer this dispensation, endless, more seductive than aspirin, to give an illusion of fleshy nearness and comfort, in what should be apart, armed, twisted, dreamless, admitting at most the echoes of sound, the gothic world. (145)

Previously she was able to escape her darkest impulses by “tak[ing] an aspirin” (122) and compartmentalising her emotions, but now other personas manifest in her “gothic world.”

As Brenner notes, “[i]t is an unconscious construct that essentially creates the alters” and the sufferer is deluded “into believing that they are not part of him/her” (1999, 345).

Theodora is equally deluded by the appearance of her alters and the illusory aspects of her delusion are transmuted into the text. However, in applying DID diagnostic criteria to an analysis of the Gothic elements of the prose, a clearer understanding is reached.

For example, the grotesquery is perpetuated in the mathematical trope of the eerily real Demoiselles Bloch already quoted, but its relevance is multi-signified: “You saw, now, the one was two. But in reverse. It was obvious, subtract one from two and the answer would be nought” (AS 146). The “unique and at times bizarre” appearances of Theodora’s alters in “Jardin Exotique” are not only eerie but typical of DID, and in order to understand how and why they function as they do it is necessary to examine their “organising influences” in Theodora’s subconscious processes, the Gothic interior of her mind (Brenner 1999, 345).

One of the diagnostic signs of DID is “the use of the word ‘we’ in the course of an interview in which the word seems to take on a collective meaning rather than an editorial ‘we’” (qtd. in Oltmanns 87):

‘Today we are sad,’ said Mademoiselle Marthe. ‘I have lost a little stylo, presented to me by the President of the Republic the season we spent in a hotel at Vichy. Sometimes at five o’clock we used to discuss language and food under a potted palm, while eating cucumber sandwiches. So you will understand.’

‘Quite often,’ said Theodora, ‘arm-chairs will disgorge a great variety of objects.’  
‘We had not thought of that, Marthe,’ said Mademoiselle Berthe.  
‘No,’ said Mademoiselle Marthe. ‘We shall try. It was an amiable little stylo, though it did not fill. I kept it, of course, for sentimental reasons, and because without possessions one ceases to exist.’  
‘That,’ sighed Mademoiselle Berthe, ‘is the terrible, the terrifying possibility.’ (147)

Significantly, the possession motif recurs and introduces the concept of “language and food” for discussion: precisely what this thesis also does. The question of existence and its relation to possessions is directly analogous with the lost *stylo*, which is, incidentally, another recurrence of the pen. Clearly, one of the Bloch twins does not exist *per se*, and that non-existence becomes “a terrifying possibility.” A further clue to Theodora’s condition is in the analogy between the “armchairs [that] disgorge a great variety of objects” and the recurring allusion to chairs as metaphor for Theodora. The arm-chair that is Theodora will ultimately disgorge. However, the disgorging will be of her alters through the purging fire. Interestingly, the adjectives used to describe the expulsion of her alters are those that describe vomiting. As the cupboard, Theodora “felt her stomach turning and turning to digest” (164): physically and mentally she finds what constitutes her existence unpalatable. Essentially, the Cartesian cause and effect relations are evoked. They are not deduced by logic but are discovered in experience.

Theodora’s alters’ memories impart a Gothic-like aura to her situation and both Mrs. Rapallo and Wetherby have their own histories. The first appearance of Mrs. Rapallo, as alter, as one must remember, contains many clues to Theodora’s condition: “Mrs. Elsie Rapallo, *née* van Tuyt” is herself a composite of “what remained, and what had been added” (159). The Gothic atmosphere is elaborated in Mrs. Rapallo’s fabrication of her daughter, Gloria, which effectively renders her own history mendacious:

Mrs. Rapallo fingered salt, reading in it some Arabian mystery that very likely she would not tell. ‘She will stay at Monte,’ she said at last. ‘She will drive over for lunch one day. Gloria, of course, has many friends.’ (160)

Indeed, relating fantastic tales is central to an interpretation of White's fantastic tale. To elaborate: the reference to "some Arabian mystery" alongside the reference to salt is, I contend, an allusion to "The Thousand and One Arabian Nights." Edgar Allan Poe, the consummate Gothic writer, "employed oriental fable and Gothic symbolism to analyse the mind of a murderer" (Riggio 515). In effect Theodora is both a literal and figurative murderess. Her figurative murder of her mother has already been discussed. However, the literal acts of murder that she commits are yet to unfold. These literal murders add a convincingly Gothic aura to the conclusion of "Jardin Exotique." The "Arabian frame of reference" (Cecil 60), that White alludes to in the quote above re-inscribes the Gothic elements of this central section.

The theme of disguise that pervades *The Aunt's Story* is alluded to in Scheherazade's tale of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." The head thief in his final disguise feigns an inability to ingest salt to avoid dining with Ali Baba: Morgiana, the quick-witted slave, sees through his disguise and eventually marries Ali Baba's nephew after she has murdered the head thief with a poniard. White later re-evokes the symbolic relevance of salt in *Voss*, in relation to the destruction of Mrs. Bonner's saltcellar as a pivotal point of the narrative. Symbolically salt signifies the veracity of what is told, but as a foodstuff it is essential for existence. Paradoxically, too much ingestion results in death.<sup>6</sup> Thus the otherworldliness of "Jardin Exotique" demonstrates an affinity with Poe's Gothic tales and "The Thousand and One Arabian Nights."

Another tale from the Arabian Nights, "Barmecide Banquet," is "an illustration of the pre-eminence of the imagination and of its power to alleviate deprivation through dream or fantasy" (Ormond 184). Indeed, as Benjamin Fisher points out in his discussion of Poe's Gothicism, the imagination is "eminently compatible with psychological plausibility in

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<sup>6</sup> See my discussion in Chapter One: "Dining Rooms."

literature” (78). Indeed, it could be argued that the Gothic elements in “Jardin Exotique” offer a “psychological plausibility” in diagnosing Theodora’s DID. Mrs. Rapallo is the embodiment of Theodora’s vicarious motherhood. For her the Arabian tales are a nostalgic recollection of her privileged childhood. Indeed, the pantomime aspect of her demeanour and appearance, which incidentally echo the “female clownface” (AS 118) at the shooting gallery, ridicule and highlight Theodora’s disdain for her mother and all that she represented.

Death, carcasses and decay pervade the final apocalyptic scenes with the General in “Jardin Exotique” and predict Theodora’s acceptance of her previous life and its associated traumas. She literally becomes “The Pale Horse” (203) of the Four Horsemen. Congruent with that image is the echo of another of Salvador Dali’s paintings, “The Horseman of Death” (1935).

Indeed, White’s choice of name for the female protagonist is by no means coincidental. The recurring imagery of cathedrals and circuses links Theodora with the Byzantine empress, who came from a circus family and is now represented by a mosaic at the San Vitale in Ravenna. Lieselotte as alter is also connected to circuses:

Lieselotte compressed her mauve lips, which were outlined very faintly in black, over wax skin. ‘Perhaps,’ she said, ‘I should have been born to a circus. To whip the lions through a paper hoop. But I can smell their coats singe, even though I wasn’t.’ (166)

Not only is Theodora’s name significant, but the most minor character, Mignon the monkey, is derived from a character in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, the prototypical *Bildungsroman*. The irony of course is that Mignon is a “kind of orphan,” who “touched [Theodora’s] pulse, and touched, and touched” (211). Theodora perfunctorily dismisses the achingly palpable sadness of Mignon with the bribe of “this child’s game of fruit” (212): a wax orange. Moreover, Mignon’s depiction recalls the Gothic allusions to

Theodora's vicarious motherhood. Similarly, for Mrs. Rapallo, who one must remember is Theodora's dominant alter, Mignon is her surrogate child constructed from the illusory Principessa. The paradox lies in the fact, as I contend, that they are all illusions.

Nevertheless, through a close analysis of the food symbolism, the symbolic puzzle is slowly falling into place, much like the Chinese-puzzle in *For Love Alone*. In *The Aunt's Story* however, the tangram transforms into multitudinous fragments that pose a difficult conundrum. I posit that the nautilus represents the duality of the symbolic images presented. To elaborate, Theodora's state of mind is represented by the fragmentary *bouchée à la reine*, which in turn is encapsulated, or enclosed, within the dining room. It is a symbol that literally should be consumed. The nautilus represents both the fragmentary and compartmentalised nature of Theodora's mind.<sup>7</sup> It is also symbolic. The nautilus spiral is a symbol of spiritual progress, yet paradoxically it is only by destroying the nautilus that the inner spirals are exposed. In this way, the nautilus both encapsulates and mirrors the multitude of symbols within the text, but I maintain that the *bouchée à la reine* is the omphalos of the novel, not the nautilus:

Static and not, beside the *compotier* with the wax fruit, the nautilus flowered. You could almost touch it. But you did not touch. Because you cannot touch a music, a flowering of water, the white smile on the sleeper's mouth. The nautilus flowered and flowed, as pervasive but evasive as experience. The walls of the Hôtel du Midi almost opened out. (191)

The oneiric nature of the turgidly poetic prose conveys the quandary that confronts Theodora. However at this juncture the walls of the hotel do not open out, and her imaginative alters remain compartmentalised. Congruent with the Gothic analogy the passage evokes Picasso's "Nature morte au compotier" (1914). Much like Picasso's, White's oeuvre challenges the polarities, of the imaginative impulse to "create out of nothing" and of respect for tradition. Emotionally the two artists are similar, both "torn by

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion about the dual symbolism of the nautilus see Manfred MacKenzie, "Patrick White's Later Novels." *Southern Review* 1.3 (1965): 5-18.

doubts and contradictions” (Elgar and Maillard, 59). In Picasso’s words, “I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them,” and “We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise truth” (*Dictionary of Quotations* 576).

Theodora’s Gothic psychological abnormalities are likewise represented through her imagined alters. For example, on discovering that the Principessa does not exist, Theodora: “swam in Mrs. Rapallo’s tulip-coloured stream [where] reason and motive were rinsed out” (AS 243). She witnesses a shift in Mrs. Rapallo’s behaviour who, “lolloped, both her head and voice. It is unusual, Theodora Goodman felt, for Mrs. Rapallo, whose words are as stiff as biscuits” (242). The simile is proleptic for Theodora’s final encounter with Katina: “‘I may even return to Abyssinia,’ Theodora said. After the metal hieroglyphs she felt an immeasurable longing to read the expression on the flat yellow face of stone. If the biscuit houses still existed” (252).<sup>8</sup> Significantly, this too is her final encounter with Mrs. Rapallo: “Elsie Rapallo dipped on her tulip-coloured stream that did not respect substance as it flowed. Theodora trod the sodden faces of old letters and the yellow smiles of photographs. Grazed by a random amethyst, dazed by the bobbing of a wax apple that would not drown, she accepted the cardboard collapse of Mrs. Rapallo’s room. Since it was the natural thing to flow, she flowed” (244). The Gothic symbolism in “the cardboard collapse of Mrs. Rapallo’s room” is dual-signified. Earlier, the symbolic *bouchée à la reine* denoted the collapse of castles – of course ruined castles are a key motif in the Gothic – and here Mrs. Rapallo’s room is metaphorically her castle. The surreal imagery depicts Gothic otherworldliness; a grotesquery of gloom redolent of Miss Havisham’s room at Satis House. In *Great Expectations* the decay represented loss of hope: here though the destruction represents the commencement of the disintegration of the alter – “the cardboard

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<sup>8</sup> Ian Donaldson, “Return to Abyssinia.” *Essays in Criticism* 14.2 (1964): 210-4. Donaldson alludes to the recurring connection between Australia and Abyssinia in White’s oeuvre and its analogy with Johnson’s *Rasselas* in *The Aunt’s Story* in particular.

collapse of Mrs. Rapallo” (244) – and Theodora’s transformation to fluidity. Likewise, Lieselotte kills the alter Wetherby and in so doing effectively destroys her host alter. The Gothic focus on death and destruction is evoked through the surreal nature of these alters’ deaths.

Indeed, Lieselotte’s existence as an alter had become problematical for Theodora.

Her only solution is to kill her in her mind:

‘Then we can do nothing?’ asked the dead voice of Lieselotte.

Her voice was grey smoke.

‘Do? Yes, we shall do. Lieselotte?’ Theodora called.

We shall do, Theodora heard her own thin voice promising smoke. But where and who was

Lieselotte was also problematical. (246)

As I have demonstrated the final destruction of Mrs. Rapallo was prefigured through the collapse of her “cardboard” room. Her ultimate demise is equally macabre and Gothic-like. Theodora imagines Mrs. Rapallo’s death from the exterior of the Hotel du Midi, a deeply symbolic position. The window in which Mrs. Rapallo burns resembles a painting. Indeed, both in the dining room and at the picnic, her description evokes images of John Singer Sargent’s paintings. To elaborate: “Elsie van Tuyl looked a million dollars, in white satin, by Sargent, over the dining-room mantelpiece” (158), could refer to either “Mrs. Henry White” (1883), “Lady Agnew of Lochnaw” (1892-3), or “Mrs. Ralph Curtis” (1898). Again, at the picnic, where, “Mrs. Rapallo sulked, and her eyelids oozed, and she tilted her parasol at the sun” (223), could refer to Sargent’s “Reading” (1911).<sup>9</sup> The art of painting a character of the imagination gives credence to the hypothesis that Theodora has subconsciously created an image in her mind of Mrs. Rapallo. The notion is substantiated

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<sup>9</sup> Refer also to Patrick White, *The Living and the Dead* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1987). In this, his second novel, first published in 1941, White describes Adelaide Blenkinsop’s dinner party in caustic detail and alludes to the portrait of her mother by Sargent. Ironically, she (Adelaide) is described thus: “She was smart, but not too smart, in spite of Molyneux, in white satin. She melted, flowed in white satin . . . she swept across the stairhead in a blaze of somewhat glacial light” (204). This imagery is evocative of Marcel Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase”; the irony lies in the clothed/unclashed paradox evident in my comparison. That paradox and its relation to food was discussed at length in “Cannibalistic Love.”

further if one recalls Theodora's earlier musings on Mrs. Rapallo, "on whose face she had not yet decided, but it wore a purple bloom" (136). As Brady points out, art, and she alludes to *all* art, "allows the individual to assess himself [*sic*], and his situation and so establish some mastery of understanding" (1974, 49). Through the transference of traumatic situations in her childhood to an imaginary painting, Theodora dissociated herself from her emotional response to those traumas.

Herein lies the link with Gothicism and its leitmotif of anomalous psychological conditions. The metaphorical destruction of the alter beyond "the window ... encrusted by fire. ... [that] had a considerable, stiff jewelled splendour of its own," literally presents Theodora as destroyer of her perverse artwork in much the same way as Lieselotte destroyed her paintings. Indeed the metaphorical destruction prefigures the destructive fire. In this earlier vignette Lieselotte, who tells "fairy-tale[s]" (166) and who paints the music of myths (167), takes Theodora to "a large room, somewhere high, the light purified by an immensity of surrounding space, the walls pierced by the open windows of pictures" (167). Theodora is drawn to a painting depicting "a glass pagoda from which her own soul looked out, flaming like a bird of paradise," but Lieselotte "took a knife, and she smashed the glass pagoda with its flaming bird" (167). Lieselotte declares that: "We have destroyed much, but we have not destroyed enough. We must destroy everything, everything, even ourselves. Then at last when there is nothing, perhaps we shall live" (168). As Helen Hewitt points out, "White often refers to paintings as windows: windows into another's consciousness, windows into unsuspected depths in oneself, windows of illumination" (26). She goes on to compare the image above with Klee's Kairouan watercolours of Tunisia. However, at this juncture the omniscient narrator declares that "Theodora, because she knew that this was not yet her crisis, went away" (AS 168).



What I argue here is that the irrationality of Theodora's ruminations/actions conveys an irrational/rational response to an acute disorder, DID. Paradoxically, there is a sense of rationality in Theodora's recognition that the destruction of her *artwork*, in other words her imagination, was not "her crisis." Whether or not this action reveals irrationality/rationality is unclear. What it does reveal, however, is that order can be found in disorder, especially if one considers how the crumbling *bouchée à la reine* symbolises Theodora's psychological state. In other words, since the phoenix rises from the flame, destruction does not negate renewal.

Indeed, the reference to painting evokes the condition that Marie-Henri Beyne experienced. Stendahl syndrome is a neologism created by Dr. Graziella Magherini, chief of psychiatry at Santa Maria Nuova hospital in Florence in 1979 (Turner 151). It is the term for psychosomatic dizziness at over-exposure to art that Marie-Henri Beyle suffered in 1817 when he visited Florence, in particular Santa Croce, where he was overcome with emotion. Later on that day he recorded in his diary, 'leaving Santa Croce, I had a pulsating heart, what they call nerves in Berlin; the life within me was exhausted' (qtd. in Turner 151).<sup>10</sup> The reader experiences similar vertiginous emotions in attempting to understand "Jardin Exotique" where a sense of disorientation induces an amnesiac-like hallucinatory state. As Picasso articulated, "The artist is a receptacle for emotions that come from all over the place: from the sky, from the earth, from a scrap of paper, from a passing shape, from a spider's web" (*Dictionary of Quotations* 575).

Furthermore, to elucidate the notion of resurrection it is necessary to move back to the apocalyptic fire which destroys Lieselotte, Wetherby and Mrs. Rapallo as alters, "because fevers consume or are consumed" (AS 249); it is also revealed that neither Monsieur Durand, *le petit*, nor Henriette survived. That these three *real* characters' deaths

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<sup>10</sup> For an explanation of a life-defining moment in art, see for example Michele Vishny, "Lucienne Bloch: The New York City Murals." *Woman's Art Journal* 13.1 (Spring, 1992): 23-28.

are textually evoked in one sentence, albeit as part of Theodora's imagined scenario, places them outside the realms of the "imagined" characters, Theodora's alters, who are destroyed. Furthermore, it would appear that it was Theodora who activated the fire, particularly if one considers the imagery prior to the revelation of the alters' deaths: "'*Vite! Vite! Il y a des hommes dans la maison,*' said Theodora, salving with difficulty a few words. Her tongue was as effectual as the stiff clapper of a bell" (248). The bell resounds with an image of the pseudo-murder of Mrs. Goodman, discussed earlier: "pale as a goat's, and the tongue clapping like a bell" (123).<sup>11</sup> Such a claim is substantiated by Sokolnikov's reminiscent statement: "It reminds me a little of the occasion at Dvinsk when the barracks caught fire. Afterwards, at an inquiry, it was established that it was arson" (249). Theodora could not let Sokolnikov "evaporate in a great, hot cloud," nor could she allow him to die, he was "deathless" (250). However, "she could not explain the certainties, even in the fierce mouths of fire" (250). Like Poe, White employs Gothic symbolism to permit the reader to analyse a murderer's mind, albeit through a fictional destruction of Theodora's alters.

However, Theodora's youngest alter, Katina, survives the fire and leaves by the same mode of transport as Theodora, thereby establishing a connection with the journeys that Theodora undertakes. She has undertaken a literal journey of escape from the confines of Australia and she has undertaken a journey of parallel consciousness within that escape during which she encounters, acknowledges, and finally destroys her alters: "There was no reason to suppose that this was not the sequence of events" (251).

The Gothic symbolism and its link to food may seem tenuous in the above discussion. However, given the macabre nature of the narrative, and the fact that the discussion focuses on the symbolic dining room, the link is sustained. The omphalos of the

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<sup>11</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (1991) 150-51. According to Marr White was irked to find that a critic had claimed that his writing technique was influenced by Ernest Hemingway. However, I contend that the similarity between Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and the film made from the book in 1943 must have influenced White sub-consciously. Whether or not Hemingway influenced his writing style is open to conjecture.

novel, the *bouchée à la reine*, was destroyed but not consumed. The fire both consumes and destroys Theodora's alters.

## Notions of Nuts

I have identified the symbolic *bouchée à la reine* as the omphalos of *The Aunt's Story*. However, nuts are another recurring food symbol. The vernacular inference in the word nuts obviously alludes to Theodora's condition. Elkort suggests that the word nut, used in this context to mean mad, comes from the walnut. The walnut is shaped like a brain, so eating it was believed to make one smarter (3). The reference to walnuts recalls the dénouement of the luncheon vignette in the dining room: "There is something to be done, but what, she said. She began to walk across the carpet through the walnut shells and the extinct smiles" (161). However, as this thesis continuously asserts, the depth of meaning in the textual references to words is "abyss-[like]" (AS 252) and here the similarity between George Lukás' "Grand Hotel Abyss" in *The Theory of the Novel* warrants a mention. Lukás' Hotel was poised on the edge of Heidegger's concept of the knowledge of "Being" culminating in nihilism (Brady 1977, 134-5).

The introduction of the diminutive Katina as the first dissociative alter in the *jardin exotique* outside the Hotel du Midi corresponds with my hypothesis of DID. Frequently, the youngest dissociative alter is created initially in response to childhood trauma.

Significantly, in this discussion, not only is Katina Theodora's first "physical" encounter with an alter, but Katina also introduces the nut motif that I will argue is essential to an understanding of "Jardin Exotique." Katina's reference to "*pistaches*" (143) recalls young Frank Parrott's ambiguous attitude to ice cream sundaes: "he would choose a sundae with marshmallow and chopped nuts, which last time made him sick, but it was good" (18). The allusion also re-evokes the perverse sexuality element of the text discussed in relation to the

General and Katina, and prefigures Mrs. Rapallo's reference to "*pistache*" (156) ice-cream, the relevance of which will be discussed shortly.

So, the nuts link the notion of childhood magical thinking to the appearance of Theodora's diminutive alter.<sup>12</sup> Here too is another link between mental processes and the Gothic discussed above. As Lucie Armitt points out, "when magic realism meets the contemporary gothic we start to carve out a cartography for the unconscious" (308). However, in this discussion the character, or more precisely alter, who is most closely aligned with nuts is Mrs. Rapallo. Nuts also delineate Mrs. Rapallo as dominant alter. Indeed, a tenuous link between the symbolic nuts can be found in the prawns/words/time symbolism discussed earlier, especially if one considers the shell that encompasses both prawns and nuts. That shell is encapsulated in the contentious nautilus shell, which also symbolises Mrs. Rapallo's dominance. By deciphering such enigmatic clues in the symbolic foodstuffs, a unique interpretation of Theodora's condition is reached:

'Mrs. Rapallo,' said the General, 'you have bought the shell.'

'I have not *borrowed* it,' Mrs. Rapallo said.

'Mrs. Rapallo, may I inform you it is mine?'

Mrs. Rapallo's eyelids denied that possibilities existed in the cage. She accepted only sunflower seeds and facts. (156)

Clearly, possibilities don't exist "in the cage," and whether that cage is metaphor for the mind, in which case Mrs. Rapallo is rendered obsolete, or whether the cage depicts the entrapment of women, is open to interpretation. Whatever its meaning, the allusion echoes Chaucer's Alison in "The Miller's Tale" who was said to be kept "narwe in cage" (line 3224). Of course, such a description of the free-spirited, feisty and unpretentious Alison is itself ironic, a fact to consider in the similar allusion to Mrs. Rapallo.

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<sup>12</sup> See Carol Nemeroff and Paul Rozin, "'You are What You Eat': Applying the Demand-Free 'Impressions' Technique to an Unacknowledged Belief," *Ethos* 17.1 (Mar. 1989): 50-69. *JSTOR*. James Cook U. 3 Nov. 2005, <http://www.jstor.org/search>. They discuss the concept of "magical thinking" in relation to food and its consumption.

As mentioned earlier, Mrs. Rapallo eventually emerges as Theodora's dominant alter. In the quote above, however, the General, as alter, attempts to assert his masculine power over Mrs. Rapallo. Her denial is counterpointed by her bird-like acceptance of "sunflower seeds." The ambiguity of whether or not she is enclosed is partially clarified through the metaphoric sunflower seeds. White conflates "sunflower seeds and facts" and in doing so projects a valency to the acceptance of facts. From a nutritional perspective, sunflower seeds have a high level of the amino acid tryptophan that produces the neurotransmitter serotonin in the brain; a calmative. The other two neurotransmitters most commonly associated with mood are dopamine and norepinephrine. A deficiency of norepinephrine results in mood disorders, but a diet high in the amino acid tyrosine can also produce stress and anxiety. Therefore, there is a very fine balance between ingesting enough or not enough. This type of scientific data exemplifies the continuing ambiguity that surrounds the consumption of food. Further, that ambiguity highlights the obsessive attitudes that all fields of inquiry have towards what humans ingest. Indeed, the foodstuffs that humans consume textually interweave and connect the imagery in *The Aunt's Story*, where their apparent insignificance invites a close reading in order to understand Theodora's condition.

For example, the conflation of "sunflower seeds and facts" indicates the textual relevance of birds and cages. Mrs. Rapallo is not the only alter who is aligned with bird imagery through reference to a cage. This extends to Lieselotte on at least one occasion when it appears that Wetherby attempts to strangle her: "[t]he hands were making a cage ... the hand in hand, from which temporarily the bird had flown" (197). The bird is metaphor for Lieselotte, who as Wetherby's alter cannot exist physically, nor for that matter can he. Both alters are effectively trapped in Theodora's mind.

The metaphoric mind is symbolised by Mrs. Rapallo's mannerisms which mimic those of a caged bird, and recall those of Mrs. Parrott. Her acquisitive bowerbird-like instincts are exemplified in the passage below, where the objects that she buys are linked figuratively: the "spool of thread" intertwines with the "*pistache* green" ice-cream which, through the nut imagery, conflates the shells of nuts with the nautilus. Finally, Mrs. Rapallo's accusation neatly combines the nuts/consumption/words imagery that permeates the passage.

I bought me a spool of thread. *J'ai mangé une glace*. It was a lovely *pistache* green. And I bought, yes, Alyosha Sergei, I *bought* my nautilus. Of course I bought it. There it was. In full sail. I knew I have never seen perfection, never before, not even as a girl. And now it is mine. My beauty, I have waited all my life.'

But Alyosha Sergei Sokolnikov could not utter enough. Words did not fit the passage of his mouth. His hands could not reduce their size.

'You are a thief,' he said. 'It is immensely obvious. If there were any delicacy left in your American handbag, you would not have stolen what it is not possible to buy. Because it is not possible to buy, Mrs. Ra-*pall-o*, what is already mine. It is mine from staring at, for many years. It responded through the glass. A tender, a subtle relationship has existed, which now in an instant you destroy. Oh, what an arrogant woman! What a terrible state of affairs! What assassination of the feelings! I do not hesitate to accuse. You are more than a cheeky thief. You are a murderess. You have killed a relationship,' the General cried.

'Alyosha Sergei, you are nuts,' Mrs. Rapallo said. (156)

The acquisitive elements of the passage also evoke images of Huntly Clarkson and his desire to possess Theodora. Moreover, for the female characters in *The Aunt's Story* handbags convey an ontological meaning: Grace Parrott's "mother's handbag" that contained "the lozenges in the little box" (48); after her encounter with Wetherby in the garden "she looked into her handbag to find some reassuring object, something she had seen before, something all-dimensional" (165); "the practical handbag" (260, 263, 275) that contains "startling objects" (263). Mrs. Parrott's existence is tenuous in a patriarchal society; her voice is "weak [and] pale"(31). Her bag may be "full of rich things" but she is unable to express them. Similarly, for Theodora her handbag and its contents signify her

identity. Theodora appears not to recognise the articles in her handbag, a diagnostic sign of DID, entailing “the discovery of writing, drawings, or other productions or objects among the patient’s personal belongings that he or she does not recognize and cannot account for” (qtd. in Oltmanns 87).

Moving back to the sunflower seeds, from a national perspective, the sunflower species is native to North America and agronomists from Russia were the first to cultivate an agricultural hybrid (<http://www.sunflowernsa.com/seed/>). Thus, their origin represents the conflict between Mrs. Rapallo, an American, and the General who is Russian. Indeed, the nexus between nuts and cultural identity is further exemplified in the fact that walnut is a combination of two Anglo-Saxon words: *wealh*, *foreigners*, and *hnutu*, *nut*. Because walnuts were imported into England they were dubbed *wealhhnutu*, the *foreign nut* (Elkort 67). The relevance of the etymology of the walnut becomes apparent in the following passages:

‘Sometimes the Russians are very Russian,’ Mrs. Rapallo remarked.  
She had a hard American core from which she seldom found relief.  
‘But I see,’ she said, crushing walnuts through her gloves, ‘I see that somebody has come.’  
‘Yes,’ said Theodora. (157)

Mrs. Elsie Rapallo, *née* van Tuyl, or what remained, and what had been added, contemplated her nautilus, as if this quite luminously justified the hard and bitter facts. The nautilus sailed on the bamboo *étagère*, now past, now present, materialised.

‘Incidentally,’ said Mrs. Rapallo, cracking another walnut in her perpetual gloves, ‘Incidentally, I have news.’

The wrinkles in her face opened and closed fearfully. You felt that her wounds had failed to heal. But she eyed the *salle à manger* without pain, waiting for someone to contradict. (159)

All the other alters are absent at this juncture. Elsie Rapallo is a “hard American” who literally and figuratively crushes the General, another foreigner, by “crushing walnuts.” It would appear that she is exposing her knowledgeable and experienced interior. She is a dominant alter because Theodora recognises her as a displaced person in a hostile

environment. It is also worthwhile considering that this scene takes place in a French, and so European, hospice and that many issues arise from the old European culture as opposed to the new American or more poignantly new Australian culture. More relevant, however, is the cultural and historical timeframe in which White wrote *The Aunt's Story*. The impending Cold War would have been at the forefront of his political consciousness, and World War II would still have been a fresh horror in his memory (Colmer 25). I posit here that White highlights the question of what constitutes factual acuity. The reference to “hard and bitter facts” in the quote above recalls Mrs. Rapallo’s acceptance of “only sunflower seeds and facts.” The apparent nonsensical slippage between reality and illusion in fact parodies hegemonic hierarchies and their dissemination of “facts” as illusory devices to circumvent the *reality* of global affairs.

A clue to the mimetic nature of the text is given in Lieselotte’s declaration that, ““you must understand we have entered the age of *Ersatz*’,” and she confesses her dependence on Wetherby, “To the end. To the end” (197). Theodora learns that “it is no longer possible ... to distinguish which is which” (197). The enigmatic “which” is non-referential: syntactically it is not clear whether it is a pronoun or an adjective. She decides that “Love is undoubtedly an acrostic, and that is why I have failed, ... as she listened to teeth on teeth grinding out words, and silences give clues” (197-8). Those silences depict the interstices of the text, the concealed meanings enmeshed within the words.

Finally, through the friability of the perished *marrons glacés* in the quote below, the notion of existence is re-evoked:

*Le petit* has brought a dish of very old *marrons glacés*, that were partly sugar, partly dust.

‘Gloria,’ said Mrs. Rapallo to Theodora Goodman, ‘is my daughter. The Principessa. She made a brilliant marriage. My lovely Gloria,’ she said.

And she stroked the nautilus, as if she were touching a distance, a more transparent morning, in which she herself stood against the white columns and the yachts.

‘*Enfin*,’ she said, her basketwork creaking as she got up.

‘*Madame ne mangera pas de marrons glacés?*’ grinned *le petit*.



*'Oh, ca, c'est dégoûtant,'* said Mrs. Rapallo, shaking the dust from a paper frill. *'And besides, tu sais que je ne mange presque rien. Jamais.* It is dangerous,' she said meditatively.

She looked in the mirror at her own face, the crystallised mauve and crimson, from which time might soon take the final bite. (160)

That it is *le petit*, a *real* character, who offers Mrs. Rapallo, an alter, the diminished *marrons glacés* highlights the question of what constitutes reality. Indeed, the passage is replete with food analogies and the fact that Mrs. Rapallo asserts that *"tu sais que je ne mange presque rien. Jamais"*, substantiates the claim that she is not *real*: as an alter it is not necessary for her to eat. The proleptic passage anticipates both the demise of Gloria the Principessa as fabrication and the demise of Mrs. Rapallo, with her memories reduced to insignificant dust. She *becomes* the "very old *marron glacés*" no longer the tasty morsel of a sweet chestnut preserved in sugar, but a parody of a "face ... crystallised mauve and crimson, from which time might soon take the final bite." Time does ultimately "take the final bite," but the anthropomorphised time alone consumes, an observation that gives credence to the symbolic relevance of food and its performative aspects in "Jardin Exotique."

So, through an array of symbolic foodstuffs in "Jardin Exotique," White delineates the various aspects and characters which support the claim that Theodora suffers from DID, whilst concomitantly questioning not only the "reality" of Theodora's existence, but also the "reality" of "facts." In this way the dual meaning of nuts offers a springboard to analyse how food functions in the text and how it relates to an assessment of madness.

## **Pictorial Picnics**

Indeed, the performative picnic in "Jardin Exotique," where a plethora of hitherto unexpressed or concealed emotions is aired, is the pivotal encounter for all of Theodora's

alters. Although it lacks the impact of the final fire scene, the picnic vignette is imbued with hidden meaning and clues to the state of Theodora's mind. Indeed, as discussed earlier, the fire is the purging, or more accurately cleansing, of Theodora's parallel consciousnesses, literally paving the way for her spiritual awakening and transcendence (Driesen 83). The picnic is the initial step to that transcendence.

It is Katina who innocently suggests the picnic, immediately following Theodora's intervention in the perverse sexuality episode between Katina and the General. Katina's suggestion induces in Theodora the wry memory of "another stiff group beside the church" (221): the time when Frank Parrott forgot the picnic he had promised. "'What picnic?'" (68) is actually uttered twice, rendering Theodora insignificant in his appraisal, yet the earlier picnic signals the importance of the picnic in "Jardin Exotique" (Herring 1990, 83):

The windows of the little wintergarden, blurred by the action of the salt air, did not disclose. There was no guide. There was only a general and continuous, consuming sea sound.

'Dear Miss Goodman, I wish that I could tell. I wish that I knew,' Katina Pavlou cried. 'But it is nothing. Nothing. Nothing at all.'

So it is to take place then, Theodora knew. The picnic will disclose. There will be stuffed eggs, and conversation, and silences, and swords. But the picnic will be made. Already the little wintergarden could not contain the event. It pressed, it brimmed, rustling with the barely suppressed wind of excitement the brown bodies of dead flies.

'A picnic?' Mrs. Rapallo said. 'How queer. And how uncomfortable.'

She propelled her words outward like deliberate amethysts, which she then observed, with some pleasure and some distaste, from beneath bluish skin. (221)

In this passage Mrs. Rapallo observes her words ambiguously, as if they were written on a page. The text thereby intimates the textuality of existence. Once more, words, whether written or spoken, are imbued with surrealism, recalling the accuracy of their depiction that is frequently alluded to in this thesis and indeed in the novel: "words, whether written or spoken, were at most frail slat bridges over chasms" (128).

In this picnic vignette, occurring outdoors rather than inside like the dining room luncheon, Theodora's awakening is played out through her alters:

Even if it only half explained, it was necessary to say. Dry words can nourish.

It was as necessary as food. Theodora knew, pushing towards Sokolnikov the hard-boiled eggs. It was necessary that Sokolnikov should feel the final twinge. It was necessary that Katina Pavlou should discover fire. And Theodora Goodman, watching the charade move with all the hopes and hesitations of the human mechanism, knew that because she loved and pitied, the humiliation and the pain were also necessarily hers. (226)

Theodora's emotional attachment to the characters in "Jardin Exotique" is not merely empathy, as some critics have posited. Theodora "knew" the emotions of her alters, because at this point she is finally acknowledging them and the impact they have had upon her life. The diversionary tactics that she had deployed emerge as a "charade" enacted in her mind. When approached by Wetherby, she states: "I have reached the age of tolerance, ... [i]t is agreeably compact. Everything fits in, in time." (227).

Furthermore, Sokolnikov's cracking of the "hard-boiled eggs" and their shells becoming "mountains" (227) are proleptic for the disintegration of Theodora's alters. These cooked eggs parody the notion of eggs hatching and creating new life. Significantly in Buddhism the "eggshell is the 'shell of ignorance' and breaking through it is second birth and the attainment of enlightenment, transcending time and space" (Cooper 60). Miss Grigg's enigmatic aphorism: "Some people never know there's nothing like food" grounds the text in the quotidian, while simultaneously elevating it to another plane of meaning. That other dimension is Theodora's parallel consciousness, where the "charade" of her alters revolves around food symbolism. Theodora would like to believe that in acknowledging her alters she has reached a perfect state of being, yet "perfection, alas, is breakable, whether it is marble, or terracotta, or the more fragile groups of human statuary"

(230). Theodora must break away from the deceptive appearance of perfection. More poignant perhaps, is the axiom that perfection is unattainable.

The “Jardin Exotique” section of *The Aunt’s Story* exhibits White’s attempt to achieve textual perfection through fragmentation. Central to that fragmentation is Theodora’s parallel consciousness, largely symbolised by food, where White dramatises the dependency of human identity on memory. He extends that knowledge, however, by elaborating how an individual’s sense of self can be compromised through the inability to confront trauma. Theodora’s ontological development is largely thwarted in her formative years and is increasingly devalued in adulthood. Those limits are imposed not only by her mother, but by restrictive cultural and societal paradigms that confront her in twentieth-century Australia. Ultimately, she must take hold of her own destiny, even if that self-empowerment leads to disillusion and fragmentation.

### **CODA: “HOLSTIUS”**

*“Now that I am free to write, shall I ever dare to sort out my disordered thoughts? This is a frightening prospect ... I reel if I look inside my churning abyss of a mind” (MMO 174).*

*Then, in a gust, Theodora knew that her abstraction also did not fit. She did not fit the houses. Although she had in her practical handbag her destination in writing, she was not sure that paper might not tear. Although she was insured against several acts of violence, there was ultimately no safeguard against the violence of personality. This was less controllable than fire. In the bland corn song, in the theme of days, Theodora Goodman was a discord. Those mouths which attempted her black note rejected it wryly. They glossed over something that had strayed out of some other piece, or slow fire (AS 260).*

All the imagery in *The Aunt’s Story* and its association with Theodora’s imagined alters are condensed into the coda, “Holstius.” In parallel, this coda to Chapter Two summarises Theodora’s mental condition as already interpreted through food symbolism. Concomitant with this summation is a parallel reading that challenges the theory that has been applied, of institutionalised notions of the personality disorder, DID. In considering the textual bases

for this tergiversation (*volte-face*) I re-conceptualise food as mental pabulum within an intellectual rather than an intuitive sphere, although intuition and intellectualism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, such a theory offers a concatenation to Chapter Three, in which I discuss how food symbolism defines the structure of *Voss*.

Here, however, food is regarded as defining a state of mind. The symbolic foodstuffs, I have argued, indicate Theodora's fractured sensibilities. Yet "Holstius" offers little food symbolism, indicating not empty-mindedness, but tenacity. Indeed, the notion of obdurateness is evident in the name Holstius, from *holt*, denoting inflexibility, or literally woodenness. White made a similar claim when asked "Why Holstius?" He replied, "'I knew a man called Holstius and I suppose I liked the suggestion of *Holz* (wood) for a sturdy, though non-existent character'" (qtd. in Marr *A Life* 243). Anagrammatically, however, there is a further clue: "Holt is us" – a transitional compound of characters into a single imaginary one.

Initially, however, in her quest for self-unity Theodora attempts reconciliation with humanity, the Johnson family.<sup>13</sup> Yet at their "house that had been built purposely for living" (AS 264) she is unable to eat: "she swallowed with difficulty the mouthfuls of warm smooth noodles" (271). In other words, she literally cannot ingest the notion of a shared life. Nevertheless, her inward desperation for affirmation through interpersonal relationships, a characteristic of DID (Brennar161), ultimately transmutes into an imaginative self-affirmation: "She embraced with love the silence of her own room" (281). Theodora's strength lies in her ability to transcend her perceived disorder: she alone unites her separate identities into a single dispensible identity, Holstius: "Just as the mind used and disposed of the figments of Mrs. Rapallo, and Katina Pavlou, and Sokolnikov. And now Holstius. She watched the rough texture of his coat for the first indications of decay"

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<sup>13</sup> See Ian Donaldson, "Return to Abyssinia" and Manfred Mackenzie "Abyssinia Lost and Regained" for arguments concerning the relevance of the Johnson name.

(277). That her traumatic memories are condensed into one male character signifies the final step in her recovery of selfhood. Holstius is a composite of the male characters (Beatson 279), who “infused [Theodora] with a warmth of love that was most thinly separated from expectation of sorrow” (276). In their second and final “meeting” the photographic clarity of Holstius is enigmatic: “his clothes were the same stiff daguerreotype. His expression had not yet evolved out of the shadow of the hat” (283). Paradoxically, the blurring of his expression connotes a sense of incompleteness, but it is Holstius who directs Theodora to her fate.

From a feminist perspective, such patriarchal subordination could be construed as a Pyrrhic victory. However, Holstius emerges as the “‘dissociative self’ [that] must be dissolved in order for integration of alter personalities to occur” (Brenner 1999, 344). It is he who is subordinated through dissolution while Theodora is the victor: “In the act that she was performing, walking up the slow hill towards the house, his moral support was assured. Now his presence was superfluous” (AS 285). She has chosen her own *reality* and her strength lies in her self-affirmation, despite her implied incarceration in an institution. Although psychoanalysts have expressed concern about the “unification” of alters,<sup>14</sup> I argue that Theodora represents the multidimensional elements of yin and yang, a philosophical dualism that is deceptively complex and multi-fragmentary on closer analysis. The success of a positivistic examination of Theodora’s condition reveals that a refractive personality does not necessitate a negative reading. Refraction contributes imaginatively to her self-recovery and permits the transcendental aspect of her rejuvenation. As Marr notes, White “was always sceptical of those who had a scheme that gave all the answers” (Marr 128).

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<sup>14</sup> See for example Brennar, “The Characterological Basis of Multiple Personality” and Kluft, “An Overview of the Psychotherapy of Dissociative Identity Disorder.”

My theory certainly does not give “all the answers,” yet from a semasiological perspective, embedded within the text is a wealth of symbolic meaning:

All through the middle of America there was a trumpeting of corn. Its full, yellow, tremendous notes pressed close to the swelling sky. There were whole acres of time in which the yellow corn blared as if for a judgement. It had taken up and swallowed all other themes, whether belting iron, or subtler insinuating steel, or the frail human reed. Inside the movement of corn the train complained. The train complained of the frustration of distance, that resists, that resists. Distance trumpeted with corn. (255)

The vastness of the yellow corn that is aligned with Theodora on her train journey connotes not only the ingestion “of all other themes” but also the interconnectivity of cultural symbols. The description connects American maize with the moon; and in Chinese symbolism the moon is the essence of the yin, the feminine principle in nature. Symbolically the locus of Theodora’s train journey is significant: in America (and Greece), maize is associated with the tree and, as already indicated, the name Holstius is a derivative of the German *holz* (Cooper 107). Harmonising the colour yellow with Theodora’s appearance evokes the concept of “simultaneism” found in orphism that I have already discussed. Theodora’s mind is now able to grasp “the simultaneous existence of an infinitude of interrelated states of being” (Spate 3). So, I contend, through the corn imagery, White, who was influenced by Stendahl,<sup>15</sup> is trying to harmonise Theodora’s condition. As Korsmeyer notes: “obvious reference to objects and events make these foods representational, and to that degree the claim that foods cannot represent or refer to anything outside themselves is demonstrably false” (Korsmeyer 32). Thus a philological analysis of “Holstius” demonstrates the interstices of Theodora’s irrational and rational

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<sup>15</sup> See Marr *A Life*, p.127.

vectors, where she is compelled to reach a state of infinity which is essentially a unification process:

Theodora Goodman sat beside the window in the train. Her hands were open. She had been carrying a weight, and now she was exhausted, slack, from receiving full measure, a measure of corn. Against her head the white mat gave her face a longer, paler, yellow shape. Like a corn cob. But in spite of outer appearances, Theodora Goodman suggested that she had retreated into her own distance and did not intend to come out.

This distressed the man in the laundered shirt, who wished to tell about his home, his mother, his cocktail cabinet, the vacation he had taken in Bermuda, and how he had sold papers as a boy. He sat in a corner, opposite Theodora Goodman, and felt and looked nervous, and fingered his mentholed chin, and rustled cellophane.

Or he talked, and heard his own voice made small.

Because all this time the corn song destroyed the frailer human reed. It destroyed the tons of pork the man's firm had canned. It dumped the man's cans beside the railroad track. It consumed the man's plans for better pork. The well-laundered, closely-shaven man scratched his slack white muscles through his beautiful, hygienic shirt, and could not understand. He could not understand why, beside the strong yellow notes of corn, his voice should fall short. He chewed popcorn, chewing for confidence, the white and pappy stuff that is a decadence of corn.

Theodora heard the difference between doing and being. The corn could not help itself. It was. (255)

The above passage differentiates between the material world endowed with consumption and greed and the spiritual world that Theodora realises is one that she can transcend to. Her "quest for gnosis" has begun (Bulman-May 55). She has projected the human characteristics that she deplures into her alters and can now reconcile the light and dark of the human condition. The abundance of yellow symbolism indicates the transformative power of "spiritual sunshine" (*soleil morale*) similar to religious ecstasy – an illumination (qtd. in Seigel 80-81). The "desiccated spinster" (Riemer 352) thus achieves a new understanding through a process of fragmentation, the "difference between doing and being." She is the corn that "could not help itself [she] was" (AS 255). Her life of "doing" and its attendant restrictions are no longer imperative, she can now be. The oneness of the fields of corn, rather than the kernels, renders the landscape less hieroglyphic and reflects



Theodora's quest for a simple state of mind (Bulman-May 1). After alighting from the train:

She walked. She smiled for this discovery of freedom.

In her hand she still held, she realised, the practical handbag, that last link with the external Theodora Goodman ... She rummaged in the handbag, amongst the startling objects that people carry in such receptacles, and found aspirin and eau-de-Cologne, the snapshot of children in a row, nickels and bills and a sticky lozenge. (263)

Theodora does therefore eventually discover her own life and her own reality as an on-going flux of opposites, and accepts that "there is no end to the lives of Theodora Goodman." Through the internal communication with her alters time is now linear for Theodora, rather than fragmentary – an element of her recovery from DID (Schwartzberg 83). However, paradoxically she recognises the self as being multiple and therefore essentially unknowable (Brady 2005, 110). To allude to the self-monitoring of time advocated by psychoanalysts, Theodora dismisses time, "[b]ecause the death rattle of time is far more acute and painful, and prolonged, when its impermanence is disguised as permanence" (AS 275). Essentially "the thin house, with elongated windows, like a lantern" (274) is a corporeal metaphor for Theodora, and syllogistically, the almost empty but dusty interior represents her mind. The linear trajectory of her journey culminates in the upper room of the house, "above the disintegrating world, light and silence ate into the hard, resisting barriers of reason, hinting at some ultimate moment of clear vision" (275). First, however, she must clear her mind: she commences cleaning.

An explanation for the paradoxical notions of interior/exterior, permanence/impermanence, and flux/stasis of time and how they relate to Theodora's condition is found in the following passage:

In the peace that Holstius spread throughout her body and the speckled shade of surrounding trees, there was no end to the lives of Theodora Goodman. These met and parted, met and parted,

movingly. They entered into each other, so that the impulse for music in Katina Pavlou's hands, and the steamy exasperation of Sokolnikov, and Mrs. Rapallo's baroque and narcotised despair were the same and understandable. And in the same way that she created lives of Theodora Goodman were interchangeable, the lives into which she had entered, making them momentarily dependent for love or hate, owing her this portion of their fluctuating personalities, whether George or Julia Goodman, only apparently deceased, or Huntly Clarkson, or Moräitis, or Lou, or Zack, these were the lives of Theodora Goodman, these too.

'So you understand?' asked Holstius, looking down from the shade and calm of his Panama hat, for there was no wind to stir it. (284)

Clearly, Katina, Sokolnikov and Mrs. Rapallo are "created." They have "entered" into her lives, whereas the *real* characters in her life "she had entered." White makes a distinction between these characters thus indicating, I maintain, that those in the "Jardin Exotique" are in fact not real, but are Theodora's alters. She understands, through the creation of Holstius, that life is multi-faceted, that "human wholeness (in the interdependence of instinct, intellect, emotion and the creative imagination)" can be achieved through an acceptance of oneself (Cotter 23).<sup>16</sup> Holstius' antinomy (two apparently correct and reasonable statements or facts that do not agree and therefore produce a contradictory and illogical conclusion) does not exclude the notion of wholeness:

'You cannot reconcile joy and sorrow,' Holstius said. 'Or flesh and marble, or illusion and reality, or life and death. For this reason, Theodora Goodman, you must accept. And you have already found that one constantly deludes the other into taking fresh shapes, so that there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and illusion of reality. Each of your several lives is evidence of this.' (278)

Rather Holstius' illogical conclusion breaks down consciousness and subconsciousness into "lucidity" and "shadows" (Shattuck 242). Dr. Rafferty, the "mild man," affirms the theory that Theodora has accepted her flaws: "Lucidity ... isn't necessarily a perpetual ailment"

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<sup>16</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, where he discusses the effects of terror in Romantic grotesque, where the only "reconciliation with the world" is through "a subjective, lyric or even mystic sphere" (39). He contrasts the absence of the mode of fear in folk culture, which disseminates total fearlessness, a factor evident in Renaissance literature where any uncertainty is translated into "gaiety" (39).

(AS 286). As in “The Purloined Letter,” where Dupin distinguishes an integrated self in his differentiation of the mathematician from the poet, or the intellectual from the imaginative being (Fisher 86), Theodora is fully integrated, ““charred and purified”” (qtd. in Marr 243). She is “the doubtful rose [that] trembled and glittered, leading a life of its own” (287). In such a way the symbolic food imagery, or lack of it in “Holstius,” “lead[s] a life of its own.” It indicates each of Theodora’s “several lives” (71). However, although the imagery suggests a symbolic whole, there is a lack of codification at the dénouement. I suggest that the openness of the coda indicates Theodora’s resistance to a wielding of power, the power that comes from closure (Newey 71).

### **Conclusion:**

*“The primary imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (Coleridge Dictionary of Quotations 227).*

In *The Aunt’s Story* White moves on several planes in depicting the food imagery and its relevance to Theodora’s state of mind, the “obsessions eating deeper and deeper into her personality” (*Beston Island*, 42). Moreover, the varied meanings derived from the symbolism of the food imagery undermine the dichotomies of illusion and reality, freedom and obligation, distance and nearness, fragmentation and unity. Through the asymmetrical structure of the novel the reader perceives the joining of these apparent opposites in the coda section. Thus the food imagery offers insight into the neuroses of Theodora’s mind and of her quest for spiritual truth and her ultimate abdication of conventional identity, an anonymity that leads to a “pureness of being” (Marr 242). She arrives at the unknown through a derangement of all the senses (Seigel 219). The self is purified from the quotidian, beyond time and space. The interstices between the inchoate flux and regulated

stasis of time create an alternate locus for Theodora to project her flawed personality, to achieve “the beauty of indifference” (Seigel 250).

Contrary to Lawson’s interpretation, I have demonstrated that there is hermeneutic certainty to *The Aunt’s Story*, and that White does conform to the Modernist approach of offering a “key-symbol,” at the denouement (Lawson 1992, 10).<sup>17</sup> Although there have been conflicting interpretations of that “key-symbol,” I have shown how that *very* multiplicity alerts to the fragmentation of Theodora’s personality into a series of alters, and how that fragmentation is represented through the central food image of the *bouchée à la reine*. That central food image is multifarious and is the conduit for the other food imagery in *The Aunt’s Story*. At the dénouement, the glittering ham bone of Meroë transmutes into the “glittering rose” atop Theodora’s hat. To finalise this hypothesis I quote White’s comments from *Flaws*: “... the great hat she always wore looked insignificant, extinct. Dusk was when it flowered, becoming for me the distinctive symbol of the Mad Woman” (20). Whether Theodora is “charred and purified” or “the Mad Woman” is, for White, obviously unclear. However, the diversity of meaning that can be derived from the food symbolism in *The Aunt’s Story* indicates the depth and multi-dimensional realms of the imagination upon which it feeds.

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, although Lawson claims that *The Aunt’s Story* lacks unity and posits that “the novel unsettles us as conventional readers ... by *appearing* to offer a couple of very familiar narrative conventions” (Lawson, 1992, 9), my reading of *The Aunt’s Story* asserts that White *does* write in a traditional Hegelian Triad framework, whereby the “conflict between the Thesis and the Antithesis is resolved into, even contained by, the new harmony and completeness of the Synthesis” (Lawson 1992, 9). Furthermore, using the trope of food, I argue that the novel *is* a traditional quest novel and that Theodora’s journey *is* one of self-discovery.

# CHAPTER THREE: FOOD AND MYTH: *Voss*<sup>1</sup>

## DES[S]ERT EXOTIQUE

*“Human behaviour is a series of lunges, of which, it is sometimes sensed, the direction is inevitable” (V 14).*

*“To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself,” said Voss” (34).*

*“To such as Mr. Bonner, the life we live is not a part of history; life is too personal, and history is not” (155).*

In undermining the Christian narrative framework upon which *Voss* is constructed,<sup>2</sup> White, as I contend, explores the creation of myths and how they affect and continue to produce Australia’s conceptualisation of its society and culture.<sup>3</sup> Approaching my analysis from the theoretical position of Roland Barthes, I view myth as an ideological construct, and argue that in *Voss* White subverts the leading myths upon which Australian society and culture are constructed, whilst concurrently providing an historical narrative that critiques colonialism. Indeed, the paradoxical nature of the representation of history is found in the structural framework that upholds society. That framework is grounded in existence, for which food is one essential element. Congruently, the myths explored in *Voss* are largely signalled through food, both literally and symbolically. By identifying and interpreting these signifiers, this chapter offers a new interpretation of *Voss* and elucidates how the

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<sup>1</sup> When my research and thinking for this thesis was already well advanced, I read Jen Harrison, “Incarnations: Exploring the Human Condition through Patrick White’s *Voss* and Nikos Kazantzakis’ *Captain Michales*,” Diss. U of Sydney, March 2004. Many of the ideas promulgated, largely in Chapter One, had already occurred to me, particularly the references to food. The present chapter differs markedly from Harrison’s thesis and any minor similarities are entirely coincidental.

<sup>2</sup> See for example John and Marie Beston, “The Theme of Spiritual Progression in *Voss*,” *ARIEL* 5.3 (July 1974): 99-114. Here they base their argument on a quote from the novel: “How important it is to understand the three stages. Of God into man. Man. And man returning into God,” and how it relates to what they claim is the central theme of *Voss*.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Curthoys, “Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in White Australian Historical Mythology,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 61 (June 1999): 1. *Expanded Academic ASAP*, Thomson Gale. James Cook U. 17 Mar. 2005, <http://find.galegroup.com>. Curthoys refers to white coloniser narratives that emphasise the struggle to conquer the land as “victimological narratives.” See also Keith Garebian, “The Desert and the Garden: The Theme of Completeness in *Voss*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 22.4 (Winter 1976-77): 557-69. Garebian notes the “mythopoeic matrix” of *Voss* (564).

iconoclastic aspects of the text are positioned through food. Furthermore, I contend that food symbolises the social, psychological, physical and spiritual dynamics of *Voss* and underpins the subversive elements of the text.<sup>4</sup> Although other commentators have identified several of the topics to be discussed, none have analysed the nexus between food and myth from an hermeneutical position, nor examined how such a theory relates to the construction of Australian culture and society. As already outlined, the overarching Christian framework of *Voss* informs my premise that all myths are socially constructed and thus are subject to philosophical and theoretical destruction. However, notwithstanding the nihilistic nature of such an approach, I contend that *Voss* does offer an element of hope for all humanity, not least through its use of food symbolism.<sup>5</sup>

The myths explored in this chapter come under the heading of historical myths: colonial exploration and *terra nullius*. Indeed, the punning title of this section of my thesis is itself symbolic: the desert is the site of the leading exploration myth of Australia, the great inland sea. Furthermore, the uncharted desert in *Voss* also represents that other great myth of colonisation, *terra nullius*. Much of this study to date has been based on the assumption that words and their constructs are an integral part of how impressions are created. Congruent with this view, this section also addresses the artistic prose of *Voss* and considers how it adds potency to the representation of food. Indeed, a careful reading of Marr's biography prompts the assessment that White himself had an obsessive relationship with food. For example, during Manoly Lascaris' hospitalisation for acute pericarditis, White took a vacuum flask of food to him each night and was convinced it was paramount

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Bryan Turner, *The Body and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Sage, 1996) 169-171. Turner claims, "Whereas religio-medical dieting sought to achieve the control of the inner body - the digestive roots of passion - by purgation and restraint, the consumer diet seeks to enhance the surface of the body - the cosmetic signs of desirability - by the practices of body-maintenance."

<sup>5</sup> William Walsh, *Patrick White: Voss* (London: Arnold, 1976) 12-13. Walsh refers to "the richly creative imagination of the author" and the manner in which White weaves "an intricate web of relationships" (13). Walsh also describes the depiction of the Bonners' and their ilk thus: "White catches exactly the madeira-cake quality of this world and conveys with an exquisite skill the whiff of its manners and spirit."

to Lascaris' survival (Marr 456). Often, White's solicitous nature was enacted through food provision, but through writing his "schizoid nature" (456), his obsessions, are also apparent. As author, White displays his sense of displacement through his writing, and readers bring their own cultural prejudices to interpreting the text.

Many analysts have examined the social and cultural historicity of colonisation. My contribution is to argue that through the depiction of food in *Voss*, White contrasts two myths basic to the colonisation of Australia by juxtaposing colonial Sydney with the explorers' trajectory into the desert.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the novel's structure reflects the many transitional stages that the members of the expedition party experience. The first five chapters provide an overview of colonial Sydney in the 1840s and lay the foundation for the explorer myth. Chapter 6 details the party's initial foray away from colonial Sydney via the ocean aboard *The Osprey*, into the backwaters of Newcastle, and thence into the pastoral hinterland. From Chapter 6 onwards the chapters alternate between Sydney and the party's various *loci*. Increasingly, Laura's and Voss' imaginations come together through letters, psychic experiences, and many textual links that unite their conscious processes, particularly in the latter stages where the chapters incorporate both of their geographical *loci*. Those tenuous psychic links and their transitional depiction are further signalled and perpetuated through food symbolism.<sup>7</sup>

In this way, the psychic interplay between Voss and Laura highlights the stages of the novel, in tandem with the expedition into the desert. All the non-indigenous characters have experienced a European/Australian transition. The ambiguity of that dichotomy becomes apparent in the subversive food imagery, as it undermines the simplistic civilisation/desert dichotomy. Food imagery indicates both landscape and the inner

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<sup>6</sup> See John Beston, "Will Voss Endure? Fifty Years Later," *Antipodes* 17.1 (June 2003): 50-56. Beston discusses the impact that the exploration of Australia's vast interior had on Patrick White's generation.

<sup>7</sup> See Lyndon Harries, "The Peculiar Gifts of Patrick White," *Contemporary Literature* 19:4 (1978), 459-71, who ably discusses many aspects of White's writing, including a commentary on the unbelievable nature of Laura and Voss' "spiritual relationship" (468-69).

thoughts of those who traverse the land. Laura and Voss' initial physical encounters represent the initial European/Australian transition. Food imagery continues to stand as a metaphor for the inner psyche of those who traverse the country (Jones 1992, 73). The dichotomy of civilisation/desert is challenged through the contrasting meals consumed: Sydney/homestead (Rhine Towers); Rhine Towers/homestead (Jildra); Jildra/bush; and finally the contrast between the fecund bush and the seemingly barren desert. The diversity of the foodstuffs consumed, the performative aspects surrounding those diverse meals, and the interpersonal dynamics at play are symbols that delineate each of the expedition's transitional stages.

## **Colonial Sydney**

As discussed in detail in Chapter One, the Bonners and their contemporaries epitomise White's satirical presentation of mid-nineteenth century colonial Sydney:

Then the Palethorpes continued to sip their tea, themselves a superior milky white, like the cups they had brought out from Home. No coarse stuff. They sat and listened to the rather melancholy accompaniment of their stomachs, and were soon walking in the rain in the neighbourhood of Fulham, their spiritual environment. (352)

These characters are unable or unwilling to sever their emotional and spiritual attachment to "Home." However, that White alludes to the Palethorpes' "spiritual environment" exonerates their complicity with the colonial élite of Sydney. To an extent they too are outsiders; they exist at the margins of colonial society, yet paradoxically still consider "themselves a superior milky white." Their spiritual connectedness with their homeland suggests deeper sentiments that cannot flourish in the settler society to which they are appended.



Voss, however, is conscious of his detachment from colonial Sydney society. His appearance conveys the hunger that motivates and feeds his will: “Edmund Bonner, once a hollow, hungry lad, was flattered by someone whose whole appearance suggested that he was hungry in his turn” (23). In Voss’ paltry attempts at assimilation, “he succeeded only in looking hungry,” an appearance that alienates him still further from the opulent society that the Bonners embody (61).<sup>8</sup> This symbolic hunger conveys Western males’ instinctive desire to conquer within the hegemonic patriarchy. Mr. Bonner’s characterisation reveals that conquest is an instinct easily corrupted and usurped by complacency and comfort. However, Elspeth Probyn points out the observation of the female Indigenous elder, Molly Nungawayi, that ““White men are hungry men”” (9). This insight delineates the male/female, Indigenous/Non-Indigenous binaries that this chapter will discuss more fully. Dorothy Jones argues convincingly that “food is ... highly significant in regard to empire and colonisation” (21). In *Voss* White explores that theory in detail, exposing how hunger as a motivator for acquisition “leads to *transgression*, the crossing or overstepping of boundaries ... which also involves theft and the despoliation of indigenous peoples” (22). Ultimately however, Voss’ hunger becomes a conduit for a confrontation with his own nature; his detachment from all apart from Laura necessitates an introspective gaze where the self is all-consuming and ultimately self-destroyed (Hergenhan 156).

Nevertheless, Voss’ symbolic denial of colonial Sydney is revelatory. By refusing to dine with the Bonners he discourages any intimacy through mealtime conviviality. His refusal also connotes his unwillingness to embrace the society represented by the Bonners and the values therein. Later Voss refuses to dine with Boyle, an act that is indicative of Voss’ refusal to acknowledge the similarities in their characters.<sup>9</sup> On Voss’ trek back to his

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<sup>8</sup> William Walsh, *Patrick White: Voss* (London: Arnold, 1976) 14. Walsh refers to the Sydney scenes as depicting “the precise feeling for the temper of the period.”

<sup>9</sup> The encounter with Boyle will be discussed in detail in “Jildra” below.

lodgings, following his refusal, the omniscient narrator details the commonplace that Voss disregards: “Through the window of a slab cottage on the left, that sold little bits of pickled pork, and withered apples, and liquorice, an old woman was staring. But Voss did not look. There were other random cottages, or shops, and a drinking house, with horses tied outside to a ring. But Voss did not look” (V 26). The narrator here places Voss in an objective light: Voss the character does not observe the quotidian; he is instead the observed object. In this instance, food represents the basic functioning of a society to which Voss is not attracted or, more accurately, to which he is impervious.

The final dinner that Mrs. Bonner gives for Voss’ impending departure for Rhine Towers embodies an essential element of quest, a rite of passage. Here Voss abandons his hungry self and positively flourishes in his role as deipnosophist, thereby merging with colonial society. In this way the meal represents Voss’ transition “out of the luxurious world of their pretensions into the desert of mortification and reward” (74). Presciently in an ironic sense, it is to Laura that this “stubborn ... category” (74), as the narrator describes it, is attributed at the commencement of Chapter 4. However the chapter concludes with a post-prandial description of Voss’ oblivious demeanour whilst contemplating “the immense distances toward which he already trudged” (92). Imaginatively the trajectory has commenced.

## **Rhine Towers**

*“This was the one thing people held against the Sandersons, and it certainly did seem vain and peculiar. They had whole rows of books, bound in leather, and were for ever devouring them. They would pick out passages for each other as if they had been titbits of tender meat, and afterwards shine with almost physical pleasure” (126).*

The meals consumed by the expedition party at the Sandersons’ homestead, Rhine Towers, represent the first transitional stage of the explorers’ journey into the Australian desert.

Here it is evident that the artificiality of European settlement and its laws impinge on an alien landscape. The Sandersons have claimed Rhine Towers by naming it, and have thus sub-consciously revealed their desperation “to name and to appropriate their new homeland” (Sempruch 44).<sup>10</sup> However, their love of literature, which alienates them from the Sydney society of the Bonners, offers a tenuous link to Voss and Le Mesurier. Voss’ recitation of a poem at his farewell dinner and Le Mesurier’s composition place them in a literary category (Beston 2005, 101). In this way, words and their meanings are not vilified in *Voss*, and as the epigraph to this sub-section reveals, for the Sandersons they are an analytical tool to “pick out” and “devour.” Paradoxically, the omniscient narrator sees this practice as “vain” and self-indulgent. This same contradictory stance, evident in naming and appropriation, is reflected in the meals that the settlers and explorers consume and the rituals that accompany them.

Voss’ refusal to stay inside Rhine Towers echoes his refusal to dine with the Bonners. Yet this second refusal, I contend, reflects an attempt on his part to deny the settlers’ imposition on the landscape. Initially Voss preferred the prospect of camping out beside a fire with his party. However, his discourteous *faux-pas* embarrasses all, Voss included: “Since it had entered the German’s [head], his eyes shone with bitter pleasure. Now the beauty of their approach to Rhine Towers appeared to have been a tragic one, of which the last fragments were crumbling in the dusk. He had been wrong to surrender to sensuous delights, and must now suffer accordingly” (V 129). Voss’ tragic vision is reduced to crumbs, a recurring image in White’s fiction that often denotes failure.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the word “crumb” occurs more frequently in Chapter 8, where Boyle’s “skeleton shack” further

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<sup>10</sup> Glenn Nicholls, “Patrick White the Parodist: The German Romantic Tradition in *Voss*,” *Antipodes* 17 (Jun. 1996): 15-19. Nicholls refers to the parodic nature of the name Rhine Towers and how it relates to “the German Romantic tradition, which White once loved but outgrew.”

<sup>11</sup> See for example: Carolyn Bliss, *Patrick White’s Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure*. London: Macmillan, 1986; Manly Johnson, “Patrick White: ‘Failure’ as Ontology.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 23.2 (Fall 1989): 73-80.

believes his failure to impose his imperialist self onto the landscape, despite his pastoral accomplishments. The significance of Chapter 8 in the overarching symbolism of food is discussed below in “*Terra Nullius*.”<sup>12</sup>

The Sandersons’ position in the Australian bush is similarly revealed through metaphoric links with food: “That was the quality which predominated in the dining-room, in the whole homestead at Rhine Towers, a quality of poignance, for heights scaled painfully, or almost scaled. Incidental failure did not rob the Sandersons of success. It was perhaps the source of their perfection” (131). That they endure the hardships of settler life is evident in the palliative nature of the meal they consume. The soup “was of a milky, potatoey consistence, speckled with sweet herbs and eminently soothing ... The company enjoyed their dinner. They had a big, crisp, crinkled saddle of baked mutton, and a dish of fresh, scented plums, and conversation, which by degrees, and with the warmth of wine, sounded agreeable to everyone” (134). As Brady points out, Simone Weil states that “subjection to physical necessity” is a basic fact of humanity (1996, 143). The fact that the Sandersons endure the physical hardship of life in the bush with “poignancy” reveals their basic humanity and the humaneness of their existence in the Australian bush.

Plainly, their “agreeable” dinner parodies the Sydney dining scenes. Its homeliness is radically different from the Bonners’ dinner parties, but it serves a similar purpose as signifier of a point of departure. Ironically, the many allusions to emotions in the account of the dinner prefigure the emotional trauma that Voss’ party is yet to endure. Likewise, the comfort food is set in sharp contrast to the privations yet to be encountered. Indeed, the

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<sup>12</sup> David Kelly, “The Structure of *The Eye of the Storm*,” *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*, eds. R. Shepherd and K. Singh. Adelaide: The Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English (CRNLE), 1978. 62-69. Kelly’s discussion inspired this idea.

contrasts between Voss and Judd are revealed in their post-prandial conversation.<sup>13</sup> Voss' visceral response to the emotional strength he perceives in Judd is evident in the following:

It was necessary for him to enjoy complete freedom, whereas this weight had begun to threaten him. So he was chewing his moustache, nervously, his mouth quite bitter from a determination to resist, his head spinning, as he entered in advance that vast, expectant country, whether of stone deserts, veiled mountains, or voluptuous, fleshy forests. But his. His soul must experience first, as by some spiritual *droit de seigneur*, the excruciating passage into its interior. Nobody here, he suspected, looking round, had explored his own mind to the extent that would enable him to bear such experience. Except perhaps the convict, whose mind he could not read. The convict had been tempered in hell, and, as he had said, survived. (137)

Nevertheless, it is not only emotional strength that Voss recognises in Judd. He also recognises a potency that threatens his sense of superiority. He is unable to fathom the complexities of the emancipist, and that uncertainty emasculates his “will to power” (Garebian 566). The quote above encapsulates the major themes of the novel and prefigures Voss' contradictory starvation. He dies through lack of food but that lack is multi-signified.

### **“Awkward but Created”**

*“Creaming the butter and sugar is the tedious part, especially when done by hand, and her wrists are fine and tend to ache after a short time. The best part is beating in the eggs and the perfect yellow gloss of the batter, the seamless fusion of elements, like an alchemist's meld, made ordinary again by the lumbering quality of the flour, no matter how fine”*  
(Lohrey 187).

The ambiguous relationship that Voss has with everything he encounters in nature and humanity is encapsulated in the recurring butter imagery that culminates in his encounter

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<sup>13</sup> William Walsh, *Patrick White: Voss* (1976) 23. Walsh highlights the fact that “Judd's sort of goodness . . . inflames the evil side of Voss's egotism. It makes him feel uneasy rather than superior, it encroaches upon his isolation . . .” In the same analysis Walsh also alludes to the “Wordsworthian” elements of Voss' nature evidenced through his affinity with the landscape and the natural rhythms therein.

with Mrs. Judd churning the “awkward, but created” butter (V 145).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Laura foreshadows the sensuous element of his character through a butter image at the Bonners’ picnic (Colmer 36): “It was impossible not to see the German where he was standing in the grey scrub, his dry lips the moister for butter, fuller in that light ... In less oblivious company, her shame might have become exposed” (V 71). In this instance, textually the butter is “real” – Voss has literally consumed it during the picnic. Yet, symbolically, the ephemeral composition is anticipated in Turner’s drunken hallucinatory outburst aboard *The Osprey* as it sets sail from Sydney to Newcastle: ““Mr. Voss, you are killing us! Give me the knife, please. Ahhhhh! The butter! The butter! It is not my turn to die.”” (119).

Laura likewise intuits Turner’s outburst in her juxtaposed contemplation of a future/present “unpleasant dream [which] persisted disturbingly. Laura Trevelyan, drawing back her lips to bite the slice of bread and honey, saw whole rows of sailors’ blackened teeth gaping from a gunnel. The knife with which she slashed the butter, had a mottled, slippery handle, and could have been made from horse’s hoof” (119). Given that it is Laura who presciently imagines the butter, the significance of the imagery cannot be overlooked. Death, destruction, fear and the transposition of the known to the unknown, “the slice of bread and honey” morphing into “whole rows of sailors’ blackened teeth,” are all proleptic for what the explorers will encounter in the desert. Thus, the butter imagery depicts the transitional stage from Sydney to Newcastle that the explorers have undertaken to this point: aboard the *Osprey* in the allusion to the sailors, and on horseback to Rhine Towers in the allusion to the handle of the butter knife. It could even be postulated that the slippery nature of the handle further anticipates the turbid wet conditions that the party encounters once they leave “civilisation” behind. More important, however, is the observation that the references to butter prefigure Voss’ encounter with Mrs. Judd.

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<sup>14</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (1991) 24. From a biographical perspective it is worthwhile noting that White’s mother’s family had a “butter business” on their property, Piercefield Estate.

Judd's wife – whose first name is never revealed and who is herself an emancipist – metaphorically enacts the ephemeral and transitional composition of butter. Voss visits Judd's selection because, as he later declares: “‘I like to see people, how they live ... They become easier to understand’” (148). On the steep descent where “the country itself was legendary,” Voss' thoughts are interrupted by “the voice of the cold girl,” Laura (143). Immediately after his blasphemous exclamation at her psychic invocation that she shall pray for him, he encounters Mrs. Judd. I contend that the butter, like so much of White's symbolism, is multi-signified. Here it not only represents the party's transitional trajectory into the desert, but also signifies the instability of the settlers' imposition on the Australian landscape and the iconoclastic nature of the text.

The emphasis on the description of Mrs. Judd “creating” the butter indicates the subversive role that the metaphor enacts: “By this time she had lifted the butter from the churn, and was pressing and squeezing, squelching with her strong hands, not all as labour, but some for pleasure. There was a milky perspiration still upon the mound of white butter” (145). The sensuousness of the passage, evident in the sonorous consonants, contrasts sharply with Mrs. Judd's position in Australia. Her position too is “awkward, but created,” yet she optimistically derives pleasure from the tenuous hold that she has on her existence in what is essentially a hostile environment. Basically, she does not fit the paradigm of colonial Sydney, nor does she entirely assimilate to the Australian bush. As emancipist, she lives on the periphery, yet is content with what she has:

She was washing the butter. The lapping of the water would not allow the silence to wrap her for very long. She reduced the butter, then built it up again, a solid fortress of it.

‘I will be here,’ she said, ‘for ever now.’

‘Have you no wish for further experience of life?’

She was suspicious of the words the stranger used. An educated gentleman.

‘What else would I want to know?’ she asked, staring at her fat butter.

‘Or revisit loved places?’

‘Ah,’ she said, lifting her head, and the shadows hanging from it, slyly sniffing the air at some ale-house corner, but almost immediately she dropped the lids over her searing eyes. ‘No,’ she said sulkily. ‘I do not love any other place, anyways enough to go back. This is my place.’ (146)

The metaphoric “fortress” of butter recalls the castellated fortifications of Theodora’s *bouchée à la reine*. However, the solidity polarises the image, thereby imbuing a sense of permanence. Indeed, the “fat butter” denotes a sense of plenitude, and poignantly in *The Solid Mandala* Arthur, the simple twin, is depicted churning butter, connoting a vision of simplicity and acceptance. However, as with so many of White’s simple marginalised characters, there is no place for them in the society that he creates; the only option is death.

In relation to death, earlier Voss had asked why the butter was white, to which Mrs. Judd replied that it was because it was from the goats. Again, the white butter imagery not only recalls the Palethorpes’ position in colonial Sydney, but also prefigures the disastrous journey to be undertaken by the expedition party. There the goats will be sacrificed for the sake of Voss’ pride and obdurate will. More significantly, the goats’ milk is the key motif for the corporeal degeneration of the party.

Clearly, the butter imagery impinges on Voss’ imagination:

That night Voss dreamed of the goat butter, in which the convict’s wife was about to mould a face. But which face? It was imperative to know. The necessity made his skin run with sweat, long after the inconclusive dream was done, and he lay there turning and tossing in the grey impersonality of sleep. (151-52)

His “inconclusive dream” is prescient for the dreams he has in the desert, the significance of which will be discussed shortly (Ashcroft 125). More important here though is the fact that Voss’ masculinity, his role as superior being, is jeopardised by Mrs. Judd as the creator. Voss’ complicity with his “imperative to know,” reveals his Nietzschean “will to power” (Brissenden 128); it also reveals the self-torture he endures to achieve that aim, and usurp all in his quest for the role of “creator.” Mrs. Judd, however, is content with her role in the bush, no matter how “awkward but created.”



## Jildra

Chapter 8, the second longest chapter in *Voss*, opens with the party's arrival at Jildra. Significantly, their arrival at both homesteads occurs in the early evening, and the landscape imagery is sandwiched between the Gothic regalism of Rhine Towers and the "slatternly settlement" (V 171) of Jildra: "All was confused, nor did the approaching unity of darkness promise great consolation" (166).<sup>15</sup> The immediate content evinces the party's impatience to commence their exploration into the "uncivilised" interior: "Voss and Palfreyman, who were left standing in the skeleton shack, in the smell of old, hard bread and that morning's ash, did not regret that this was the last hospitality civilization would offer them" (167). The phrase, "the last hospitality civilization would offer them," proleptically evokes similar imagery the day before Palfreyman is killed: "All sat in the dusk, nursing in their mouths a little tepid water, that tasted of canvas, or a sad, departed civilization" (338) It also indicates the liminal phases of their journey.

Furthermore, the allusion to a skeleton shack recalls Laura's literal response to Lieutenant Radclyffe at the Bonners' dinner party where she recalls the skeleton in the churchyard and declares: "It is the thought of death that frightens me. Not its bones" (82). At a literal level the bones highlight the paradoxical parallels between the dinner scenes at Sydney and Jildra, but symbolically they signify the imagination. It is the abstract notion of death that frightens Laura, not its reality. In effect Jildra is the liminal space between "civilisation" and the uncharted interior of the Australian landscape. Its centrality to the novel is equally significant, both structurally and metaphorically, as too is the depth and intensity of the narrative at this point. The symbolic relevance of Chapter 8 is discussed in

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<sup>15</sup> See James McAuley, "The Gothic Splendours: Patrick White's *Voss*," *Southerly* 25.1 (1965): 34-44. McAuley refers to the "hallucinated response" that White's style produces, an observation which relates to the discussion about Gothicism in the preceding chapter.

depth later in “*Terra Nullius*.” Here, however, I maintain that the various stages of the expedition are depicted through multi-signified recurring food and drink references. Such repetitiveness highlights the increasing hardships that the party endures as they extend their trajectory into the unexplored interior.

## FOOD, TRAJECTORY AND DEATH

*“Through the marriage of light and shadow, in the infinite distances of that dun country of which he was taking possession, all, finally, would be resolved” (V 190).*

*“Nobody, except Voss, was concerned whether his bones would rise again from the earth, when his green flesh, watered by the dew, was shooting nightly in celestial crops” (359).*

*“Italians reduced to corpses . . . the yellow flesh melting like butter into the sand and saltbush” (FG 93).*

Themes examined in this sub-section involve the impact of exploration on the Australian psyche.<sup>16</sup> The discussion focuses on the centrality of food, its performative aspects and how these relate to the explorers’ trajectory into the Australian interior. As methodology a hermeneutical analysis of *Voss* reveals the metalinguistics at play in the novel and how metalanguage reveals the historicity of explorers, their journals and history in literature (Genoni 24-25). The examination draws on Adrian Mitchell’s observation that “the complexity [of White’s novels] is not in the character, but in the process of arriving at that character” (7). In *Voss* that process of “arriving” is enacted through the explorers’ trajectory into unfamiliar landscape, both cerebral and corporeal (Ashcroft 123).

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Cotter, “The Function of Imagery in Patrick White’s Novels.” *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*, eds. R. Shepherd and K Singh (Adelaide: The Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English (CRNLE), 1978): 17-27. Cotter explores the Eurocentric ideals of colonisation in “Fragmentation, Reconstitution and the Colonial Experience: the Aborigine in White’s Fiction.” He indicates that White’s fiction offers an imaginative reappraisal of relations between coloniser and colonised. He concludes that White synthesises the two cultures through symbolism. He argues that in *Voss* the central symbol of that synthesis is the comet.

## Food and Landscape

The eponymous Voss is largely based on M. Barnard Eldershaw's depiction of the German explorer Leichhardt: "an intemperate autocrat, consumed with envy for Mitchell, who punishes his sick companions with exotic medicines" (Priessnitz 214). In his characterisation of Voss, White alludes also to Alec Chisholm's description of Leichhardt as having a "chaotic and capricious nature," and as one who "functioned on God's blessing" (v). In order to substantiate these disparate definitions of Leichhardt's character this section examines them through White's depiction of Voss (Colmer 35). Voss' chaotic character, his ordered/disordered self, is established through food references, in particular through the contrast between natural food and refined food and the way in which that food is consumed. Analogously with the contrasting foodstuffs, this sub-section examines the symbolism inherent in flour, puddings, roast meats, fruit and greens, and analyses their significance for the explorers' personal quests in *Voss*. Concomitantly, that notion of explorer/explorers, that is to say the individual contrasted with the group, I explore the philosophical notion of what is real and unreal, what constitutes historical fact and fiction, and how such concepts are illumined through food and its consumption.

White's retelling of an Australian historical narrative with an inconclusive ending highlights the historicity of Sydney's origin: that it was founded as a penal colony is a fact that many of its inhabitants in the 1800s would have distanced themselves from, just as the Bonners and their acquaintances do. The historical verisimilitude is enacted further in Voss' selection of members for his expedition party. Like Leichhardt's ill-fated party that set out from Roma in April 1848, it is composed of misfits largely incompetent and ill-equipped to venture on an inland expedition (Carter, Jeff 71). It is only at the behest of Mr. Bonner that Ralph Angus and Albert Judd, who were selected by Mr. Sanderson, accompany Voss. They are the only members of the party knowledgeable about the

Australian outback. However, they fail to understand the social dynamics of the exploration party or, indeed, to understand Voss' obsessive quest. The juxtaposed characteristics of the members of the party indicate that the forthcoming epic journey encompasses far more than an exploration of the outback. Yet the elements of Odyssean quest are essential to an exploration of Voss' psyche. His motivation to explore the interior closely aligns with Leichhardt's, who "had extravagant metaphysical longings, a conviction that he would find fulfilment in death's embrace, and a temptation to indulge himself in the sugar bowl and other luxuries of the stores" (Priessnitz 205-206).

Voss succumbs to that "temptation to indulge himself in the sugar bowl and other luxuries of the stores" in "the incident of the mustard and cress" (V 286). Here the food imagery signifies the inner thoughts of White's Voss. It also indicates the similarities in character between the fictional Voss and more negative readings of the "real" Leichhardt. In this incident Palfreyman overhears the "scurvy" Turner's lament for "'a nice dish of greens, cabbage, or spinach, or even turnip-tops at a pinch, with the water pressed out, and a lump of fresh butter slapped on like, or marrer from a good bone. But as long as there was greens''"; and "remembered amongst his belongings some seeds of mustard and cress, which drought at first had prevented him from sowing, and which he had forgotten long before the weather broke" (287). This incident is based on a true event: Daniel Bunce grew mustard and cress on Leichhardt's second failed expedition of 1846. Yet in *Voss* its symbolic significance is paramount.

According to *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* the etymology of mustard is *mo(u)starde*, a condiment prepared from not quite fermented grape juice. The mustard seed, according to Matthew 13:31<sup>17</sup> symbolises faith – a tiny amount can move mountains – and so symbolises human or spiritual potential. Voss' iconoclastic consumption of

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<sup>17</sup> The numerical significance of 13:31 is analysed in the following sub-section, "*Terra Nullius*."

Palfreyman's carefully tended mustard and cress encapsulates his disdain for all the members of his expedition, as well as his lack of social skills. In consuming the fresh mustard and cress he not only destroys Palfreyman's creation, but also destroys Palfreyman's endeavours to nurture both the plant and the ailing men. Conversely, however, Voss' ingestion of the mustard and cress signifies self-nourishment and his potential for growth.

Taken in conjunction with the multi-signified "greens," this incident merits further analysis, in particular of how White uses food symbolism to define character. Clearly the party needs food to survive, yet symbolically Turner's list of "greens" reveals his status as petty criminal: his concession to consume "turnip-tops at a pinch" succinctly conveys his social class. Such a dish would not have appeared on the Bonners' dining table in Sydney. Furthermore, from that ideological standpoint, turnips were cultivated mostly for animal fodder, not primarily for human consumption. Indeed, Turner's corporeal instincts are animal-like; his "scurvy" body literally craves essential minerals and vitamins.

Whilst it could appear jejune to align foodstuffs with character, I aim to alleviate such concerns through a systematic analysis of the explorers' interaction with food and their responses to its consumption. In the incident of the mustard and cress, the green foodstuffs convey Palfreyman's nurturance, Turner's social position and dependency, and Voss' solipsism. Interestingly, neither Palfreyman nor Turner accompany Voss following the split in the party. Harry Robarts and Frank Le Mesurier do, however, and when Voss asks them what he has taught them, Harry Robarts responds that he has learnt how to live. Le Mesurier replies, "To expect damnation" (360). Voss, "infuriated by rational answers," then asks whether damnation is Le Mesurier's "greatest desire?" (360). It is Harry Robarts who replies, "in the terms of his own needs":

'I would like to eat a dish of fat chops,' he said. 'And fresh figs, the purple ones. Though apples is good enough. I like apples, and could put up with them instead.'

‘That is your answer,’ said Le Mesurier to Voss. ‘From a man going to his execution.’

‘Well, if I was asked what I would take for me last dinner,’ said the boy. ‘And who would not eat? What would you choose?’

‘Nothing,’ said Le Mesurier. ‘I would not eat for fear that I might miss something of what was happening to me. I would want to feel the last fly crawling on my skin, and listen to my conscience in case it should give up a secret. Out of that experience I might even create something.’

‘That would not be of much good,’ said Harry Robarts, ‘not if you was to die.’

‘Dying is creation. The body creates fresh forms, the soul inspires by its manner of leaving the body, and passes into other souls.’

‘Even the souls of the damned?’ asked Voss.

‘In the process of burning it is the black that gives up the gold.’

‘Then *he* will give up the purest,’ said Voss. (361)

Just as food illumines the contrast between Palfreyman and Turner, Le Mesurier and Harry Robarts are polarised by their relation to food and its consumption.<sup>18</sup> Complexity of character is highlighted through Le Mesurier’s asceticism and focus on creation. However, Harry Robarts’ banality explicitly questions ontological reasoning, thus implicitly challenging dogmatism. Furthermore, this passage encapsulates the two themes under discussion: the historical narrative framework of *Voss* and the manner in which symbolic foodstuffs undermine the textual allusions to the explorer aesthetic. The notion of metempsychosis not only alludes to the transmigration of souls but also prefigures the nature of Le Mesurier’s death, the significance of which will be argued shortly.

Indeed, the food imagery not only foreshadows death, but is also proleptic for the evolution of the interpersonal dynamics of the exploration party. For example, the tension between Judd and Voss was evident prior to the central mustard and cress incident. In order to reach the caves, where Palfreyman had cultivated the mustard and cress, the explorers had to traverse a raging river. Voss’ incompetent directive to build a raft to transport the

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<sup>18</sup> Throughout *Voss* White consistently aligns food and banality with the less realised child characters. See for example the unnamed girl’s response to Le Mesurier (132) and the three schoolgirls’ conversation, all named Mary (396-97). See also John Beston, “Alienation and Humanization, Damnation and Salvation in *Voss*,” *Meanjin* 30.2 (June 1971): 208-16. Beston compares the conflation of the three characters into one name to Chekhov’s three sisters. His unfavourable critique of Laura’s character claims that, (i) she has no personal future and (ii) that she uses her education as a barrier to human intercourse (210, 215).

essential items resulted in the loss of vital equipment, including provisions. However, unbeknown to Voss, Judd had salvaged half the flour from the raft before it was set afloat. Voss' afflatus, symbolised in his creation of the raft, is subordinated to the commonplace by Judd's act. Voss' animosity toward Judd encapsulates his uncertainty about his status as creator. Following his exaltation at the "creative act" of a new day, he is beset by doubt:

The natural sequence of events soothed the superior being in his cave, to the extent that he might have fallen asleep if the gelatinous, half-created world had not loomed too close, reminding him of disagreeable things. He had to recall the soup the convict had prepared the night before from flour hidden on the backs of mules. The gelatinous mess was even less palatable in retrospect, the cook more hateful than his soup. So that the erstwhile creator was fiddling with his blanket-sleeves. Moreover, he began to have an inkling of a confession he had made, in a tent, at night, under the influence of laudanum, and in human terms.

So the divine spirit fled out, into the swirl of blown rain. The man that remained continued to watch the shiny grey soup of the prevailing flood, and for want of a better occupation, crushed an earthworm that had crawled for protection as far as the rocky platform on which he sat. (282-83)

The palliative soup of Rhine Towers has transmogrified and duplicated into a "gelatinous mess," where the repeated adjective "gelatinous" is multi-signified.<sup>19</sup> For example, it denotes a sense of cohesion; gelatin is derived from collagen, which is a protein found in animal connective tissue. Etymologically the word *collagen* is from Greek, *kolla*, glue + *ge*(grave)ne. Also citing *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, gelatin lacks colour and taste. Thus its amorphous state contradictorily denotes lack of structure and sensory deprivation. Metaphorically, Voss' vacillating demeanour, his Janus aspect, is depicted through the "gelatinous, half-created world" and its link to Judd's skillaglee [*sic*]. He enacts his self-disgust by transferring it as a loathing for Judd. Indeed, the quagmire imagery recalls John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*: like Christian, Voss is mired in the Slough of Despond. However, the Christian allegorical framework of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is subverted through Voss' perception of himself as creator, despite the fact that he is beset by

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<sup>19</sup> See my earlier discussion in "Cannibalistic Love" that compares "gelatinous" kisses, lips and fruit.

doubt “in human terms.” Nevertheless, what this imagery does convey is Voss’ susceptibility to self-doubt and his willingness psychically to embrace Laura’s love and devotion.

However, foremost in Voss’ deliberations at this juncture is his quest for power over Judd, the literal and metaphorical creator of the “shiny grey soup” that threatens Voss’ status as leader. Analogous with the iconoclastic nature of the text, Judd’s act of mutinous sanity is anticipated during the campfire meal before Christmas:

After Mr. Judd had mixed flour and water, and hidden it in the ashes, and taken from that unpromising bed a huge, rude loaf, and they had cut themselves chunks of salt beef, an offering from Boyle of Jildra, and were burning their mouths on the red tea, there was little else to be desired.  
(193)

This short paragraph is fraught with symbolic relevance. In this earlier vignette Judd mixes the flour and water to create damper, an act that prefigures the separation of the flour and water that he enacts later. The metaphoric bed denotes nurturance and emphasises Judd’s family role as husband and father. However, he is denied that role through the death of his family, prefigured in the subversion of the Phoenician bed of ashes yielding a “huge, rude loaf.” This imagery conveys diametrically opposed notions of quest and fulfilment. Food is essential for survival yet its preparation and consumption necessitate a social dynamic that excludes metaphysical desire. Like the *bread and circuses* of the Roman Empire, food suppresses hunger,<sup>20</sup> and a lack of hunger thereby precludes questioning the motives of hierarchical power, whether Voss’ or society’s.

Conversely, food nurtures humanity. Indeed, Judd nourishes the party with food, “himself an element” who “pick[s] at the black fruit of trees to release the seed” (243). He is an optimistic counterpoint to Voss’ troubled soul; his love for his wife is “earthly love”

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. White’s comment, “I can’t see any good coming out of the Bicentenary for our country as a whole – only for the greedy comen. I’m not alone in believing this. There are many down-to-earth Australians who share my opinion. Circuses don’t solve serious problems. When the tents are taken down, we’ll be left with the dark, the emptiness – and probably a two-dollar loaf” (*PWS* 186).



(244), a love for which he craves. Significantly, both Voss and Judd vicariously nourish Harry Robarts as substitute for the women they desire. For example, the gum that Judd proffers Harry is emblematic of the power struggle between himself and Voss:

As the lad stared at his leader, the sun's rays striking the surrounding rocks gave the impression that the German was at the point of splintering into light. There he sat, errant, immaculate, but ephemeral, if he had not been supernal. ...

As it was, aware of some disloyalty to his leader, he spat out the remains of the bitter, and now offensive gum. (246)

Thus Voss nourishes Harry's intellect, his desire to transcend the humdrum in which the illiterate Judd is rooted. However, at this juncture the party, to use a colloquialism, is literally *up a gum tree*. Conversely, like gelatin, gum is water-soluble where its bitterness can be diffused. Concomitant with the "gelatinous mess" its variational properties highlight the complexity of Voss' character and the blurring of interpretation. Again, colloquially, the mild oath *by gum* invokes God, the *supernal* level of Voss' chemistry. Effectively, through spitting out the gum Harry Robarts disavows Voss, yet contradictorily affirms his devotion to Voss. Moreover, the quintessential eucalyptus tree from which Judd extracts the gum locates the historicity of Voss. Leichhardt reputedly engraved his initials on tree trunks, in doing so leaving clues to his unknown trajectory. Philologically, the clue here lies in the text, argued more fully through the symbolic relevance of food to character.

The paradoxical social dynamics within the group are further enacted in Voss' palliative care of Le Mesurier, whose character reflects Voss' dichotomous nature: his "mind and body will not coincide" (269). Le Mesurier's inability to articulate his thoughts orally, "mumbling of dried peas that he could not spit out of his mouth" (268), characterises his role as writer, "filled with the hallucinations of intellectual power" (250). However, his sickness is a corporeal metaphor for the ailing expedition. Voss' magnanimity, then, could be construed as self-serving, a means for saving his project. Yet Voss' nihilistic tendencies,

projected through his solipsism, are reflected in the goats' milk he feeds Le Mesurier. The narrative emphasis on "the warm, hairy milk" evokes disgust (268).<sup>21</sup> Hairs in food are anathema to twenty-first century Western civilised taste, yet here could denote the harsh reality of exploration. Nonetheless, the initial recoil remains and encourages an analysis of the symbolic significance of contaminated food and its relevance to Voss' characterisation.

The oft-repeated imagery of milk in White's *oeuvre* is clearly symbolic. The "warm, hairy milk, laced with rum" which the "prudent German had been hoarding against sickness" signifies Voss' magnanimous nature (270). Yet conversely, the "food of divinity for the gods" is tainted by the rum and goat hair (Cooper 105). This contamination then, feeds the abhorrence of unusual foodstuffs, which in turn feeds repulsion against the provider, Voss. Le Mesurier's repulsion may also be signified by his diarrhoea, the consistency of which is not dissimilar to the tainted milk.

Parallel with that repugnance is Voss' unusual reaction to the source of "the terrible stench" (V 270). Paradoxically he decided: "Prospective saints ... would have fought over such an opportunity, for green and brown, of mud, and slime, and uncontrolled faeces, and the bottomless stomach of nausea, are the true colours of hell" (270).<sup>22</sup> The paradox resides in Voss' subconscious thought processes. That he aligns himself with "prospective saints" is subsequently disavowed through what he perceives as his duty as leader to "clean the man" (270). Taken in conjunction with the contaminated milk/diarrhoea imagery, Voss' use of an "iron dish," a cooking utensil, to clean Le Mesurier further extends the food metaphor. In addition it recalls Judd's care for Palfreyman, who had literally slid from his horse upon arrival at Rhine Towers. Then "the convict had brought him a shallow iron

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<sup>21</sup> See William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1997). Miller ably discusses many types and causes of disgust. Miller's conclusion is optimistic – he suggests that without disgust humanity would fall into anarchy. Disgust offers a way to confront chaos and enable a more fulfilling and stimulating existence.

<sup>22</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White A Life* (1991) 358. Marr notes that Lascaris and White "believed in saints and holy places. They celebrated Greek Easter not on their knees but with a binge of cooking."

basin of water, and a lump of crude, yellow soap” (138). At that point Voss’ reaction to the bond established between Le Mesurier and Palfreyman is one of “panic for his own isolation” (138). Implicitly, he is afraid of solitude, yet recognises the strength of his solipsism. In effect, “the iron dish” used to clean Le Mesurier is emblematic of Voss’ complexity. Indeed, Voss’ character has drawn disparate reactions from critics polarised by his “will to power” and the transcendental nature of his quest.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the entire expedition party is enigmatic. As a collective it is both literally and metaphorically embodied as the “bottomless stomach of nausea” (270). There is a duality of perpetual movement that propels its members to ineluctable hell, unconsciously renouncing their motivation for exploration. Following “a little rhubarb and laudanum” (270), Le Mesurier concedes that, “[t]he mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming” (271). As Brady points out in her essay on *The Vivisector*, White creates “a world in which bodies and objects of all kinds are made correlative to, not at odds with, consciousness” (1974 143). In *Voss*, I contend, the bodies are inextricably linked to food, and the correlation between body and mind is depicted through food’s symbolic consumption and expulsion.

However, at this juncture, Voss’ appropriation of Le Mesurier’s body is two-fold, further signifying Voss’ duality. Following the turbid dawn vignette discussed earlier, Judd appears carrying a quart pot of goats’ milk: “Voss was furious” (V 283). His subsequent malicious act of administering “the controversial milk” (283) to Le Mesurier recalls M. Barnard Eldershaw’s assessment of Leichhardt as “an intemperate autocrat... who punishes his sick companions with exotic medicines” (Priessnitz 213). However, in *Voss* White

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<sup>23</sup> See for example, Sylvia Gzell, “Themes and Imagery in *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot*.” *Australian Literary Studies* 1.3 (June 1964): 180-95, Margaret Walters, “Patrick White” *New Left Review*, 18 (Jan.-Feb. 1963): 50, William Walsh, *Patrick White: Voss* (1976) 10, John Colmer, *Patrick White*. London: Methuen, 1984, 39. See also, Lyndon Harries, “The Peculiar Gifts of Patrick White,” *Contemporary Literature* 19.4 (Autumn 1978): 459-71. *JSTOR*. James Cook U. 29 Mar. 2005. <http://www.jstor.org/search> 471. Harries asserts that “the differing opinions of the critics on almost every aspect of White’s work are, of course, a measure of his achievement” – an observation with which I concur wholeheartedly.

subverts the notion of the explorer as an “intemperate autocrat” through the import of the symbolic foodstuffs and the manner in which they are tendered and consumed. Certainly, Voss exhibits signs of excessive behaviour, yet that excessiveness signals his complex character.

## Food and Civilisation

As mentioned, the other members of the exploration party likewise have a degree of complexity in their characterisation, yet White uses them as foils for Voss who is intent on a journey of self-discovery. His disavowal of the restraints he perceives in Sydney society propels his motivation, yet his solipsistic quest requires elements of that same civilisation. As quoted earlier in relation to Mr. Bonner’s characterisation, “food is ... highly significant ... to empire and colonisation” (Dorothy Jones 1992, 21).<sup>24</sup> Equally in *Voss*, the staples of traditional colonist explorer fare, dried meat, flour and tea, function on both literal and metaphorical levels. For example, the tenuous connection the party still has with civilisation is substantiated by the reference to tea in the quote below:

‘Except that tea without milk,’ Turner grumbled, ‘is not much above medicine.’

‘If you will walk back a mile in the dark,’ suggested Voss, ‘to where the goats are camped with Mr. Angus, you may have your milk, Turner, if you care to pull it.’

Some considered this a joke of the leader’s, and laughed accordingly, but Turner spat out the bitter tea-leaves, which tasted of metal, besides.

‘Poor old Turner,’ laughed Harry Robarts, ‘You are out of luck. Better turn in.’

The boy could not stop, but continued to laugh beneath the stars. The apparent simplicity of space had deceived his rather simple mind. He was free, of past, and future. His hilarious body had forgotten its constricting clothes.

‘Turn in, Turner! Eh?’

He was so pleased, this large boy, of laughing throat.

But Turner had turned sour. He was harbouring a grievance, against no one in particular. (193)

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<sup>24</sup> Dorothy Jones, “The Post-Colonial Belly Laugh: Appetite and its Suppression.” *Social Semiotics*, 2.2 (1992): 21-37.

Turner's complaint against society, his role as petty criminal in *Voss*, is reiterated through the medicinal qualities he perceives in the "tea without milk." Symbolically he strives for the "divinity of the gods," but his "sour[ness]" precludes any perception of a higher plane, let alone transcendence. Conversely, taken in the context of Jones' argument, Turner subliminally recognises the imperialist economic power inherent in tea and its consumption. To add complexity to the nexus between food and civilisation, Turner's rejection of the "bitter tea leaves" may signify his rejection of civilisation. However, obversely it could also signify a rejection of the "sour[ness]" that he harbours. Whatever the "sour [and] bitter tea-leaves" signify, they are clearly proleptic for the "sour" goats' milk vignette to be discussed shortly.

In contrast to Turner's "sour[ness]" Harry Robarts is "deceived" by "the apparent simplicity of space." Clearly, the omniscient narrator perceives space as anything but simple, yet Harry is "free, of past, and future." However, his unconscious attempt to garner power over Turner is subverted by Turner's symbolic recognition of power and its inherent manipulation. Symbolically, mealtimes expose the power dynamics inherent in any group interaction.

Literally, the production of tea involves manipulation through economic processes that require time and labour. Taken in the context of time, I contend that the contradictory nature of time and space is enacted through the analogous food imagery. The organic nature of food is inextricably linked with the notion of time in that even the refined foodstuffs will rot eventually (Murcott 10). Indeed, the mythical explorer envisaged a trek into unknown territory through food as a measurement of time. Such an unstable assumption underpins the central argument to this section, that food governs civilisation, and highlights the binaries of known/unknown and fact/fiction. Historically, explorers have been revered, yet

the colonialist assumptions of superiority enacted through the refined food they take on their expeditions highlight their incompetency.

Furthermore, the contrast between Indigenous/non-Indigenous is emphasised later with the death of one of the explorers' non-Indigenous food staples, the sheep:

They were riding eternally over the humped and hateful earth, which the sun had seared until the spent and crumbly stuff was become highly treacherous. It was, indeed, the bare crust of the earth. Several of the sheep determined to lie down upon it and die. Their carcasses did not have much to offer, though the blacks would frizzle the innards and skin, and stuff these delicacies down their throats. The white men, whose appetites were deadened by dust, would swallow a few leathery strips of leg, or gnaw from habit at the wizened chops. (210)

The harsh consonance in the above quote emphasises both the arduous journey and the explorers' inability to perceive beyond their hatred of the earth. Indeed, the pastry metaphor – “bare crust of earth” – signifies that ellipsis in the explorers' perceptions. As food metaphor, pastry syllogistically conveys a notion of pies, replete with filling. Citing Rebecca Schechter, Jones points out that the pie is “a highly mediatory dish which both elaborates and conceals the food it contains” (24). However, “the bare crust” that the explorers envisage reveals the absence of mediation. Even so, that stark imagery also invokes an image of peeling away the layers of civilisation, and exposing what these concealed. The explorers' limited scope is emphasised further through the Indigenous members' affinity with the landscape. The explorers' “stomachs were shrivelling up” (V 210), as their visceral inner space literally contracts. In this way, the adaptive aspects of the Indigenous characters' diets only serve to highlight the explorers' plight and their inability to adjust to what they perceive as an alien landscape.<sup>25</sup>

To recap: an exploration of the contradictory tenets that are embedded in the binaries of civilisation/barbarity are symbolised in *Voss* through food. White highlights and

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<sup>25</sup> See Dorothy Jones, “The Post-Colonial Belly Laugh (1992) 24. Jones argues that Australian meals still bear a “colonial imprint.”

questions the vicissitudes of colonialism and reveals, through food, not only the ineptitude of the explorers but their impact on the culture of the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia. An observation that presciently envisaged the current cultural Indigenous crisis facing residents in remote communities in post-colonial Australia.<sup>26</sup>

## Food and Dreams

Thus, the natural landscape slowly impinges on the explorers' physical demeanour. They are unable to contend with what it offers, even when "an abundant supply of game had arrived to celebrate the good season" (334). They begin instead to subsist on ephemeral dreams:

The muscular forms of cool, smooth, flesh-coloured trees rose up before the advancing horsemen. Yet the men themselves, for all their freedom and their joyful songs, only remotely suggested flesh. By this time, it is true, their stock of provisions was inadequate, but an abundant supply of game had arrived to celebrate the good season. The men did take advantage of this, to catch and eat, only never more than was necessary to prolong life, for deprivation and distance had lessened their desire for food. It was foreign to their wizened stomachs. They preferred to eat dreams, but did not grow fat on these, quite the reverse. (334)

The explorers are unable to face the future that confronts them, and, as a result, their existence is in jeopardy. Yet, paradoxically, an element of ascetic heightening intrudes, taken in the context of self-denial as an ethical way of life. The explorers' self-denial, their non-hunger for food in the civilised Western tradition, reveals that they are propelled not only by physical distance, but also toward a heightened ontological plane. They *are* able to subsist on dreams.

In contrast, earlier at Rhine Towers Voss had dreamed of the "suave flesh" of the manifold abundance of the landscape, clearly proleptic for the "season of grass, [and]

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Louis Nowra's recent publication, *Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal Men's Violence Against Women and Children* (North Melbourne: Pluto, 2007).

game” (334). Indeed, in this earlier dream, the inherent nyctitropism<sup>27</sup> aligns Voss with the natural landscape. He realises that: “That which would have been reprehensible, nauseating, frightening in life, was permissible, even desirable, in sleep. And could solve, as well as dis-solve” (139). The hyphenated “dis-solve” recalls the solubility of gelatin, as well as the ingredients of dough and pastry, thus exposing the contradictory elements at play in the novel. At Rhine Towers Voss was unable to accept the “baked” hand of Mrs. Sanderson “which broke into pieces” (139). Instead he accepts the “white grain” hand of Laura, which had “its semblance of flesh” (140). In other words, he rejects the reality of love for an ephemeral dream.

However, that this rejection is in itself a dream blurs the binary of real/unreal. As Paul Carter notes in *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History*: “The association between travelling and [day/night] dreaming was, in fact a commonplace of the explorer literature ... the writer seeks to persuade us of the universality of his experience. Such transcendent moments are part of the explorer’s credentials” (84-5).<sup>28</sup> In *Voss* White extends the transcendental metaphor with the psychic relationship between Laura and Voss, thereby conflating the transcendental with the quotidian.

The Bestons refer to Laura as a “pythoness” (1974 103). Using that analogy as a springboard, I contend that White’s inclusion of the Indigenous peoples’ belief in the “Great Snake” (V 378) metonymically incorporates Laura into that legend. Legends and myths underpin faith yet they also create antagonism. As Antonella Riem points out in her discussion of *For Love Alone*: “The whole iconography of our prehistory is related to this central cosmogonic and religious entity [the Goddess], often represented through the serpent, which in later male-dominated societies became ‘evil,’ and the butterfly (*psyche*)

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<sup>27</sup> The movement of parts of a plant in response to light and temperature differences night and day, such as the opening and closing of flowers and the folding together of leaves at night.

<sup>28</sup> Carter also notes that Leichhardt wrote in his earlier expedition journal: “I had been carried back in my dreams to scenes of recent date, and into the society of men with whom I had lived shortly before starting on my expedition” (85).



chthonic and etheric symbols of transformation and rebirth” (2003, 38). What Riem refers to is the “Life-Death-Life” belief systems of societies connected with the spiritual and natural worlds which they viewed as intertwined (38). What is significant in the context of Voss’ death is the nexus between the belief systems of the Indigenous people and Voss’ role in them, and how these beliefs relate to Laura and Voss’ psychic relationship.

Earlier that day, the encounter between Voss’ depleted party and the large group of Aborigines prompted him to recognise the reality: that his quest to conquer the land was doomed. He was no longer able to subsist on dreams. Instead, he “was at last openly wearing his own sores that he had kept hidden. Vermin were eating him” (V 363).

Psychically, Voss undergoes a Kafkaesque metamorphosis: his body remains scrofulous but his awareness transforms. The interconnection between the natural and the spiritual is enacted in the earth’s metaphoric consumption of Voss’ “trinity” (359): “the party was at length swallowed by a cleft” (376). Given the overlap between the spiritual and natural, such imagery is analogous with the Aborigines’ fear of the “Great Snake,” believing that the comet will “eat, eat” them (378).<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the textual ambiguity of Voss’ fear “[o]f the great legend becoming truth” (390) highlights the chthonic and etheric dysphoria experienced by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, indeed all of humanity. Effectively the fusion acknowledges Voss’ bleak aphorism that ““We rot by living”” (388).<sup>30</sup> However: “Grace lay only in the varying speeds at which the process of decomposition took place, and the lovely colours of putrescence that some souls were allowed to wear. For, in the end, everything was of flesh, the soul elliptical in shape” (388). This quote not only recalls the incident in the caves, but the intensity of the prose reflects Voss’ importance in the Aborigines’ belief system.

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<sup>29</sup> Colin Roderick, *Leichhardt: the Dauntless Explorer* (North Ryde: Angus & Robertson, 1988) 259-260. Roderick notes that Leichhardt noticed “a blue meteor that streaked across the sky parallel with the thunderclouds” three days prior to Christmas. Three days after Christmas Leichhardt renamed Ancyclus Creek Comet Creek.

<sup>30</sup> Rot and decay are discussed in more detail in the following sub-section, “*Terra Nullius*.”

Paradoxically, their fear of the “Great Snake” (378) induces them to nurture him: “the old blackfellow, the guardian, or familiar, put into the white man’s mouth a whole wickety grub” (388). The sensation of being unable to swallow the wickety grub recalls for Voss “the struggling wafer of his boyhood ... As then, his fear was that his sinful wafer might be discovered, lying before him, half-digested, upon the floor” (388).<sup>31</sup> Here, however, Voss does “swallow the grub in time” (388). His submission is two-fold. Firstly, by swallowing the grub he digests the Indigenous etheric belief system. However, in doing so he unconsciously acknowledges his innate rejection of Christianity as a child (Brady 1983, 61). Much like Proust’s *petites madeleines*, the wickety grub serves as a reminder of the past: “The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect” (qtd. in Steiner 1079). The novel’s last page reveals this: “‘Come, come. If we are not certain of the facts, how is it possible to give the answers?’ ‘The air will tell us,’ Miss Trevelyan said” (V 448). Thus the ceremonial enactment imbricates natural and spiritual worlds, but Voss is unaware of the significant part that he plays. With the death of Le Mesurier and Robarts, Voss’ tenuous link to civilisation is expunged. He admits that he had “always been most abominably frightened” and “reduced to the bones of manhood, he could admit to all this and listen to his teeth rattling in the darkness” (390). Voss’ “bones of manhood” recall Laura’s assertion at the farewell dinner that it was not the bones in the graveyard that alarmed her, but the “thought of death” (V 82).

The notion of anamnesis is nevertheless relevant to the current discussion. At the Christmas dinner the whole party engages in a gluttonous consumption of food. Such an act is two-fold: it signifies the plethora of “golden sheep ... rustling with juices and spitting fat” (206) still available to the party, as well as an implicit allusion to the materialism

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<sup>31</sup> Don Anderson, “A Severed Leg,” 405.

inherent in Western Christians' Christmas ritual. The sharp contrast between plenitude and subsequent deprivation, which induces the ascetic desire to "eat dreams," highlights the paradigmatic shifts in the explorers' position. These are prefigured in Harry Robarts' repulsion at the maggoty, fly-blown carcass Judd prepares for the Christmas dinner.<sup>32</sup> Later, his olfactory senses are awakened by the smell of the carcass cooking, his attraction to the cooked flesh set in opposition to his response to "the earlier stages of its preparation" (206). Nevertheless, Harry Robarts' attitude to food, its preparation and consumption, also highlights Western society's hypocritical attitude towards food.<sup>33</sup> For example, vegetarian meal options often include chicken choices as well as fish. A priori, food and its abundance contribute to humankind's behaviour, particularly in group interactions:

All were soon bursting, but still contrived to stuff down some of the hard puddings that Judd had improvised out of flour and currants, and boiled in water; even these were good on that day. Afterwards the men lay in the grass, and embroidered on their past lives, stories such as nobody believed, but to which they listened contentedly. Even Voss descended from his eminence, and was reviewing the past through benevolent gauze. (206)

The convivial meal unites the party, whereby the "hard puddings" are a metaphor for their cohesion. However, the combination of flour and currants into "hard" puddings re-emphasises the divisiveness of this disparate group of incompetent explorers. They listen to "the German[']s tales," "[e]xhausted by food, mellow with Christmas, they no longer demanded narrative, but preferred the lantern slides of recollection" (207). There is a palpable sense of detachment from the reality of their position in the bush: the recollections

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<sup>32</sup> Colin Roderick, *Leichhardt the Dauntless Explorer* (1988). Roderick notes that Leichhardt's 1844 expedition party consumed stewed cockatoo and suet pudding for Christmas dinner (259). The disparity between the foods consumed adds dimension to my observation that the metalinguistics at play in *Voss* illumine meaning.

<sup>33</sup> See for example, Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1990 and also Tony Bennett, Michael Emmison and John Frow, eds., *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

segue reality and allusion “into their own states of mind” (207). Remembering and forgetting are at the forefront of their [dis]illusioned states, a fact that re-evokes the narrative tensions at play in the novel.

Furthermore, remembering and forgetting are enacted through Voss’ recollections of his childhood. Recalling his family emphasises his geographical and temporal distance from the others. Immersed in family and family values, he recalls the “rampant lions” decorated on the green tiles in the kitchen that “resembled thin cats”:

‘Between all this festivity, and sweet things that were passing round, and the hot wine, I would hear the streets. It was the snow, filling and filling the empty streets, until we were lost, it seemed, in Christmas.’

The German paused.

‘So,’ he said. ‘It was not altogether different. Except for the snow, *selbstverstandlich*.<sup>34</sup> There was the snow.’

‘And except that we are not lost,’ Judd felt compelled to add.

Some of them laughed, and said they were not so sure. At that moment they would not have cared.

‘What did you use to eat, sir?’ asked Harry Robarts.

‘At Christmas, a goose. But on the Christmas Evening, always a fine carp.’

‘What is a carp, sir?’

But how could the German answer, who was so far distant? (207)

Despite Voss’ inhumane, at times sadistic behaviour, what the passage above reveals is his humanity. His recollections are replete with food, reflected in the explorers’ Christmas meal as well as the conviviality of the gathering. Effectively food nurtures, yet contradictorily it numbs the members of the party into apathy, “a stupor of meat and dreams” (207). Ultimately that apathy dissipates with the realisation that they are geographically and metaphorically lost. Thus, the contradictory nature of food symbolises the explorers’ equally contradictory trajectory into the interior. In the initial stages of the journey their appetites were voracious, but ultimately their inability to adapt to their situation diminishes that appetite. At the point of death, Voss, the embodiment of the

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<sup>34</sup> As a matter of course.

mythical all-conquering explorer, effectively becomes disembodied. All that remains are “the pale eyes of the white man” (394), their focus unclear.<sup>35</sup>

## Starvation and Death

The death of other members of the party is either prefigured or metaphorically depicted through food, largely contrasted with bodily deprivation and decay. As mentioned earlier, and most pertinently to this discussion, death ends both hunger and the ability to create. Palfreyman is the first to die. His corporeal weakness is signalled early: his face “had been drained by his recent illness to a greenish white, the outline somewhat blurred” (45). Although he claims to be “‘perfectly strong.’ ... fed on eggs and cream,” his pallor implicitly casts doubt on his corporeal strength (45). Yet his is the most performative of all the deaths, and its metaphoric significance rewards analysis. That he is the first of the explorers to die, speared in the side by an Aboriginal, signifies the death of faith in the expedition as well as the three stages of transformation as enunciated by Laura: “Of God into man. Man. And man returning into God” (qtd. in Beston 2006, 112). Furthermore, Palfreyman’s death highlights the incommensurability of relations between the explorers and the Indigenous inhabitants of the interior. The food metaphor in his “cabbage-tree hat” signifies Palfreyman’s embodiment in “the paradox of man in Christ, and Christ in man” (342). In other words, the appropriation of the “cabbage-tree” into a Western classification system devalues the Indigenous claim to the environment. This devaluation is emphasised by measuring a cabbage against the grandeur of the tree, an image further devalued as a

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<sup>35</sup> Keith Garebian, “The Desert and the Garden: The Theme of Completeness in *Voss* (1976-77) 558. Garebian notes that Voss “would himself like to be remote from humans and capable of indulging his appetite for power and infinity.” Effectively, Voss’ quest is thwarted by his loss of appetite, metaphorically and literally.

mere hat. Effectively Palfreyman symbolises the absurdity of the encounter and the lack of communication between the explorers and the Indigenous people.

In contrast, Le Mesurier's death is self-inflicted. The poet kills himself with the knife which represents both sides of his life: the "swords and saints" of his faith and the "pen mightier than the sword" of his writing. His book of poems symbolises his life, but he is unable to accept the "bleeding poems that he had torn out and put on paper" as solace for his disillusionment (379). He mislays the book amongst the "crumbs" of tangible objects, where his life is represented "in lovely, opalescent intaglios, buckets of vomit, vistas of stillest marble, the livers and lights<sup>36</sup> of beliefs and intentions" (380). Le Mesurier's metaphoric life of "buckets of vomit" and "livers and lights" at once recalls and prefigures rejection, digestion, and humankind's complex attitudes towards food.<sup>37</sup> The contradictory elements of vomit and diarrhoea are coalesced in the "opalescent intaglios" of Le Mesurier's "beliefs and intentions." He aspired to Willie Pringles' optimism: "I am confident that the mediocrity of which we speak is not a final and irrevocable state; rather is it a creative source of endless variety and subtlety. The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow. Common forms are continually breaking into brilliant shapes. If we will explore them'" (447). However, Le Mesurier is thwarted by an inability to retain self-belief or purpose. Food as physical nourishment is denied through subversive expulsion, signified by his writing. His death is impelled by starvation and is a metaphor of his poetical aridity, ... "dry, dry . . ." (381), where even his poems are unable to survive.

Harry Robarts discovers Le Mesurier's body: "[i]t had not occurred to him that a gentleman might lie in real blood, like an animal" (381). Here his naïve repulsion recalls his earlier disgust at the maggots and sheep carcass. However, that he forgot the maggots in

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<sup>36</sup> Lungs of sheep, pigs, bullocks, etc. used as a food especially for cats and dogs.

<sup>37</sup> The theme of repulsion at the ingestion and expulsion of food is satirically represented in *Memoirs of Many in One*. This theme will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

his greed for the mutton, “rustling with juices and spitting fat,” is proleptic for his own death, his body riddled with maggots (206). Harry Robarts’ denial of a past and a future enmeshes him in the present. Unable as he is to acknowledge his mortality, in death his body is forgotten, his physical exuberance transformed. Effectively, he remains suspended in the present. His dead body ingests the maggots that abhorred him: “[his] profane body ... was raising where it lay ... It was swelling. It had become a green woman” (389). In contrast to the “dry, dry” (381) body of Le Mesurier, “the plump body and the dried one lay together in the gully. There let them breed like maggots together, white maggots, cried one blackfellow, who was a poet” (389). The corporeal contrast, together with the allusion to maggots, reconfigures Harry Robarts’ disgust and initial refusal of the contaminated meat. Yet the harsh injunction to breed signals a blurring of the polarities of innervate/enervate and proffers an element of hope in death, in effect an affirmation of the “Life-Death-Life” cycle mentioned earlier (Riem 38).

Conversely, the deaths of the scission group formed through Judd’s mutiny proffer a bleak image. Literal death from hunger signifies an inability to transcend to a metaphysical plane. Both Turner and Angus are unrepentant and their minds have turned to folly where they can not assess situations properly. This is seen in Turner’s rejection of food and in Angus’ physical deterioration.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, their deaths are prefigured in Turner’s behaviour after Judd declares his intention to turn back: ‘I will not eat, Albert,’ he was saying craftily, ‘and the load will be so much lighter for the provisions we do not have to carry. It is surprising how little a man need eat. I will be the headpiece, you will see. Food, they say, only numbs the brain’” (V 346). Turner’s antinomy highlights the paradoxical nature of food and its consumption. His efforts to persuade Judd are an assertion of power as well as a declaration of weakness: “Turner was gabbling. The prospect of a return to

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<sup>38</sup> The irony of both names is evident: Turner (turncoat) and Angus (bull).

sanity had brought out the streak of madness that is hidden in all men” (346). Just before Turner’s death his “bowels were protesting at the last injustice humanity would inflict upon him” (425). The scatological “dried putrescence” (425) conveys Turner’s repugnant demeanour. His failure is in not acknowledging his own culpability for the failed expedition. He represents the element in humanity unwilling to confront weakness and acknowledge blame. He is unrepentant.

The starving Ralph Angus is likewise unrepentant, and his surreal imaginings reveal the weakness of his mind. However, the elision of binaries in his thought simultaneously suggests a possibility of hope. His primary fear is “that he might not know how to die, ... in a manner befitting a gentleman” (425). At death he is metaphorically immersed in genteel society, where “young ladies of his own class offered him tea out of Worcester cups” (425-26). He journeys further back to “a swaddled baby,” back to the earth, his beard “sprouting from the sand” (426). The surreal imagery recalls the key mustard and cress episode and conveys the indistinctiveness of binaries such as death/renewal; failure/hope; flux/stasis; natural/unnatural – all signified by food and its attendant performance.<sup>39</sup> In that context, just prior to his death, “silence and isolation began to eat at Ralph Angus” (424). The reality of his plight, and his inability to form a bond with Judd, compel him to concede that “[i]n his mouth he could taste the clotting of disgust” (425). An aura of self-contempt emanates from Angus’ recognition of his failure. Although it could be postulated that regression is all that sustains him in death, there remains an optimism in the metaphorical regrowth of his “sprouting” beard (426).

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<sup>39</sup> As an example of White’s enduring quest for unity see John Colmer, “Duality in Patrick White,” *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*, eds. R. Shepherd and K. Singh. Adelaide: The Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English (CRNLE), 1978. 70-76. Colmer analyses the validity of the imperative for realism in modern literature. He asserts that “as common readers we are therefore justified in resisting works that have what Keats called too ‘palpable a design’ upon us, whether that design is political or theological” (70). Colmer argues against the type of hermeneutic reading that this thesis adopts. Nevertheless he recognises the complexity of White’s fiction but resists a symbolic approach to unravelling that complexity.



Indeed, that optimism is sustained in Voss' death which is preceded by revelation (Gzell 191). His death is central to both this discussion and the novel, a contention that is substantiated below in "*Terra Nullius*." Voss' death is literally and metaphorically sandwiched between the deaths of Harry and Le Mesurier and the deaths of Turner and Ralph Angus. Its symbolism, however, is paradoxical.<sup>40</sup> Configured as a sandwich-filler it symbolises nourishment, yet obversely it represents the scission of the exploration party. According to *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, *sandwich* is derived from the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Sandwich (1718-92) who was said to have eaten food in this form to enable him to continue gambling for extensive periods of time. To extend that metaphor in this context, Voss has indeed gambled the lives of others in his solipsistic quest. Conversely, his rejection of food symbolises an asceticism that ultimately results in self-revelation. Such contradictory symbolism, I argue, represents the complexity of Voss' characterisation. Indeed, textually the prelude to his death is inordinately long, as well as replete with food imagery.

Held captive by the Aborigines, "Voss attempted to count the days, but the simplest sums would swell into a calculation of universal time, so vast that it filled his mouth with one whole mealy potato, cold certainly, but of unmanageable proportions" (388). Here, with Voss' life nearly over, the nourishing "potatoey soup" diminishes to an "unmanageable," "cold," and "mealy potato," symbolising the unpalatable truth that confronts him near death. Concomitantly with the notion of death, the mealy potato signifies ineluctable time and its inherent element of decay. Obversely, that the potato

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<sup>40</sup> Lloyd Fernando, "Re-Defining the Self in South-East Asia," *Westerly* 4 (Dec. 1984): 25-31. Fernando discusses the limits of discourse and how the writer needs to "explore through his [*sic*] works the capacity of the psyche to transcend this old universe" (28). He concedes that Voss' death is "gruesome" but adds that it "is a dramatically appropriate admission to both the longing for and the failure to acquire the knowledge needed to penetrate the logic of another culture" (30). However, I oppose Fernando's view that Jackie does "not have any inkling of [the] spiritual dimension of life" (29).

remains whole offers an element of hope resident in death. Like the talisman carried by Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, faith sustains and nurtures.

Confronted with death, Voss is no longer afraid. At the behest of the elders Jackie hacks off Voss' head in order to "break the terrible magic that bound him remorselessly, endlessly, to the white men" (394). Voss' discarded "head-thing ... lay like any melon" (394). Not only is his affinity with the landscape apparent but the "dissolution of the boundaries of self and other, socialised subjectivity," is symbolised by the dissolving of his blood into the Australian desert (McCann 1997, 148). Once again, the symbolism parallels Joyce's *Ulysses*. I contend that the "melon" beheading underscores the notion of iconoclasm in *Voss*. To behead necessitates severance of the oesophagus, the symbolic organ of Chapter 8, "Laestrygonians," in Joyce's novel (Gilbert 38). Clearly, without the oesophagus the body can no longer ingest food. The major themes of "Laestrygonians," bloody sacrifice and food, are symbolically re-configured in *Voss* from cannibalism to a chthonic enrichment. His death is prefigured in Le Mesurier's poem:

*Humility is my brigalow, that must I remember: here I shall find a thin shade in which to sit. As I grow weaker, so I shall become strong. As I shrivel, I shall recall with amazement the visions of love, of trampling horses, of drowning candles, of hungry emeralds. Only goodness is fed. Until the sun delivered me from my body, the wind fretted my wretched ribs my skull was split open by the green lightning. Now that I am nothing, I am, and love is the simplest of all tongues. (296-7)<sup>41</sup>*

In the context of metalinguistics, in *Voss* all written evidence of the explorers' trajectory is subsumed into the interior. Metaphorically, the earth consumes not only the explorers but their narratives too. In an historical context, the esculent nature of explorer literature is encapsulated in the following: "A page of my *Journal*," Boswell once remarked, 'is like a

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<sup>41</sup> T.S. Eliot *Four Quartets* (London: Faber, 1958) 43: "Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,/Every poem an epitaph."

cake of portable soup. A little may be diffused into a considerable portion.’” (qtd. in Carter, Paul xxiii). Such an observation also reveals how the eidetic nature of journal writing can be subverted through a reinterpretation of the text, what I refer to as the diffusion principle.

In *Voss*, White applies that diffusion principle through his poetic prose. It is he, as author, who writes an account of Voss’ expedition in which the omniscient narrative permits an interpretation beyond the scope of explorer literature. As Laura says on the last page of the novel: “‘His legend will be written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it’” (V 448). Leichhardt, who one must remember is the template for Voss, similarly inspired a plethora of writers to write about his disappearance. Indeed, textually the chthonic/ethereal, natural/spiritual binaries are fused through the diffusion of Voss’ character, an exposition of which I have produced through food.

Effectively, although I have applied an iconoclastic argument to the nineteenth-century exploration of Australia, what *Voss* does is open up a re-interpretation and a re-examination of explorer literature on an ontological plane. Although food is embedded in the quotidian, a reification of various foodstuffs reveals how a quest for knowledge is indeed enacted through food and its attendant imagery.

To summarise: through an exploration of the performative aspects of food and its inherent symbolism in landscape, civilisation, dreams and starvation, this section questions the myths of exploration in Australia’s history. A hermeneutical approach shows how food operates as a simulacrum in *Voss*. Furthermore, these simulacra offer a way to understand the complexities of White’s characters metaphorically, enacted through the explorers’ trajectory into Australia’s interior.

## TERRA NULLIUS

*“She loved the shape of words, and taste, even of the acid drops” (V 238).*

*“She would work fanatically at some mathematical problem, even now, just for the excitement of it, to solve and know” (V 9).*

### *“Division by Zero”*

*She could’ve been our grandmother  
Warning us of poisonous mushrooms –  
To stress her point she’d scratch  
The taboo bold with crimson chalk.  
It should never be used to divide,  
Or we’d be howled from lined yard  
To pit where cruel paradoxes ruled.  
Her warnings tempted us even more:  
Young, growing in confidence,  
We’d prove the impossible for fun –  
Nothing she said could prevent us  
From showing two was equal to one” (Petsinis 4).*

*“‘As that is a quart pot, there is no mistake about it,’ Turner assured him, and the black pot did look most convincing. ‘But that there Le Mesurier’ – how the speaker hated the name, and would roll it between his tongue and his palate, more often than not, as if to gather up a bad taste, and spit it out – ‘that Le Me-sur-ier would keep a cove guessing for years. Then you would wake up one fine day, and find as the pot was not at all what you and me thought it to be’” (V 254-5).*

*“All the time the young native was keeping up a chatter to his mentor, Dugald, who was lost between several worlds” (V 189).*

This subsection explores the contentious concept of *terra nullius* via a philosophical approach to dietetics, lexicology and numerology.<sup>42</sup> The complexity of debate that surrounds the colonisation of Australia, I will contend, is reflected in the complexity of the interpersonal dynamics of Voss’ party, which in turn relate to the complexity of the novel’s structure (Angela Smith 154). Yet complexity of character and its refractive potentialities are counter-balanced by the portrayal of the Indigenous people. Nonetheless, their

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<sup>42</sup> For a refutation of the term see Michael Connor, *The Invention of Terra Nullius: Historical and Legal Fictions on the Foundation of Australia* (Paddington, New SouthWales: Macleay, 2005). Connor argues against Henry Reynolds’ interpretation of Indigenous history.

characterisation is not overtly simplistic; indeed White portrays both sides of the racial spectrum of white/black with equity and, I suggest, proffers a symbiotic relationship between the explorers and the Indigenous communities they encounter.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, he portrays the complexities of colonisation synchronously with the complexities of all humanity.

Thus far I have conducted an aetiological discussion of how food and food symbolism relate to Voss' doomed expedition. Furthermore, the relevance of food to character and how that resonates in death have been discussed and analysed in detail. In this section too the focus is on food as mental pabulum, re-examining the intellectual/intuitive elements at play in White's writing. As the title indicates, the discussion concentrates on how the scission of the party relates to land ownership. The contentious term *terra nullius* highlights the continuing debate in Australian society and the ongoing legal ramifications concerning land ownership.<sup>44</sup> White's portrayal of the Indigenous characters in *Voss* resonates with equally contentious issues.<sup>45</sup> The two named Indigenous characters, Dugald and Jackie, stand at the centre of the concept I have devised, yet the Indigenous people as a collective, their belief systems and interpersonal dynamics, provide an overarching methodological tool to interpret the text. Such an approach, I maintain, reflects the novel's structure and its relationship to the perceived division between the explorers and the Indigenous people. That Dugald and Jackie are members of the expedition party, admittedly not necessarily under their own volition, offers a methodology to examine the perception and creation of such binaries. In turn, such a methodology allows for a re-

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<sup>43</sup> Adam Shoemaker, *Black Words White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988* (St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1989) 89-90. Shoemaker points out that the "Aboriginal servants Dugald and Jackie and the entire mass of faceless, undifferentiated blacks are significant, not so much because of the specific traditional customs of the people, but because of their profound spiritual – and actual – affinity with the land and its creatures" (89). He goes on to show how the "shared environment" of the desert does not create a "spiritual rapport" between the white/black characters (90).

<sup>44</sup> Note for example, the major land rights awarded to the Indigenous people of Perth in Western Australia (2006) and the continuing debate surrounding land rights in Queensland.

<sup>45</sup> My thesis disputes Jen Harrison's contention that Dugald and Jackie are liminal characters.

envisioning of the dualities *Voss/Voss*, *Voss/Leichhardt*, *Indigenous/non-Indigenous*, *black/white*, *day/night* and *European/Australian*.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, I contend that in *Voss* White presents both sides of the colonisation issue with empathy. To some extent all humanity is compromised and is a victim of ideological pursuits, particularly of acquisition as the capitalist pursuit.<sup>47</sup> I argue that White's much quoted lament about "the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man ... food means cake and steak, ... and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves," is multi-signified (*PWS* 15). The capitalisation in the metaphor, "[T]he Great Australian Emptiness," further indicates its importance. Indeed, "great" and "emptiness" are oxymoronic, and the fact that "Australian" acts as divisor indicates not only an intellectual barrenness, but, I contend, highlights the divisive notion of *terra nullius* and the effect of the explorers' foundational "march of material ugliness." I concur with Brady's suggestions that the facts of White's biography cannot be ignored as they "increase the reader's horizon and repertoire" (1992, 24). He was from a privileged colonial pastoralist family and had a thorough education in prestigious institutions in England: "Ironed out in an English public school and finished off at King's, Cambridge" (*PWS* 13). White's love/hate relationship with Australia, its colonising inhabitants and its literary critics, is notorious. In writing *Voss* he hoped to convince "the dingoes ... howling unmercifully" that "the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism" (*PWS* 16). White also claimed that he wanted to impart a textual sensuousness to the novel, an imaginative overload. In this sub-section I argue that he achieves this, not least through the food

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<sup>46</sup> Veronica Brady, "To Be Or Not To Be? The Verbal History of Patrick White," *Westerly* 2 (1992): 29. Brady refers to the "problem of interplay between life and art . . . [yet that interplay] takes us to the point of intersection between the physical and historical, the psychic and the semantic."

<sup>47</sup> See for example Manfred Mackenzie's argument in "Writing Australia/n. Writing Double." *Southern Review* 30.1 (1997): 26-40, which offers a "Manichean" model to describe the European colonisation of Australia.

imagery, whilst at the same time he offers a prescient if occasionally contradictory overview of the complexities involved in the term *terra nullius*.

A range of features in *Voss* reject the notion of *terra nullius*. Among these are White's inclusion of Indigenous peoples: an examination of their food consumption, with its attendant symbolism; and a study of Voss' affinity with the landscape of the interior. Conjoined with Voss' paradoxical relationship with its Indigenous inhabitants, the latter reveals White's complex understanding of colonialism. The Indigenous guides, Dugald and Jackie *appear* to be compromised through their subordinate role as guides. Paradoxically, however, Voss recognises their superior knowledge of the Australian interior and the fact that they are vicarious leaders of the expedition. In this way both Voss' role as character, and White's role as author, in what evolved into the *terra nullius* debate, can be viewed as visionary and intermediary. An example that incorporates food symbolism is the night a group of Indigenous cattle-rustlers disturbs Voss. For an explanation he approaches the "two native guides," whose "eyes were open, he could see, upon some great activity of their minds. If only he could have penetrated to that distance, he would have felt more satisfied" (V 201). Voss is both literally and metaphorically unable to "penetrate ... that distance," the distance between his culture and the Indigenous peoples' culture, and the distance of Australia's vast interior. Furthermore, the cattle are central to the theory of what Lévi-Strauss refers to as "the raw and the cooked," the foci of the construction of mythologies, and how they relate to different cultures' perceptions of food in its various stages of production.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* and *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1969) 29-41. In addition *Totemism* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 102-125. Lévi-Strauss discusses nominalism and highlights the complexities of categorising races synchronically or diachronically. His theories highlight the transformative power of binaries in offering a connection between the material and the spiritual worlds. He points out A.P. Elkin's reference to the reptilian connection between sorcery and belief systems amongst Aboriginal totemism. Lévi-Strauss also discusses how "the great problem of Australian totemism is that posed by its relation to the rules of marriage" (107). I contend that in *Voss* the problem of marriage is transmuted in Voss and Laura's relationship. Of course, Lévi-Strauss' *Totemism*

Dugald is unwilling to assist Voss in what would effectively be a transgression against his own people. He feigns illness, “he was rubbing his belly under the remnants of his ridiculous swallowtail coat” (201). The omniscient narrator positions Dugald in a somewhat “ridiculous” situation. Yet, as John Healy points out, the Indigenous people are “immune from Voss” (191). Dugald’s pathetic defiance imparts a sense of passivity, while his feigned stomach-ache symbolises subconscious disgust at the way in which most of the colonising explorers treated the Indigenous inhabitants. Indeed, the fiction of *terra nullius* fed the drive to acquire land at any cost, by allowing the Aborigines to be viewed as an expendable obstacle.<sup>49</sup> However, as Colin Roderick argues, Leichhardt was uninterested in personal economics (261). Instead, his focus was epistemological, reflecting the complexity of his character.

The complexity of both Indigenous people and Voss is seen in the structure of the novel. The significance of food as metaphor for remembering and character has already been discussed in relation to the Christmas feast vignette. The festively imbued vignette is immediately preceded by the farinaceous incident. In this incident the Indigenous people reject outright Voss’ claim that they would respond positively to “material things” (V 205). His uncharacteristically paternalistic gesture is comically derided by the insouciance that the “blacks” exhibit toward his gift. He orders Dugald to “explain ... [the] virtues” of the flour, which “he did briefly, as people will confess unwillingly to the lunacy of some relative” (206). According to de Vries, flour symbolises perfection, it is “the finest extract of something” (194). However, in this exchange the sense of perfection is lampooned.

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refutes its eponymous title. In so doing the author’s structuralist approach through phenomenological methodology invites new dialogues.

<sup>49</sup> Dorothy Jones, “Mapping and Mythmaking: Women Writers and the Australian Legend,” *ARIEL* 17.4 (Oct. 1986): 63-86. Jones convincingly discusses the lack of place for women in the colonisation of Australia. She uses “the portrayals of *Terra Australis Incognita* by early cartographers” (64) as a springboard to an analysis of the problems experienced by Australian women writers who face “the added problem of responding to an emergent national myth” (64), a myth which excludes and dismisses women. However, the conclusion is optimistic and asserts that through the imagination women writers may explore Australia and its marginalised inhabitants by using new experiences and the formation of new places to remap and reinterpret Australia.



Clearly, Dugald is deeply embarrassed by Voss' gesture, the meaning of which is two-fold: Dugald is embarrassed by his complicity with the explorers. Thus the reference to "the lunacy of some relative" indicates Dugald's disdain for the expedition party's mission. Obversely, Dugald is embarrassed by the Indigenous peoples' reluctance to embrace new food concepts, and it is his affinitive genealogy that is also represented in "the lunacy of some relative." However, it is Voss' paternalism that is ridiculed by the omniscient narrator, who notes that Voss "persisted in considering [the Aborigines] his people" (V 205). The entire exchange is a parody, and imparts the ambiguity inherent in the term *terra nullius*. That is to say, the concept continues to create debate, particularly in political circles. The admission of culpability for the continuing plight of Indigenous people resonates with economic and cultural concerns. In 2007, the collision of cultural values between the Indigenous inhabitants and European society in Australia reveals conflicting views of the history of colonisation and the dangers of mythmaking. The humanitarian element that resides at the core of the ambiguous debate is explored throughout the desert vignettes in *Voss*.

That ambiguity is sustained by irony. In the description of the eventual abandonment of the bag of flour "in ignoble rags," there are six examples of humour, based on the Indigenous people's amusement at the preposterousness of Voss and his party.<sup>50</sup> This inversion of imperialistic ridicule adds weight to the derision that the Indigenous inhabitants felt towards the invaders of their land. Indeed, the farcical narrative imputes the homonyms *farce* (drama) and *farce* (to stuff). The ironic humour is paralleled with the "unhappy" exchange that occurred between Dugald and "the natives" (206) at the behest of Ralph Angus, who wanted to question them about the stolen cattle. Such parallels reveal the tension that existed for the "civilisers" in their relationship with the actual inhabitants of

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<sup>50</sup> See Angela Smith, "Is Phallogocentricity a Sin? Or a Peccadillo," where she discusses comedy and gender in *Voss*.

the land that they said belonged to no one. The battle for ownership of land and cattle also exposes the tension inherent in consumerism, a tension that remains in Australia today.

In *Voss*, I maintain, White uses the tension that surrounds the materialism of colonialism to question the actuality of the conquest of *terra nullius* and to show how it haunts the Australian psyche. The parallelism in the farinaceous vignette exemplifies that tension: the parody of the non-Indigenous flour contrasts with the practicality of the Indigenous flour, when the explorers encounter a “party of blacks, trooping gaily over the grey earth ... on its way to eat the fruit of the bunya bunya” (210).<sup>51</sup> Traditionally, in Aboriginal food culture, the seeds of the bunya bunya cone are either eaten raw or roasted and ground into flour. By evoking traditional foodstuffs in contrast with the explorers’ bag of flour, White emphasises the cultural differences that plagued the interaction between the two groups. In effect Voss’ party refuses the promise of a potential “paradise.” Instead they “continued westward through what could have been their own perpetual sleep, and the fruit of the mystic bunya bunya contracted in their mouths” (210). The colonisers refuse not only “paradise,” but an existential encounter with the Indigenous foodstuffs. Lexicologically, the homonyms *flour* and *flower* indicate the essential differences between the two parties and their relationship with food. So, the explorers’ implicit refusal to partake of “the fruit of the mystic bunya bunya” reveals their inability to grasp the potentialities of the landscape and thereby acknowledge that difference is not necessarily exclusive. Their self-imposed exclusion both impairs their physical survival and precludes any mystical or spiritual amelioration.

The appearance of the comet complicates the tension between the material and the spiritual. Indeed, the comet is linked to the farinaceous incident where the metaphor “rain of flour” (206) parallels the imagery of the comet, a “cool flood of stars” (376). In order to

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<sup>51</sup> *Araucaria bidwillii*

align lexicology with dietetics it is worthwhile noting that in *The Oxford Dictionary* *comet* is sandwiched between *comestibles* and *comfit*. Given that the comet is viewed as all-consuming by the Indigenous characters the lexicological observation rewards further analysis. The characters who are most closely aligned with the comet are Laura and Voss. Yet, the triune *comestibles/comet/comfit* paradoxically presents Laura as compressed between foodstuffs. If one considers the sandwich analogy it incorporates her as a foodstuff to be devoured. However, as I will discuss shortly, it is Voss and Jackie who are afraid of being devoured by the comet, but as I have already pointed out, Voss is consumed by the earth. The tension between the empyrean and the terrestrial is indicative of the tension that pervades the narrative and the complexities of meaning that result.

I contend that in *Voss* the empyrean shift in the narrative not only highlights the ontological plane of Laura and Voss' relationship, but is also homologous with the changing relationship between Voss and the Indigenous characters who hold him captive. His passivity is compounded by hunger, but a self-imposed hunger that reflects his diminishing thirst for knowledge. Concomitant with the metaphor of thirst, and indeed the rain metaphor, Lévi-Strauss, in his discussion of the contradictory mythological origins of water – celestial or terrestrial – correlates three categories of water with three types of diet: swamp and rain through cannibalism; river and lake through fishing and hunting; and intermittent rains through vegetable foodstuffs (*The Raw and the Cooked* 215). Voss' exploration party experience all three types of water, but while anthropophagy is a central trope in *A Fringe of Leaves* it is absent from *Voss*. Consumption by an unknown "other" is nevertheless an absent presence in the narrative: "'If we are not devoured by blacks,' Voss replied, 'or the Great Snake, then we shall be eaten by somebody eventually. By a friend, perhaps. Man is a tempting morsel.'" (V 379). That contradictory absence/presence reflects, I contend, both Voss'/Leichhardt's empathy with the Indigenous people he encounters in

the uncharted Australian interior, and an innate fear of the unknown. In turn that empathy/fear reflects the empathy/fear that White felt for the disadvantaged and marginalised. As Wendy Steiner points out: “The horror of being eaten is reflected in our ideas of illness. The nineteenth-century name for tuberculosis was ‘consumption.’ It was the typical fate of heroines of melodrama, opera, and novels, the nurturer of Life transformed into the meal of Death” (1039-1040). Whether Laura suffers from tuberculosis is not explicit,<sup>52</sup> but as she is the Jungian anima to Voss’ animus such a correlation bears speculative analysis.<sup>53</sup>

Laura is the nurturer of life. She nurtures Mercy and psychically she nurtures Voss (Walsh 26). As the central trope in their psychic relationship, the comet relates to this discussion of *terra nullius*. Yet other natural phenomena sustain their relationship, concomitantly reflected in the relationships among the members of the party and in their relationships with the Indigenous people. To relate phenomenology to dietetics, Lévi-Strauss contends that there is a mythological “link between the rainbow and diseases” (297). He supports this by elaborating on the diurnal and nocturnal aspects of the rainbow, both of which reflect a “coincidence of phenomena” (297). Thus, phenomenologically he aligns rainbows with disease and, more specifically, with epidemics.

Contaminated food is associated with epidemics, and a combined approach through epidemiology and aetiology to the contaminated food in *Voss* is crucial to an understanding of *Voss/Voss*. In other words through a dietetic, lexicographic and numerological analysis of the novel, the “cruel paradoxes” evident in all three theoretical stances illuminate my argument. For example, textually, the link between rainbows and contaminated food is

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<sup>52</sup> Charles Lock, “Patrick White: Writing Towards Silence.” *The Kenyon Review* 23.2 (Spring 2001): 72-85. The dedicatee to *Voss*, Marie D’Estournelles de Constant, had recently died from tuberculosis (Lock 74). Also, according to David Marr, one of the symptoms of White’s asthma attacks was to cough up blood, also a symptom of TB (152).

<sup>53</sup> See James Bulman-May, *Patrick White and Alchemy* (2001) 3-14. Bulman-May’s discussion on Jung in White refers to several other critics’ interpretations. In the same book Bulman-May also uses Jungian animus/anima to discuss Waldo and Arthur Brown in *The Solid Mandala*, 218-309.

implied in the goats' milk discussed earlier in relation to Le Mesurier's illness. The surreal imagery in the quote below conflates contamination with vision yet the conjunction "or" adds an element of doubt:

wrestling with the great snake, his King, the divine powers of which were not disguised by the earth-colours of its scales. Friction of days had worn its fangs to a yellow-grey, but it could arch itself like a rainbow out of the mud of tribulation. At one point during his struggles, the sick man, or visionary, kissed the slime of the beast's mouth, and at once spat out a shower of diamonds. (281)

The imagery prefigures the comet, yet the denseness of the imagery imparts ambiguity.

That this vignette occurs in Chapter 8 and prefigures the comet in Chapter 13 adds dimension to my argument that the food symbolism in *Voss* relates to the complexity of the term *terra nullius*, a complexity that can be partially explained through an analysis of the structure of *Voss*.

Chapter 13 opens with Mr. Bonner purchasing the box of three pears, "beautifully nesting in their own leaves" (353), for Laura "who had caused ... [his] world of substance to quake" (350). The chapter is composed of seven vignettes that alternate between Sydney and the desert, in particular the Aborigines' camp. Not only is the disparity between the non-Indigenous/Indigenous inhabitants enacted within these vignettes, but the masculine/feminine notions at play throughout the novel are also overt. In the third vignette, for example, Laura's fever intensifies as the pears rot, and their odour becomes symbolic of Mrs. Bonner's corporeal decay and uncertain mind.<sup>54</sup> Taken in conjunction with the desert as a subject interposed between the acquisition of the pears and their putrescence, the pears could also signify the transitional demise of the "trinity" of Voss, Le

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<sup>54</sup> In *House of All Nations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), Christina Stead similarly satirises the symbolic pear in Scene Forty-two: A Stuffed Carp: Raccamond with his "bulging eyes and sweating chops bloats himself on food, including "Yanco" peaches from Australia (288) "wine-filled tea," "the best chocolates in the world . . . Lindt and Sprüngli," and finally "a splendid Doyenne de Cornice pear, specially bought for him, 'because he needed fresh fruit for digestion'" (297-298). The shape of the pear signifies the female form; its rotten triad as opposed to its singular consumption highlights both authors' concern with the place of the feminine in a masculine-driven culture.

Mesurier and Harry Robarts (359). In this way the desert vignette that divides the two pear vignettes overtly challenges the “doubtful quantity” of Jackie’s position (359).<sup>55</sup>

Dietetically, contaminated food is re-evoked in the dramatic vignette prior to Voss’ slaughter, the penultimate vignette in Chapter 13:

In the night the blackfellows were killing the horses and mules of the white men, as it was now their right. The emaciated animals could not rear up, but made an attempt with their hobbled forelegs. Some, ridiculously, fell over sideways. Their eyes were glittering with fear in the firelight. Their nostrils were stiff. Blood ran. Those animals that smelled the blood, and were not yet touched, screamed more frightfully than those which were already dying. Tongues were lolling out. If the mules were silenter, they were also perhaps more desperate, like big, caught fish leaping and squirming upon the bank of a river. But their eyes glazed finally.

None of this was seen by Voss, but at one stage the spear seemed to enter his own hide, and he screamed through his thin throat with his little, leathery strip of remaining tongue. For all suffering he screamed.

Ah, Lord let him bear it.

Soon the bowels of the dying animals were filling the night. The glistening, greenish caverns of their bellies were open. Drunk with the foetid smells, the blacks were running amongst the carcasses, tearing out the varnished livers, and hacking off the rough tongues.

Almost before the blood was dry on their hands, they had fallen to gorging themselves, and in a very short time, or so it seemed, were sucking the charred bones, and some were coughing for a final square of singed hide that had stuck in going down. It was, on the whole, a poor feast, but the bellies of all had swelled out. If they were beyond pardon, it was their lean lives that had damned them.

Voss heard the sucking of fingers beside the fires, as the blacks drowsed off into silence, deeper, closer, their own skins almost singed upon the coals (391-92).

That the exploration ends with the slaughter of all the malnourished pack animals has mythological significance. Following the disappearance of the “Great Snake” the “blacks” (378) experience anger at what they perceive is a double deception, “by the Snake and by the white man” (391). The duality is perpetuated then, through the apparent duplicity. The ensuing feast is redolent of the explorers’ Christmas feast, but the Aborigines consume the animals which were an integral part of the failed expedition. As the non-Indigenous animals die, the strength of the party diminishes. This inverse parallel highlights just how

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<sup>55</sup> Analogous with putrescence is the notion that it signifies the diminishment of faith, especially if one considers that the pear signifies hope (Cooper 128).

ill-equipped the colonial explorers were in their quest to conquer *terra nullius*. Indeed, lexically the frequent anastrophes further compound both the density of the passage and the complexity of the notions that they evoke. Lexically, the passage correlates the binaries of empathy/fear, white/black and life/death with food consumption.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, I assert that the parallels inherent in the homonym *diet* (way of feeding) (congress) are reproduced in the astronomical diurnal, which encompasses both night and day. Conversely, night/day can equally be defined as nocturnal/diurnal.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the lexicological ambiguity of the passage highlights the multitude of meanings that can be derived from it. So, the number of hours in night/day is different depending on which field describes it. To realign this argument with food, the Aborigines' diet, as I have mentioned several times, is a point of difference between colonised and coloniser. Their diet (congress) is also unique to Voss' previous encounters with humanity.

To continue the diet analogy in conjunction with parallels, in adopting a hermeneutical methodology I maintain that the two named Indigenous characters, Dugald and Jackie, are symbols for the severance of the party, visualised numerically as 1 1. Conversely, I contend that they also represent a unifying principle. To elaborate: if one envisages the number of party members, eight, as the digit 8 vertically split in two (1 1), the resultant image represents the mirror-image of the digit 3.<sup>58</sup> In *Voss* textual emphasis on the number three invokes the Aristotelian Triad, "the number as a whole inasmuch as it contains a beginning, a middle and an end" (Cooper 114).<sup>59</sup> It is also a universal number in that it incorporates body/soul/spirit, heaven/earth/waters and birth/life/death (114).

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<sup>56</sup> The imagery is redolent of William Alabaster's "Away, Fear with Thy Projects" (1597-8): "Tell them, my soul, the fears that make me quake:/The smouldering brimstone and the burning lake,/Life feeding death, death every life devouring,/Torments not moved, unheard, yet still roaring,/God lost, hell found, - ever, never begun./Now bid me into flame from smoke to run!"

<sup>57</sup> One day incorporates 24 hours. Night/day thus produces a twelve-hour definition.

<sup>58</sup> The word digit can also refer to fingers, another recurring symbol in White's oeuvre. As I have demonstrated, the non-Indigenous members of the party split into two groups of three.

<sup>59</sup> Of course, the number three has great significance in folklore. In *Voss* its obvious association is the Trinity.

So, to return to the number eight analogy: if one configures the numerical scission digitally as 3 1 1 3 it can be reconfigured grammatically as a chiasmus. The etymology of chiasmus derives from the Greek letter X which has connotations of anonymity, which in turn evokes the term *terra nullius*. Yet numerically it denotes the number ten. The inversion of the letter X to numerological parallelisms once again transforms it to 1 1. Effectively, these various constructions signal Chapters 8, 10, 11, 12 (X11) and 13. In this way, I argue that the isomorphic binaries of black/white, consume/defecate, interior/exterior are ameliorated through food imagery, particularly in relation to the structure of the novel and how food is structurally positioned in the five chapters (Korsmeyer 35).

To return to Chapter 13, a more complex chiasmus is evident in the thematic structure: ABABABA, where A stands for Sydney and B for the desert. The pivotal B consists of eight pages which depict the plenitude of the Indigenous camp; the secret Indigenous ceremony; the arrival of the comet and Le Mesurier's death which has already been discussed. Dietetically, the comet "coiled achingly in the bellies of the more responsible," yet paradoxically, "this great fiery one [spirit] came, and threatened the small souls of men" (379). Here the omniscient narrator alludes to the power of fear to subordinate those with "small souls." Indeed, White's depiction of Voss as an "arch-megalomaniac" (*PWS* 15) is symbolically most apparent in Chapter 13, where his physical weakness belies the symbolic power he holds over the Indigenous camp. Therefore, paradoxically, on the cusp of spiritual enlightenment Voss is at his weakest physically, yet is unaware of the spiritual power he holds over his captors.

To situate the novel in a cultural context, clearly World War II impacted on White's consciousness.<sup>60</sup> Numerology and acronyms in the novel may also be interpreted through the cultural context of World War II which clearly influenced White the writer. The name

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<sup>60</sup> See for example Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass: A Self-Portrait* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1983) 81-127.



VOSS can be interpreted as itself representing the scission; the letters can be divided thus: VO SS. The SS then clearly alludes to Hitler's *Schutzstaffel* and its abhorrent practices – a notion not too fanciful if one takes into account White's statement that after he had been "[n]ourished by months spent trapesing [*sic*] backwards and forwards across the Egyptian and Cyrenaican deserts, influenced by the arch-megalomaniac of the day" the idea for *Voss* finally came to fruition (*PWS* 15).<sup>61</sup> Concomitant with this same power through fear motif, the symbolic SS in *Voss* depicts White's representation of the two comets. It is observed from the different perspectives of Mr. and Mrs. Bonner and the Indigenous people. It elicits fear of the unknown for both viewers. Yet for Laura, even in her delusional state, the comet is an intuitive presence, a fact which goes some way to explaining my theory behind the remaining letters in VOSS, the symbolic VO.

As I have shown SS signifies the way in which the text operates on two levels, and indeed on two hemispheres. To resituate the text in the Antipodes necessitates a horizontal inversion, which renders the image thus: ^O. The caret signifies an ellipsis, which reflects both White's narrative style and the recurring elliptical imagery in *Voss*, and indeed in all his novels. As Mitchell asserts: "At the most highly mystical moments, White obviously can't write down the experience. Where it exists is *between* the words" (12). So here, I maintain, ^ indicates symbol and word. It signifies the apparently oppositional characters of Voss and Boyle in the central Chapter 8, and suggests how that opposition relates to Voss' "highly mystical" epiphany and its connection with Laura's illness in Chapter 13 (Beston and Beston 1974, 99). To elaborate: a lexicological nexus with food is the homonym "caret" and "carrot":

Now Brendan Boyle was reminiscent of the big, rude, red potatoes, the shapely ones, but hard, with the fine red dust coating them which is akin to the patina the man had encouraged to coat those

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<sup>61</sup> Refer to "Patrick White's *Voss* and *The Quest for Corvo*: A Note." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 35.2 (1 June 2000): 139-44, where Rodney Stenning Edgecombe discusses the parallels between the characterisations of Voss and Rolfe and the megalomania evident in both.

persistent traces of aristocracy. . . . At his host's side, on the rudimentary veranda, which was all splinters, just as it had been split, stood the German, also in disguise. Blackened and yellowed by the sun, dried in the wind, he now resembled some root, of dark and esoteric purpose. (168-69)<sup>62</sup>

Metaphorically, both Brendan Boyle and Voss are depicted as root vegetables, yet their physical characteristics are poles apart. Whilst it could be argued that such a theory is tenuous, if one considers other factors that link the two chapters, and indeed Boyle and Voss, I contend that such disparities reward further analysis.<sup>63</sup> Mathematically, eight and thirteen are congruent numbers when the modulus is five:<sup>64</sup> narratively, the two chapters unify Voss' trajectory into the desert, in that in Chapter 8 the party commence their trajectory into the desert, while Chapter 13 sees the demise of Voss; symbolically, the number eight, envisaged as an octagon, represents the transition from a square to a circle; spiritually, according to Cooper the number eight symbolises the goal of the initiate (118), a goal achieved by Voss in Chapter 13.

In order to analyse these characteristic disparities between Voss and Boyle it is necessary to reconsider the meal that the exploration party partakes of at Jildra. In addition to the host, Brendan Boyle, the only two members of the party present are Voss and Palfreyman. Paradoxically then, this snatched meal echoes Mrs. Bonner's dinner where the only two members of the expedition party who were considered "*comme il foh*"<sup>65</sup> were also Voss and Palfreyman (78). However, in all other respects the Jildra meal contrasts with that dinner and with the dinner they consumed with the Sandersons at Rhine Towers:

Later, when these two had shared with their host a lump of salt beef and some cold potatoes, which a pair of shrieking black women, naked as the night, had set on the table's edge, he proceeded to make

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<sup>62</sup> In *Patrick White: Voss*, William Walsh refers to the Wordsworthian elements evident in the description of Voss and conjectures that the form reflects the various characteristics that Voss possesses. He too sees the various *loci* as metaphor for both the journey and the manner in which Voss is perceived by the other characters in the novel.

<sup>63</sup> See also Jane Adamson, "Talking With Oneself and Other Ostriches," *Meanjin* 53.4 (Dec. 2004): 103-15, where she discusses emotional avoidance tactics. The title is self-explanatory, but the concept of burying one's head in the sand is analogous with the metaphoric roots, although it could be argued that racines are productive rather than evasive.

<sup>64</sup> If one subtracts multiples of five from eight/thirteen the remaining number is three.

<sup>65</sup> White's intentional mis-spelling of the indicative *faux* indicates Mrs. Bonner's lack of breeding.

the conversation he craved, or rather, to disgorge out of his still handsome throat chunks of words, and opinions he was not used to confess to other men in all that vastness. (167)

These disparities in the meals consumed not only highlight the disparities between Voss and Boyle, but also indicate that the food events at Jildra are liminal. Indeed, the complexity of Boyle's situation is signalled through the apparently uninspired foodstuffs. Unlike the emotionally laden dining experience at the Sandersons', Boyle has difficulty articulating his feelings until he has consumed his meal. The tactile esculent imagery in the transitive verbs "crave" and "disgorge" along with the "chunks of words" indicates the arbitrary nature of consumption/expulsion and adds pathos to his isolated existence.

Indeed, the purgatorial nature of Boyle's speech below is reminiscent of "The Twitching Colonel."<sup>66</sup> Basically, the eponymous Colonel Trevellick symbolises Imperialism. However, in the short story colonised India is the site of contention. The Colonel's attraction to the Hindu belief system indicates his attraction to the other: "I shall strip myself, the onion-folds of prejudice, till standing naked though conscious I see myself complete or else consumed like the Hindu conjuror who is translated into space" (7). The first-person narration exposes a self-knowledge that contrasts with the third-person narration in *Voss*. However, the food imagery in the "Colonel" is re-evoked by Boyle's indolent yet paradoxically insightful observation:

[Boyle] was twitching with his mouth to release the words, or some personal daemon. 'To peel down to the last layer,' he yawned. 'There is always another, and yet another, of more exquisite subtlety. Of course, every man has his own obsession. Yours would be, it seems, to overcome distance, but in much the same way, of deeper layers, of irresistible disaster...' (167)

Similarly, despite their obvious differences there is a certain affinity between Boyle and Voss. Both are attempting to escape their "personal daemon[s]," yet their trajectories in

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<sup>66</sup> For an exegesis of "The Twitching Colonel" see Ron Shepherd, "An Indian Story: 'The Twitching Colonel,'" *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*, eds. R. Shepherd and K. Singh. Adelaide: The Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English (CRNLE), 1978. 28-33.

their respective obsessive quests seem to be towards annihilation. However, Boyle's quest is visceral, as opposed to Voss' more enigmatic binary of transcendentalism/ego-driven nihilism.

Food similes in the passage describing their subterranean characteristics, quoted above, encapsulate their opposing natures. Both are aligned with subterranean vegetables, which, as indicated, they have just consumed. The implicit ingestion of each other is proleptic of Voss' assertion that, "we shall be eaten by somebody eventually. By a friend, perhaps. Man is a tempting morsel'" (379). In this way, the voracious comet imagery and the [sub]-liminal imagery at Jildra inter-connect Chapters 8 and 13, the numerical significance of which I have already explained. In describing the parallelisms evident in the chiasmus (X) 3 1 1 3, I will examine the significance of the parallelisms and binaries evident in the root similes associated with Voss and Boyle and demonstrate how these in turn juxtapose Chapters 8 and 13.<sup>67</sup>

The association of Boyle's persona with the colour red denotes a sense of light, the sun, the zenith. However, red also symbolises the desert and blood, thereby aligning Boyle with Voss and his imminent journey (Cooper 40-1). Voss' persona, however, is symbolically more complex: the duality of light-refractive yellow and the void of black signify the Jungian anima and animus of his being enacted through his psychic relationship with Laura (Bulman-May 10-11). As an aside, a further connection between Voss and Laura is in the fact that a yellow and black flag signifies quarantine, yet paradoxically it is Laura who is quarantined, not Voss (Cooper 42). Black, of course, also symbolises death and mourning, so taken in conjunction with Boyle's iconic desert red, the passage prefigures Voss' death in the interior. Furthermore, the root vegetable comparisons

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<sup>67</sup> Patrick White, *Three Uneasy Pieces* (Fairfield, Australia: Pascoe, 1987) 12. The evocation of White's symbolic root vegetables as shaping metaphor in *Voss* is justified by one of his very late short stories "The Screaming Potato": "Memories rise to the surface as we hear the whimper of a frivolous lettuce, the hoarse-voiced protest of slivered parsnip, screaming of the naked potato in its pot of tumbled water."

prefigure the exploration party's encounter as they head further westward with the "black women" digging for yams. A corollary with the westward trajectory lies in the fact that in Hinduism the colour yellow represents the West (Cooper 42). To resituate the argument that Dugald and Jackie are central figures in *Voss*, the Indigenous flag is black, red and yellow, symbolising terrestrial Australia. The ironic association of the colonisers with the symbolic colours of the colonised gives credence to the relevance of the food imagery. Jildra then signifies the portal for the explorers' trajectory from East to West, from European to Indigenous Australian. The two colonisers stand on the symbolic verandah; the liminal space between the two cultures, where they have both literally stepped through the door [portal] of the homestead. To reconnect my argument lexicographically, the cognate adjective *portal* is of the *porta* – the transverse fissure of the liver, the purifying organ and the seat of emotion. Liver, of course is one who lives. Boyle survives, Voss dies.

To continue with the portal theme, it is Boyle who welcomes Voss "through the gate of human weaknesses" (V 177) after he overhears Palfreyman informing Voss that he had been sleep-walking the previous night. Voss is variously described as being "bones rather than flesh" (177); "his distaste for men returned" (178); "chewing his pen over that journal of acts and facts ... when Boyle came into the room, crunching over stale bread" (178). Voss evidently lacks intestinal fortitude. He refuses the "inevitable leg of charred mutton" claiming that he is "suffering from some derangement of the intestines" (179), a statement proleptic of Dugald's dichotomous distaste at having to: "explain ... [the] virtues" of the flour (206). In depicting the verisimilitude of the archetypal explorer through Voss, who religiously writes his "journal of acts and facts," White subverts the myth of the brave, irrepressible Australian explorer. He satirises Voss' journal-writing endeavours by introducing Boyle's mirror image, "crunching over stale bread." In this way

the studiously ardent explorer, “chewing his pen” is parodied by the crass station owner, who uses the board from a copy of Homer to “chock the leg of a table” (166).

Significantly the vignettes described above occur in Chapter 8 and are relevant to the numerology theory, whereby the symbiotic shift in detail signifies the parallelisms of the human condition. As this thesis continues to assert, in order to gain any insight into these parallelisms, in other words their reflective and refractive states, it is essential to confront the disorder that is an essential element of the human condition. Through the symbolic foodstuffs and their alignment with both the human condition and the culture(s) that define that condition, one can confront and analyse the resultant disaffection, disenchantment and dislocation. Thus Laura’s enigmatic penultimate statement that “Voss did not die” (447) alludes not only to Voss’ heroic status and his enduring statue, but, I argue, to Boyle, who continues to live at Jildra.<sup>68</sup> The omniscient author and reader, of course, know that Voss is dead. The binaries of seeing/unseeing, knowing/unknowing embody the evident contradictory tensions in *Voss*. That Boyle offers a portal for viewing Voss’ “human weakness” is fundamental to the inter-connectivity of Chapters 8 and 13 whereby his offer signifies Voss’ epiphany just prior to his death. Fundamentally, deprivation of food equates to a change in human physiology which is reflected in a transformation of human values. In this way, Voss’ mental epiphany is a result of his corporeal weakness. Such a connection dramatises the dichotomies of privation and abundance, illness and wellness and their relationship to the mind and body. In order to refocus the discussion on the ^O concept corporally, I contend that the diprosopus nature of the textual representation of Voss and Boyle as root vegetables evokes Janus, the Roman god of portals often depicted on Roman coins. Here, as Brady puts it in her discussion on A

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<sup>68</sup> As I have already mentioned, Brady argues that Laura is the key heroic figure in *Voss*. Whilst I acknowledge such an exposition, I maintain that the phallogocentric nature of exploration precludes a singular feminist theoretical position.

*Fringe of Leaves*, White implies that “White Australian culture will be incomplete until it comes to terms with the full range of human possibility, above all with the claims of nature, honoured by Aboriginal culture” (Brady 1983, 67). In this way, I maintain, the circular coin figuratively indicates the O of the ^O concept and highlights the parallels between Chapters 8 and 13.

O is multi-signified, but here I contend it signals Voss’ impending death and his self-realisation. To quote: “None of this was seen by Voss, but at one stage the spear seemed to enter his own hide, and he screamed through his thin throat with his little, leathery strip of remaining tongue. For all suffering he screamed” (V 392).<sup>69</sup> The image of Voss’ scream evokes Munch’s “The Scream” imparting the futility and frustration experienced by humanity in an imperfect world, threatened by natural phenomena, a volcano and a comet.

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (LZW) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Fig. 2. The Scream, tempera and pastel on board, <http://www.edvard-munch.com/gallery/anxiety/scream.htm> (1893).

Yet in Munch’s painting the tongue is not clearly visible. The mouth is merely an orifice, whether open to scream or open in desperate anguish is debatable. The tongue, then, is symbolic in the passage just quoted. Literarily the triplex tongue(s)<sup>70</sup> combined with the fricative alliteration, “through his thin throat,” signifies its relevance to deciphering the

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<sup>69</sup> Imagery that also re-evokes “The Screaming Potato.”

<sup>70</sup> See the fully quoted passage above (243). The shorter quote here contains the human singular tongue.

text. Furthermore, the feculent imagery is analeptic of the turbid imagery of Chapter 8 and proleptic of the rotting pears in Laura's sickroom in Chapter 13.<sup>71</sup> To elaborate: anatomically *of the tongue* is derived from the Greek *glossa*, a homonym of *gloss*, the etymological root for *glossary*. As interlinear translation then, Voss' "leathery strip of remaining tongue" signifies his diminishing articulation and prefigures Laura's final difficulty in articulating her thoughts at the dénouement: "By which time she had grown hoarse, and fell to wondering aloud whether she had brought her lozenges" (447). The circularity of *Voss* is therefore articulated through women's voices.<sup>72</sup> The novel opens with Rose's announcement: "There is a man here, miss, asking for your uncle," but women's role is subordinated to the literal central theme of exploration. It is the metaphorical exploration of the mind that elevates Laura's status.<sup>73</sup>

So, Voss signifies the corporeal and Laura signifies the mind. Taken literally as the mind Laura is thus inside Voss and is part of the multi-signified O 0. Voss' symbiotic internalisation of Laura's psychic power exposes the egoism of his quest: "[a]ll that was external to himself he mistrusted, and was happiest in silence which is immeasurable, like distance, and the potentialities of self" (21-2). The most poignant psychic encounter between Laura and Voss is set in relief against Voss' and Jackie's mutual understanding of the Aboriginal artwork they come across in a cave:

Why can it not remain like this, he wondered to the woman who was locked inside him permanently, and who would answer him through the ends of her long, dreaming hair. She suggested: the souls of those we know are perhaps no more communicative than their words, if you wind in the strings to which they are attached, and that is why it is arranged for those to break, and for the liberated souls to carry messages of hope into Bohemia, Moravia, and Saxony, if rain has not erased; in that event, the finders must content themselves with guesses. (275)

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<sup>71</sup> The significance of the three rotting pears has created much speculation. For example, Harrison correlates the three pears with the female characters in the Bonner household, a Greek chorus, and Mr. Bonner's emasculation.

<sup>72</sup> Once again, see Brady's argument in "In My End is My Beginning: Laura as Heroine of *Voss*."

<sup>73</sup> For White's explanation of the genesis of Laura as Voss' anima see *Flaws in the Glass* (103).



Laura is the kernel, Voss' soul, who, at the dénouement, is liberated to disseminate "messages of hope." Yet it is only Voss' eventual demise that liberates her from the confining O of his sphere. However, as usual the passage is contradictory. The rain has "erased" the exterior landscape, but the erasure is counter-pointed through the enduring Aboriginal art.

The fixity of the Indigenous people in the Australian landscape is enacted in the spatial/temporal complexity evidenced by the explorers – that is, the land already traversed and the land to be traversed, along with the uncertainty of their position in the vast interior: "Voss himself rode forward with the two blacks, Dugald and Jackie, and in that way was freed momentarily from further responsibility, and strengthened by his vision of uninterrupted space" (189). The explorers' uncertainty contrasts sharply with Dugald and Jackie's assurance, reflected further in their adaptive food skills:

'Jackie kill lizard,' Dugald explained.

It was, in fact, one of the short, knobbly-tailed lizards. Surrendering up its life quickly and decently to the grinning Jackie, it lay with its paler belly exposed. A very little of its dark blood had trickled out of the battered mouth. (190)

This incident occurs at the commencement of the explorers' trajectory into the interior, thus highlighting Dugald's and Jackie's hierarchical status. Concomitant with the dietetic adaptiveness of the Indigenous people in contrast with the explorers, numerologically that contrast is emphasised further in the quote below:

The three men rode on. The two blacks were chattering to each other. The naked Jackie dangled the stiff lizard by its tail.

'What will he do with the lizards?' Voss asked of Dugald.

The old man popped a bony finger into his mouth. All his grey stubble laughed.

'It is really good to eat?' asked the German.

Dugald restricted that possibility by waving the same, long, black stick of a finger.

'Blackfeller.' He laughed. (190)

To explicate: “The three men rode on” 3; “The two blacks were chattering to each other” 2; “The naked Jackie . . .” 1. Numerologically configured 3 2 1, is a system that incorporates the theory expounded. Namely, the numbers indicate the doggedness of the exploration party and their lack of communication; the interconnectivity of “blacks” and their ability to communicate; and the naked vulnerability of the solitary Indigenous character. Moreover, the single digit of the “bony finger” encapsulates the enigmatic text, the notion of two becoming one. Gastronomically, Dugald does not allow Voss to appropriate the “Blackfeller” food, a fact that emphasises his vicarious leader status: he thwarts Voss’ desire to consume Indigenous foodstuffs, whilst parodying Voss’ aspirations. That sense of confusion, the loss of status and identity experienced by both the Indigenous people and the Europeans, results in Jackie’s slaughter of Voss, prefigured here in his slaughter of the lizard that in the earlier passage “surrender[ed] up its life, quickly and decently.” Moreover, the adjectival contrast of the “paler” belly of the lizard and the “dark” blood emphasises the impending rift between the explorers and their Aboriginal guides.

Yet, paradoxically the adjectives indicate contrary notions of power. The “paler belly” of the lizard signifies “whiteness” – the colonisers. Nonetheless, the belly is vulnerable and its paleness contrasts with the theory of the dark underside of humanity discussed earlier. Equally, the “dark blood” that emanates from the lizard’s mouth signifies “blackness” – the colonised. Nevertheless, the imagery also imparts the idea of an expulsion, an ejaculation. So although the death of the lizard prefigures Voss’ death, it also highlights the complexities immanent in death, rebirth and expression. In other words, it embodies the existential angst that confronts humans in their ability to articulate an idea, thought or theory. Given that both the “belly” and “mouth” are essential agents for digestion and food consumption raises the concept of food as vehicle for expression.

Dietetically the parallel flour vignettes of Chapter 8 already discussed not only expose the cultural rift between Aborigine/European but they also highlight the importance of food as symbol. The cultural rift is further alluded to in Chapter 10, where Judd enacts his separation of flour and water that has also been discussed. Bread and water, of course, is the staple fare of prisoners. The imagery emphasises Judd's emancipist status and the social stigma attached. However, as in many of White's novels, the symbolic vignettes also suggest a more complex narrative. The night after Voss resists reading Le Mesurier's notebook, he and Jackie reconnoître a more suitable campsite, a cave, and discover there the Aboriginal cave-paintings, the long-lasting quality of which I have already discussed. Voss feels a spiritual empathy with the paintings, prolepsis for the spiritual empathy that the Indigenous group fearfully disposes towards Voss. That fear is paralleled by Jackie's fear of the dark, the unknown, "Too black. This feller lost inside" (272). Yet paradoxically he follows Voss, believing in the "exorcizing [*sic*] magic the white man possessed" (273). His intuition precedes the discovery of the paintings, the proleptic symbolism of which resonates with the imagery of the snake as, "Father, my father, all blackfeller" (274). However, the ineffectiveness of spoken language to convey meaning is the central theme of this vignette: "The man was yielding himself up to the simplicity of the drawings. Henceforth all words must be deceitful, except those sanctioned by necessity, the handrail of language" (274). Thus, I argue, the stand-alone letter in the passage below signals something beyond the power of words to explain:

The man in the cave should have felt wet, and aching, and cold, but the woman's smooth, instinctive soul caressed his stubborn, struggling spirit. Secretly he would have liked - or why secretly, for the boy would not have understood - he would have liked to contribute to the rock drawings, in warm ochre, the L of happiness.

But time was passing, bats were stirring, the boy had tired of the drawings, and was standing at the mouth of the cave, remembering that substantial kangaroo, of which he had stuffed into his belly the last singed squares of hide ten days previously. He was hungry now. (275)

To elaborate: L is multi-signified it could signal Leichhardt, Laura, or Love. However, here I suggest its significance lies in the fact that it is the twelfth letter of the modern alphabet. L establishes a connection between the ameliorative Indigenous rock paintings in Chapter 10 and the dissolution of Indigenous/explorer relations and split in the exploration party that occur in Chapter 12 (XII). Gastronomically, White alludes to the conflict between abstinence and desire that lies at the core of humanity's attitude toward food and its consumption, and how these elements connect the chapters: the "fat country through which they were passing began to thin out" (336). For Jackie the paintings not only evoke a connectivity with the past, but also remind of hunger in the present. Conversely, Harry Robarts responds imaginatively to the paintings:

[He] understood immediately what the drawings were intended to convey. Privation, which had reduced the strength of his body, had increased his vision and simplicity of mind, so that he was treading through the withered grass with the horde of ochrous hunters. Morning stole amongst the trees, all sound wrapped in pearly fog, the kind that lies close to the earth. The pale soles of his feet were cold with dew.

Or he stood in front of another drawing, which he proceeded to interpret:

'See, this man is going to die. They have planted a spear in his heart. It has gone in at the back through the shoulder-blades.'

In fact, the little fishbone in faded red ochre had entered the wizened pear, that would soon be rattling in its cage of bones. (280)

Harry's response to the "simplicity of the drawings" is two-fold. Contradictorily his vision is sharpened yet his mind is simple. The complexity of such a paradox indicates the complexity of vision. For example, is the "fat country" necessarily more enriching than the "thin" country that the explorers traverse? Harry's visionary dilemma is based on a vicarious corporeality. His vision of unity with the Indigenous people is ephemeral, depicted through the temporality of the "morning [that] stole amongst the trees" and "sound wrapped in pearly fog." Furthermore, this imagery conveys the empathy that the explorers have established with their Indigenous [vicarious] leaders, although by this stage Dugald

has withdrawn from the exploration party. Dugald's withdrawal was prompted both by his recognition of his position in the exploration party and his desire to re-connect with his cultural heritage. Yet that re-connection could only be established by returning to Jildra, the portal to Indigenous/non-Indigenous existence. However, Dugald's semi re-acculturation renders him speechless; he is unable to articulate his desires or experiences when Jackie re-establishes contact: "To his disappointment, however, he discovered that Dugald had become so old he was again young, and he, Jackie, was weighed down with the wisdom of age" (420).

Moving back to the painting quote above, the omniscient narrator juxtaposes the complexity of Harry's imaginative connection to the drawings with his attempts to articulate those images. What this juxtaposition reveals, I contend, is the difficult relationships that all humanity endures when different cultures and customs meet. Cultural disparities, as I have outlined, are entwined in food, its consumption and its symbolic relevance. Clearly, Harry's perception of an impending death in the Aboriginal drawings anticipates the trio of Palfreyman's death, the death of the nameless Indigenous character in the drawings, and the death of Voss. Thus, the death by [s]pears is envisaged imaginatively, and connects the homonyms, [s]pears and pairs, and the parallels that connect the five chapters outlined above.

Chapter 11, the remaining chapter in my numerological structure, has not been explained in depth. Significantly, it is the only chapter under analysis that does not include elements of the desert. Yet symbolically it signifies much. The chapter encompasses and elucidates the three elements of my theoretical framework: numerology, lexicology and dietetics. Its import lies in Laura's inability to adapt to the mores of social Sydney, and how myths are constructed through inexperience and lack of knowledge and understanding. The

quote below, incorporating Laura's correspondence with Voss, encapsulates the relevance of the chapter to my argument:

Was the firm, upright, reliable character one seemed to have been, a myth? ...

The reddish light of morning had begun to flow into the rooms of the sleeping house. The tender rooms were like transparent eggs, from which the protective shell had been removed.

The young woman, whose eyelids were turned to buckram, was writing in her red room. She wrote:

... It would seem that the human virtues, except in isolated, absolved, absurd, or oblivious individuals *are* mythical. Are you too, my dearest, a myth, as it has been suggested? ... (329)

The imagery of the red morning prefigures Jackie's epiphany which is subsequently deflated by his re-acquaintance with Dugald. However, his affinity with the land and sky indicates the "chthonic and etheric symbols of transformation and rebirth" (Riem 2003, 38). Lexicologically the letter that Laura composes is interrupted by the description of domestic interiority. The simile of "the rooms [that] were like transparent eggs" dietetically connect the textual interruption, signifying its relevance further. To re-evoked the numerological significance of 11 as digits that represent Dugald and Jackie, I contend that in Chapter 11 they are an absent presence. I have argued that numerologically they represent the scission in the exploration party, a scission lexicologically repeated in Chapter 11. Here, however the domestic scission indicates the number of the chapter and highlights the binaries of interior/exterior and absence/presence.

Chapter 11 therefore symbolises the construction of the mythology of *terra nullius* and the complexities that lie therein. In *Voss* White explores the construction of many myths, but the focus on Dugald and Jackie and their centrality to the construction of the novel signals the importance of their characterisation. They are not liminal characters, and indeed ultimately Jackie becomes a disembodied spirit that continues to haunt the desert landscape, "the shifting and troubled mind" (421). He is able to articulate the wishes of "the

souls of those who had died in the land” (421). His voice remains. But is he merely a ventriloquist?

### **Conclusion:**

“*Car enfin, qu’est-ce que l’homme dans la nature? Un néant à l’égard de l’infini, un tout à l’égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout*” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (1670 ed. L Brunschvicg, 1909) sect. 2, no. 72).<sup>74</sup>

In this section I have outlined how the complex structure of *Voss* presages the complexities of *terra nullius* that were to follow forty years later, whilst concurrently locating those complexities one hundred years in advance of the novel’s composition. Through a philosophical argument that incorporates numerology, lexicology and dietetics I have shown how the contentious term relates to *Voss*. The complexities that still resonate today in the term *terra nullius* signify the cultural concern that White explores through the complex narrative structure of *Voss*. The omniscient narrator’s simplistic appraisal of Aboriginal life belies the complexity of Indigenous people’s depiction in the novel. Furthermore, the nullity implicit in the term is exposed and challenged by the dense prose.

In White’s own words: “Australia will never acquire a national identity until enough *individual* Australians acquire identities of their own. It is a question of spiritual values and must come from within before it can convince and influence others” (qtd. in Marr 633). Thus, I maintain, through the food imagery that defines the chapters I have focussed on, White presciently envisions those enduring complexities. In doing so he invites the twenty-first-century reader to undertake an analysis of an increasingly complex inter-racial problem. That problem resides not only in Australian society, but is a

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<sup>74</sup> “For after all, what is man in nature? A nothing in respect of that which is infinite, an all in respect of nothing, a middle betwixt nothing and all,” from *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (568).

continuing global debate over what constitutes national/racial/religious identity and how identity relates to a sense of belonging to a place.

Through a detailed hermeneutical analysis of *Voss*, this chapter demonstrates how White undermines the Christian framework of the novel. Such destabilisation questions the authenticity of the explorer narrative and in so doing elucidates the fragility of all myths. The paradoxes discussed throughout the chapter are largely illumed through food and its relation to existence. Food symbolises the spiritual, corporeal, psychological and social dynamics of *Voss* and their relation to character. Whilst I have briefly alluded to the imaginative realms of the characters under discussion, the following chapter will explore the nexus between food and the product of the imagination, art.



## CHAPTER FOUR: FOOD AND ART

*“I love the English language – it offers the most beautiful smorgasbord. It’s an inexhaustible smorgasbord ...”* (Thea Astley qtd. in Smith 1982, 20).

*“Australian expatriate writers, and artists in general, eventually starve in the absence of their natural sustenance”* (White 1981, 99).

*“Imagination ... is nothing but decaying sense”* (Hobbes  
<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-contents.html>).

In this final chapter I analyse the correlation in the selected literary texts between food and the creative processes of painting, music and writing. The first section, “Food, Painting and Creativity,” explores Patrick White’s *The Vivisector* (1970) and *Memoirs of Many in One* (1985). It examines how the expulsion of food relates to writing an identity and how defecation relates to decay. By writing aspects of his own identity into his protagonists, Hurtle Duffield and Alex Gray, White is able to examine the dispositional difficulties of all creative artists.<sup>1</sup> I argue that creation is analogous with the digestive process, and I demonstrate how the contradictory nature of this analogy mirrors the artist’s problematic psyche and sense of being. However, the creative process permits artists to experience disorder, disaffection and disenchantment and in so doing to ameliorate their individual, as well as universal, uncertainties.

The following section, “Food, Music and Writing Satire,” considers selected novels and short stories by Thea Astley. The evidence supports a view of artists as “vivisectors,” “feeding off others”<sup>2</sup> for inspiration. I maintain further that the representation of food in Thea Astley’s fiction is inextricably linked to satire. Through the symbolic foodstuffs and

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<sup>1</sup> For a comparison of White’s characters and their relationship to those in *Memoirs* see Carolyn Bliss, “Transpositions: Patrick White’s Most Recent Fiction.” *Westerly* 3 (Sept. 1989): 77-82. In addition, Antonella Riem, “Autobiography or Fiction? Patrick White’s *Memoirs of Many in One*.” *Westerly* 3 (Sept. 1991): 95-101 explores how White’s imagined characters reflect his life.

<sup>2</sup> The expression is taken from the title of Laurie Clancy’s review of *The Acolyte*.

their consumption, Astley conveys diverse foibles and contradictions in Australian culture and society, and appears to recognise that food, as metaphor rather than essential aspect of existence, is able to project her message. The food imagery discussed in this chapter frequently advances a satirical observation of society and exposes the often unpleasant elements of human interaction. However, it also conveys subtly important meanings that offer new insights into the human condition (Oliver 68). Astley works with dualities such as the fundamental nature/culture dichotomy, and questions the seemingly unbridgeable gaps that such dualities pose (Clancy 1986, 45). Essentially her novels explore the human soul and the hardships that humankind has to endure to achieve any wisdom or sense of the meaning of existence. The link between food and satire is consistent in many of Astley's novels but due to time and space constraints I have limited the ambit of my research. In sum, used as satiric metaphor, food in Astley's prose invites the reader to liberate the imagination and nourish inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

Satirical elements in the texts selected for this chapter are signposted in their titles. For example, *The Acolyte* undermines the ecclesiastical sense of the word *acolyte* by raising the inferiority of an acolyte into empowerment. Likewise, *Vanishing Points* examines the ineffectuality of humankind's attempts to escape the banality of existence. The satire is evident in the ambiguity of the title: it is oxymoronic and thereby denotes nihilism, yet there is an element of questioning in the noun *points*. To elaborate: what is the point of vanishing? How can a point vanish? The title *A Descant for Gossips* is also contradictory. The dual meanings of *descant* highlight the musicality of the prose, but conversely expose the darker underbelly of humanity. Similarly, *A Boat Load of Home Folk* is almost an oxymoron. If the characters are indeed "Home Folk" why are they escaping on a boat? The

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Edible Écriture," *Consuming Passions: Food in the Age of Anxiety* eds. Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998) 203-08. Eagleton analyses the relationship between food and words.

title of Astley's last novel, *Drylands*, appears to be self-explanatory, but it also denotes an aridity of the soul (Clancy 1986, 46), not just the landscape, evoking once again this writer's perennial theme of intellectual malnourishment. Astley's short story titles are no less subversive in their satire. "The Salad of the Bad Café" is a spoonerism of Carson McCullers' "Ballad of the Sad Café," and neatly encapsulates the musicality of both authors' writing. Yet, both authors' enduring passion for music is offset by their contradictorily caustic and empathetic view of humanity. That Astley's satiric title transforms a ballad to a salad, effectively linking music with food, encapsulates the centrality of food to her satire. Although food is not evident in the title "David Williamson You Must Have Stopped at the Border," the mordant representation of food in this short story likewise conveys the complexity of the human condition. The title of White's novel *The Vivisector* is multi-signified. It subverts the notion of the artist as creative into a binary of destruction (creation/destruction). The title *Memoirs of Many in One* also lends itself to duplicity of meaning, and begs the questions, "who is the one, and who are the many?" and "why in one?"<sup>4</sup>

The duplicity of meaning evident in the titles symbolise the dichotomous nature of art and its production, reception and endurance. In referring to *art* I aim to incorporate painting, writing and music, and propose to discuss how food, in a variety of forms, is intertwined with the creative process. In addition, this chapter considers how that creative process can itself be problematic, and uses food symbolism to explore the many dimensions of creativity.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Beatson, "White and Gray: Image Patterns in Patrick White's *Memoirs of Many in One*." *Landfall* 41.1 (1987): 59-76. See Beston's insightful analysis of what he refers to as *Memoirs*' "nadir of fierce triviality" (76).

## FOOD, PAINTING AND CREATIVITY<sup>5</sup>

“All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril” (Wilde 3).

“Names are important. I can never have enough of them myself. A freshly acquired name gives me a fresh leave of life.” (MMO 177)

To begin I want to explain how defecation and excrement relate to this section. Of course, defecation is a natural bodily function resulting from food consumption and without food the body would not survive. Syllogistically, without the corporeal there is no mind and without either body or mind there is no identity. In their introduction to *Culture and Waste* Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke contend that “expelling and discarding is more than biological necessity – it is fundamental to the ordering of the self” (Hawkins and Muecke 2003, xiii). Therefore, taken in the context of the biological and ontological duality of expulsion, I argue, as I have elsewhere, that food, in its many guises, is inextricably linked to identity. This section also follows a hermeneutical approach to an analysis of identity, an underlying theme of both novels discussed: *The Vivisector* explores the notion of being through art, while White’s last novel, *Memoirs of Many in One*, explores it through writing. Furthermore, adopting Brady’s assertion already referred to, that White’s life cannot be ignored in analysing his work, I also address White’s claims that the protagonists in each novel are representations of himself. Indeed, the scatological references that underpin the characterisation of Alex Demijirian Xenophon Gray, the protagonist in *Memoirs*, serve as a diagnostic tool to illumine and confirm the identity of the protagonist of *The Vivisector*, Hurtle Duffield.

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<sup>5</sup> Part of this section was presented as a paper at the biennial BASA Conference 7-10<sup>th</sup> September, 2006.

## Writing an Identity: *The Vivisector* and *Memoirs of Many in One*

“Writing is really like shitting; and then, reading the letters of Pushkin a little later, I found he said exactly the same thing! It’s something you have to get out of you” (Patrick White qtd. in Lawson 1994, 275).

“‘If you want total theatre, matey, then I’m with you. But I want urination and defecation and vomiting and nose-blowing. The lot.’ People stopped poking at their doubtful brown servings. ‘I want diarrhoea and spewing and mucus and none of your bloody plastic turds, matey. If that actor can’t turn on a good crap at ten past nine every night in Act Two then I want him drummed out of Equity. I want stench and fartings and blokes blowing their noses between their fingers and spitting great gobbets into the orchestra pit and then I’ll be with you...’” (A 82-3).

First, I’d like to explain the nexus between defecation and the arts of writing and painting. In the first epigraph to this section White invokes Pushkin and the tension he experienced in his literary output, a tension not uncommon to many artists in *all* aspects of the production of their art. Indeed, White was reading Pushkin at the time of writing *The Vivisector*, which could account for the scatology in that novel (Marr 487). For example, Hurtle Duffield often sits on his outdoor dunny cogitating the notion of self and his sense of being in the world.<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge the nexus between food and excrement and the symbolic relevance of that nexus to an understanding of the artist has not been analysed in any depth in White’s oeuvre.<sup>7</sup> I will use as a springboard to such an analysis Veronica Brady’s observation that White’s fiction is “not so much an organised system as a movement, a constant and dialectical interplay between self and world and the various possibilities of the self within the problematical person called Patrick White” (Brady 1992, 25). I contend that the constancy of movement Brady refers to is symbolised through the peristalsis of digestion. To elaborate: the formal noun aliment means one, food, and two, support or mental nourishment, and the alimentary canal is the conduit for digestion. Thus the “dialectical interplay” between

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<sup>6</sup> John Osborne, *Luther* (London: Faber, 1961) 24, 55, 63. The protagonist of Osborne’s play similarly analogises the processes of defecation with bleakness.

<sup>7</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (1991) 355. White saw the parallels between art and food: “an ephemeral dish of food wore the expression of a work of art.”

food and excrement signifiers in both novels symbolises the ambiguous nature of humanity. These ambiguities concurrently signify both the artist striving to create, and how that creative process is in itself an obsessional struggle with what constitutes a sense of self.<sup>8</sup>

Part of that obsessional struggle in the creative process lies in the naming of works of art. Indeed, as already alluded to, the titles of both novels are relevant to my argument and names and naming is crucial to an understanding of White's oeuvre. Firstly, there are two meanings for vivisection; one, dissection or other painful treatment of living animals for purposes of scientific research, and two, unduly detailed or ruthless criticism.<sup>9</sup> Both meanings are pertinent to *The Vivisector* in that White metaphorically dissects the painter protagonist, Hurtle Duffield, and in doing so ruthlessly criticises art and its attendant cult of celebrity. Concomitant with that criticism, the meta-fictional *Memoirs of Many in One* simultaneously self-parodies and satirises the field of literary criticism. It ostensibly relates the memoirs of Alex Xenophon Demirijian Gray who bequeathed her memoirs to Patrick White to edit. However, it is a fictional account, although at least one reviewer was duped by White's subterfuge.<sup>10</sup>

The blurring of reality and fiction, combined with the tension between what constitutes reality and its ontological questioning, is fundamental to the characterisation of the protagonists of *The Vivisector* and *Memoirs*. For example, the characterisation of Hurtle Duffield attests to White's self-description as a "painter manqué" already alluded to. White admired and was closely acquainted with many Australian painters

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<sup>8</sup> See Lyndon Harries, "The Peculiar Gifts of Patrick White." *Contemporary Literature* 19.4 (Autumn 1978): 459-71. Harries alludes to White's emphasis on "'dreck,' especially upon the waste products of the human body" and to the honour that Australian writers seem to bestow upon the lavatory.

<sup>9</sup> *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, in the 1980s M.I.P Company published a hoax book entitled *Secret Journal 1836-1837* which claimed to be a translation from a private journal written in code by Pushkin (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pushkin>).

and he viewed his writing as a painting without a canvas, a painting in words. The notion of a painting in words certainly applies to the way White depicts Hurtle Duffield.<sup>11</sup>

There has been much conjecture about the real life identity of this figure. The novel is dedicated to Cynthia and Sidney Nolan, and Nolan's paintings influenced *A Fringe of Leaves* (Hewitt 3). However, Murray Bail has mentioned John Passmore's belief that White based the character on him.<sup>12</sup> Passmore identified closely with Rimbaud's definition of an artist that is an epigraph to *The Vivisector*; "He becomes beyond all others the great Invalid, the great Criminal, the great Accursed One – and the Supreme Knower. For he reaches the unknown." White, however, has claimed that the artist Hurtle Duffield is "a composite of several I have known, welded together by the one I have in me but never became" (FG 151). According to his biographer David Marr, in 1970 White admitted to James Stern, a reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review*: "'*The Vivisector* is more about myself than any other – my unfortunate character at least – though in very different circumstances'" (476). Given White's claim to "painter manqué" status, I argue here more fully that Hurtle Duffield is his *alter ego*, and that, as Marr points out, an underlying theme of *The Vivisector* is the "perils of celebrity" (476).

*Memoirs* explores this theme further through the characterisation of Alex Gray. White claimed that Alex "is myself in my various roles and sexes. It gives me great scope" (qtd. in Marr 622). White also admitted that "Patrick the old sod, the performer, the prim disapprover, the occasional bore, 'the born Mother Superior'" is a self-portrait

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<sup>11</sup> See Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, "Some Sources for the Construction of Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector*," *Antipodes* 17.2 (Dec. 2003): 139-44. Edgecombe draws upon several diverse analogies for White's creation.

<sup>12</sup> See Barry Pearce, *John Passmore: Retrospective* (Sydney: The Beagle Press, 1985).

in *Memoirs* (qtd. in Marr 622).<sup>13</sup> His claim that the fictional Alex is himself, juxtaposed with the admission that the editor character Patrick is a self-portrait, testifies to the illusory yet self-referential nature of White's writing .

Writing self-portraiture evinces the art of painting. As Oscar Wilde observed, “[a]ll art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril” (3). White invites the reader to go beneath the surface and explore the symbolic relevance of his fiction, but contradictorily as writer he portrays many of his own idiosyncrasies in his depiction of Hurtle Duffield. As mentioned earlier, the name of the protagonist is significant. *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* defines “hurtle” as 1. move or hurl rapidly or with a clattering sound, 2. come with a crash. Etymologically, it is derived from “hurt” an obscure sense of ‘strike forcibly.’ Hurtle does indeed move rapidly from self-doubt to self-aggrandisement and it is ultimately to himself that he directs his vindictive view of humanity, notwithstanding his cruelty to others. The paradox inherent in the binary oppositions of Hurtle's character conveys White's own polarised view of himself as writer and painter manqué.<sup>14</sup> More succinctly, the polarised food and excrement are ameliorated by the peristalsis of digestion, a shift that offers a mode of blurring binaries.

White's bifurcated view of himself is evident in *Memoirs* where he lends import to the protagonist's name: Alexandra is a feminised version of Alexander, from White as self-confessed Hellenophile (*PWS* 14). It also derives from Alexandria,<sup>15</sup> the city in Egypt where he was stationed in World War II, at a time when Alexandria “must have

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<sup>13</sup> See Antonella Riem, “Autobiography or Fiction? Patrick White's *Memoirs of Many in One*.” (Sept. 1991), for a detailed examination of the self-referential elements of this fiction.

<sup>14</sup> John Colmer *Patrick White* (1984) 55. In his excoriating critique of White's characterisation of Hurtle Duffield Colmer refers to the fact that “*The Vivisector* attempts to demonstrate the necessary and reciprocal relations of destruction and creation.” Yet he views Hurtle's creative personality as largely destructive and offers very little explanation to support the “reciprocal relations” of his assertion.

<sup>15</sup> A notion not too fanciful to consider is the significance of the fact that I (Self) in Alexandria is absent in Alexandria.



been at its most frivolous, its most corrupt. The glitter of its diamonds was betrayed by its values, which were never more than paste” (FG 91). His narrator’s first surname is that of the Greek historian Xenophon, who was a disciple and friend of Socrates. Gray denotes the blurring between black and white.<sup>16</sup> “Alexandra,” “Xenophon” and “Gray” exemplify the complex nature of *Memoirs*, where in Wilde’s terminology all is at once surface and symbol. To elaborate: I contend that White positions Alex on two planes and those planes constantly shift and change, just as the digestive process is in a constant state of flux. Such shifting notions of the creative process and how it relates to the artist’s life portray the existential dilemma that confronts the artist. As Alan Lawson notes, “the *position* of authority from which White can speak derives from his reputation as a figure from the ‘other-world’ of art, while the *performance* of that authority clearly marks him as a man-of-his-time.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the length and repetitiveness of *The Vivisector* display the obsessional nature of both writer and painter, as the narrative powerfully creates “the portrait of an alienated artist” (Beston 1971,174). Conversely, *Memoirs* is a relatively short novel but its brevity reflects its metafictional status. In effect it is a coda to all of White’s fiction and indeed his life.

Moreover, the fact that the protagonist artists Hurtle and Alex both die signifies the decay of the physical, yet metaphysically they are resurrected through their art. What both novels display is the “power of indeterminacy, and of the paradoxical interconnections between destruction and renewal” (Hawkins and Muecke 2003, xii). In the context of the phrase, the “power of indeterminacy,” it is worthwhile noting that in *The Vivisector* Hurtle’s death *appears* to occur in the final sentence, yet Alex’s death conclusively occurs in the Epilogue. White’s claim to edit Alex’s fictional memoirs

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<sup>16</sup> In “Autobiography or Fiction?: Patrick White’s *Memoirs of Many in One*” (Sept. 1991) 97, Antonella Riem offers different interpretations of the protagonist’s name.

<sup>17</sup> See Alan Lawson, “Art, Life and Authority in Australian Literary Culture.” *Australian Literary Studies* 15.4 (Oct. 1992): 356. In this essay Lawson argues the impact of White’s death on his “canonical” position in Australian Literature.

attests to the writer's, and implicitly the painter's, complicity in the blurring of reality and fiction.

Taken in conjunction with the epigraph to this chapter from Wilde, the theory of “the paradoxical interconnections” between the binary oppositions of reality/fiction, destruction/renewal and known/unknown is underscored through scatology in both *The Vivisector* and *Memoirs*. The nexus between these oppositions and food is exemplified in the conflict between Hurtle Duffield and his lover Nance Lightfoot that culminates in her death. Nance is concomitantly Hurtle's muse and excoriating critic. At one stage she ridicules his upbringing, claiming, “‘you're the real aristercratic [*sic*] prick – in yer grandad's ring’” (*Viv* 201). Hurtle retorts, “‘I could shit on you,’” to which she responds, “‘Go on ... if it'll do you any good – through yer grandad's bloody old ring!’” where the pun is obvious but prescient. Following that altercation they make love and “[w]hen they had finished she showed him what she had brought; a pork pie looking as edible as a castle; a cream horn the raspberry blood had begun to stain; and a polished apple. The little girl couldn't have exposed herself more completely ...” (201). The exposure of Nance's identity is clearly through the metaphoric foodstuffs. They include her desire for castles as friable as a pork pie, while the cream horn is a metaphor for the mythological horn of plenty, yet here it is stained with “raspberry blood.” The blood imagery prefigures Nance's death, but at this juncture represents the *stain* of her tarnished reputation. Her role as prostitute muse compromises her relationship with Hurtle, a fact that is also pertinent to how society perceives her and her ilk. The edenic imagery evinced by the “polished apple” further substantiates the theory of the sinner exposed. Indeed, the omniscient narrator's viewpoint is paternalistic, a point which conveys the role of the “fallen woman” in the literary canon: her exposure can result only in death.

However, in their final encounter it is Hurtle's self-identity that is exposed. Nance ridicules his self-portrait and undermines his vacillating confidence in his artwork; "His only true achievement was his failure" (248). Metaphorically, Hurtle's self-portrait "sprout[s] jagged diagonal teeth," signifying the voracity of his hunger for self-knowledge (248). However his voracity is all-consuming, denoting a sense of the self being subsumed. Thus escape into a metaphysical realm is denied, and the authenticity of Nance's aesthetic criticism causes Hurtle to seek solace in the material world of the corporeal; "like the worst of captions at the flicks: [he replies] 'We still have each other, Nance.' [to which she shouts] 'Like shit we have!' She made it spatter brown across his forehead" (248). Hurtle here transports the metaphor of Nance's vitriol into the physical. He proceeds to the dunny, where "[f]lies die ... at night on yellow squares of the *Truth* you wipe your arse on" (249), and subsequently smears his self-portrait with his own excrement.<sup>18</sup> After a short interlude during which they have sex he throws away the only reminder of his birth-father, the ring he had kept from Pa Duffield. Nance is horrified at the financial rather than the sentimental implications of his action. She searches for the ring on her hands and knees in the dark. Hurtle sleeps. Nance falls to her death.

A number of paradoxes in the two vignettes from *The Vivisector* that I have just outlined reward exploration. Metaphorically, Hurtle has defecated on "himself", yet his behaviour towards Nance is "shitty". A Google of the noun "scatology" revealed several sex acts using excrement as arousal. Taken in conjunction with such sexual mores, I contend that the humiliation Nance deals to Hurtle symbolises a sexual humiliation. Nonetheless, the earlier pun on the ring invalidates Hurtle's debasement,

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Cook, *Carson McCullers* (NY: Ungar, 1984) 102. In his discussion of Carson McCullers' "The Ballad of the Sad Café," Cook notes that, "the grotesque can serve the purposes of a more exact moral and psychological realism in art." Such a theory applies equally to *The Vivisector*, particularly if one considers Hurtle's hump-backed sister Rhoda, a character who reflects the hunch-back dwarf Cousin Lymon in McCullers' novella.

since ironically, the sexual arousal that implicitly results from Hurtle's smearing of his self-portrait with his own excrement relocates power to the male. Furthermore, the motif of the disempowered female is compounded in Nance's quest for the ring. Hurtle's symbolic ring echoes Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and underscores the nexus between quest and identity, except that in Tolkien the quest is to *discard* the ring. Clearly, Pa Duffield's ring is a metaphor for Hurtle's identity, so effectively Nance's search for his identity on her hands and knees reveals her dependency on him for her sense of self. However, Hurtle also suffers a dualistic identity crisis. That his *real* identity was effectively relinquished for monetary gain, when sold by his impoverished birth parents, conceptualises the dualistic nature of humanity through supply and demand. Indeed, greed and over-indulgence were the motivating factors for the vendees of his identity, the Courtneys. However, to convolute the question of identity further, it is Hurtle who hurtles the symbolic ring into the Australian bush. Moreover, Nance's pun on the ring impinges on questions of how identity is constructed and of how this construction impacts on the individual.

Clearly Hurtle suffers too, but it is Nance who is expendable: unable to acknowledge Hurtle's cruelty to her body and soul, she dies. In death her body resembles "left-over trimmings of dough or marzipan" (252), the detritus of life. Nance's alignment with these metaphoric foodstuffs translates her identity to the digestive process. Literally and metaphorically she becomes part of Hurtle's and White's creative processes in which she is the embodiment of the "dialectical interplay" between food and excrement; something that ultimately has to be "dumped."

Likewise, in *Memoirs* the symbolic significance of food and defecation is clear. Following an embarrassing event in the park close to their home, Hilda, Alex's daughter, offers to boil an egg for her. Alex responds with: "Bloody eggs! ... Words

are what matter. Even when they don't communicate. That's why I must continue writing. Somebody may understand in time . . .'"(86). Alex is here speaking metaphysically, and the contradictory nature of her caustic retort to her daughter's attempt to ground her in the everyday highlights the difficulty inherent in dialectics. Taken in conjunction with the analogy between creativity and defecation the scatology of the text cannot be ignored.

Clearly words are as significant for Alex as they are for White. Indeed, White's use of Gray as Alex's surname echoes Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and thus signifies the illusory nature of Alex's characterisation, where all is not as it appears. Like the portrait in the attic contrasted with the protagonist's perceived visage, the dualistic images of White and Alex are set in sharp contrast. Concomitant with that dualism of perception is how the name Gray also denotes a colour embodying a sense of turbidity, a metaphor for the dark underbelly of society. The veneer of cultural refinement that pervades society is exposed through food imagery at the Sand Pit theatre, where Alex "did not realise some of my roles at the theatre would be those of barmaid and lavatory cleaner. ... [she didn't know which would be] more difficult, dealing with actual excrement, or facing shit the other side of the counter" (145).

Role-playing is crucial to Alex's sense of self, and the "ontological tension" is literally played out in the Sand Pit theatre (Hawkins and Muecke xiv). In her theatrical role she exposes the veneer of cultural refinement the audience aspires to when she witnesses them missing the commencement of the play (Laigle 78); "Too insignificant of course, for those whose smoked salmon and Veuve Clicquot still rumble in their stomachs" (167).<sup>19</sup> As she succinctly writes in her memoirs:

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<sup>19</sup> Gay Bilson, *Plenty* (Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin, 2004) 78. Bilson refers to the lines from *Hamlet*; "For the Play, I rememberd, pleas'd not the Million, 'twas Cauiarie to the generall; but it was an excellent Play."

Nothing is honest that isn't explicit. Shit is no longer a dirty word, it's a realistic expletive. Now that the press has brought us together, now that we know one another intimately, in bed and out, at breakfast, dinner, and on the dunny, we have nothing more to expect, nothing to fear. So why are we afraid, particularly of one another? (166)

Here the quotidian acts to expose the vulnerability of humanity. For example, the overt juxtaposition between the real, that is to say a reality constructed by the media, and the unknown, that is to say a fear of the unexpected, highlights humankind's fear of confronting the perplexity of what constitutes the real, the unreal and more specifically the unknown. In other words, the crass veneer of open honesty belies a sense of mistrust, a fear that the known is unknown. In White's novels that exploration of the fear of the unknown is contiguous with the author's presence, where writing becomes a vehicle for self-exploration.

In self-consciously writing himself into the depiction of Alex, White indicates, through such referents as food, excrement and philology, the connection between *Memoirs of Many in One* and his characterisation of Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector*. Taken in conjunction with the analogy between creativity and defecation, the scatological references in *Memoirs* must therefore be considered in analysing the correlations between White/Hurtle, painting/writing and eating/defecating (Colmer 50). Again Alex gives a clue to the conundrum in her conversation with a taxi-driver: "Art can be almost a worse crime than living ... that's what I'm trying to decide. I've got to discover – by writing out – acting out my life – the reason for my presence on earth. Doesn't that sound reasonable?" (*MMO* 157). Such a statement echoes Hurtle Duffield's contradictory relationship with his art and the cult of celebrity he is hurtled into. Indeed, White's explicit exposé of Hurtle Duffield's problematic psyche simultaneously exposes his own dichotomous relationship with his writing (Gillett 74). Yet writing as a method of self-discovery indicates the philological thrust of his novels.

An example is how the anagrammatic signifiers form a nexus that joins *The Vivisector* with *Memoirs*. The capitalisation of GOD and INDIGO in *The Vivisector* is re-iterated subtly in *Memoirs* through Alex's imaginary dog, comically called Dog. Given that Hilda, Alex's daughter, invokes God to "let [her] off the hook," whilst Alex is immersed in her hallucinations, the anagrams reward analysis (112). Indeed, they are signalled whilst Hurtle is cogitating on the dunny, where he admits, "much more depended on the bowels than the intellect was prepared to admit":

Inside the vine-hooded dunny with its back to Chubb's Lane, heat became a positive virtue, an assistance to the stiff pelvis. While he sat straining in the heat which was half smell, he noticed the aphorism he had started to scribble on the white-wash – must have been twenty-five years ago – and never finished:

God the Vivisector

God the Artist

God

Permanently costive, he never would find the answer; it was anyway pointless, not to say childish.  
(397)

Paradoxically, Hurtle's costive state suggests the futility of artistic endeavour, yet also denotes a need to create. The striving artist was earlier that day propelled from ontological creative impulse to biological commonplace banality by "the smallgoods girl, ... performing a simple operation on his mind, ... [doing] away with the membrane separating truth from illusion" (396). By alluding to his mortality, she metaphorically performs a vivisection on Hurtle, a fact that reiterates the conjunction of "surface and symbol" in Wilde's aphorism. Allusion to corporeal decay affects White's ability to be insightful; his artistic vision is drastically diminished, yet ironically his vision of his own mortality is vividly exposed (Brady 1974, 140).

Precisely that overlap of artistic vision and vision of mortality is encapsulated in Hurtle's quest for the colour INDIGO in his final painting. Brady notes that indigo is "the colour of God in the alchemical spectrum" (Brady 1974, 140). This supports her

contention that God is the Vivisector, “[n]ot an abstract concept,” but more akin to Blake’s definition of a God in humanity: “‘only Acts and Is in existing Beings and Men” (qtd. in Brady 1974, 137). It follows from this that God is in Hurtle, INDIGO: IN GOD I (Hewitt 78).

As correlative, an anagram of “defecate” is *c eat feed*. The imperative to *see* reflects the imperatives associated with food and its consumption. The tension that surrounds food consumption is highlighted by the verbs *to eat* and *to feed*. *To eat*, to consume, denotes destructive necessity, whereas *to feed* indicates nourishment and fulfilment. However both relate to the ingestion of food, and to defecate results in excrement (Marshall 70). Rhoda, Hurtle’s hump-backed step-sister, embodies both corporeal necessity and spiritual sustenance. For example, whilst Hurtle sedulously quests for INDIGO, Rhoda:

had climbed the stairs: she was banging on the door. ‘Aren’t you coming, Hurtle? I’ve made us a nice fricassee of rabbit. People eat to live, you know. And they should eat together because it’s sociable.’ When he didn’t answer, she shouted; ‘Then you *are* mad!’ (565)

Rhoda’s desire to feed Hurtle, to nourish him, is thwarted by his silence. Conversely, Hurtle’s indifference to the “nauseating kind” of food that he and Rhoda occasionally “sat in silence over,” combined with his solipsistic cogitation on the dunny, clearly defines food as a process of waste, “something ... to get out of you.” Hurtle’s refusal to partake of the sociability of food consumption reflects his refusal to nourish Rhoda (Anderson 1980, 406), as well as his solipsistic quest for INDIGO. Eventually, through her acknowledgment that food is never wasted – “[t]he worms will eat it, if no one else” – she concedes to that solipsism (*Viv* 615). Analogous with the image of worms eating waste food is the image of worms eating flesh, which clearly correlates with death. Nonetheless, Rhoda’s statement also acknowledges the fact that food waste can be construed as fertile; it can nourish, fertilise and rejuvenate.



In this way the paradoxical relationship between food, eating and defecating, together with the symbolism therein, highlights the artist's ontological dilemma. That ontological dilemma is signified through the creative process. As the omniscient narrator concedes: "... [B]ut you would never convey in paint; in words perhaps, or phrased in music – modelled in clay – dough – in any other medium. (Your own sheer drudgery is always utter shit.)" (616). Ironically, two pages later, on the last page of the novel, it is Hurtle who is "Dumped" (617), where the one-word sentence impels the reader to analyse the multi-signified "dumped."<sup>20</sup> In the vernacular "dump" means to defecate, while metaphorically Hurtle is excrement. Concomitant with the notion of decay is the evocation of a waste disposal site, a dump, which of course recalls Nance's death and the fact that she was literally and metaphorically dumped. Hurtle then in his moribund state is himself in a state of decay. He is no longer able to articulate his thoughts through any medium. In the final paragraph the text literally disintegrates and the novel concludes; "Too tired too end-less obvi indi-ggoddd" (617).

The conclusion to this section, however, will not disintegrate into the text. By writing himself into the characters of both Hurtle Duffield and Alex Gray White explores the complex emotions of the creative artist. Fundamentally, the scatological elements of both novels underscore the contradictory self that sustains the narrative. Similarly, the creative process is closely aligned with the digestive process, whereby the contradictory nature of the end-product reflects the artist's ontological dilemma. However, like both Hurtle and Alex, it is through his art that White breaks free from the restrictive mores of a society that demands adherence. The creative process permits him

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<sup>20</sup> Noel Macainsh, "Patrick White's Myth of the Artist: Dionysos as Vivisector." *Quadrant* (Nov. 1985): 77-81. Here through a mythical analysis of *The Vivisector* Macainsh explores the recurring irony, a notion prefigured in the novel's epigraph, that "painting and religious experience are the same thing." Macainsh notes how "[t]he 'God' of this art religion is presented as a cruel Vivisector, who finally and literally dumps Duffield before he can finish his painting" (77). His observation prompted this analysis of the various connotations of the word "dump."

to gaze into the realms of disorder and thereby attempt, through self-questioning and self-searching, to create an individuality beyond the cohesive crowd (Brady 1974, 46).

## FOOD, MUSIC AND WRITING SATIRE<sup>21</sup>

*“Once survival is no longer the problem, food can become an art form, a social statement, and an intellectual fulfilment” (Elkort 1).*

*“Once in the Red Plains supermarket, driven crazy by the screeching of rock singers as she shopped, she had pretended to faint outside the manager’s office and after he had helped her to a chair and raced off to fetch a female assistant, she had wedged the office door shut with a chock she had brought specially for that purpose and switched the hell tape in his machine for the first movement of the Sibelius second, of which she was particularly fond. Despite the hammering on the door and the cries of outrage, she managed to keep the irate gent at bay for the entire movement, after which she removed the door-stop and opened up to his pulsing face, the blander smirk of the local sergeant and a crowd of paused and grinning shoppers. ‘There,’ she had said, ‘Now, wasn’t that lovely? Such a change for you all’” (D 179).*

The writer, of course, is inspired to write. Likewise the painter is inspired to paint and the musician to produce music. As I have already mentioned, Patrick White described himself as a “painter manqué” and explained his recourse to writing as stemming largely from his inability to paint. He admired and was closely acquainted with many Australian painters, and he viewed his writing as a painting without a canvas, a painting in words. As Helen Hewitt has pointed out, this is reflected in much of his writing, and in her book she associates many of White’s novels with specific known paintings. Similarly Thea Astley professed a love for music. In a television interview she said: “wouldn’t it be marvellous if one could write in the same way that, Schubert particularly, and Mozart, can have you laughing with pleasure or reduce you to tears” (Griffin 2003). As a final development of the concerns of this thesis, in this section I elucidate how the nexus between Astley’s satire and the emotions inspired by music is sustained through food symbolism.

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<sup>21</sup> Part of this section was presented as a paper at the ASAL mini-conference held at the National Library of Australia on 2-3 February, 2005.

As Georges Poulet and Robert Kopp assert in *Baudelaire: The Artist and His World*, “[g]enius is a tractable mnemonic power that can be used to conjure up in his [sic] mind, thus his work, certain stored experiences” (142). Therefore, I contend that art, music and literature affect mood by evoking sensory perceptions including those associated with food. *The Vivisector* echoes Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in that it is about art *per se* and also about art as a portal to what constitutes the truth. In the same way Astley’s novels and short stories are a portal, not only to what may or may not constitute the truth, but also to an understanding of the human condition.

**“Feeding Off Others”:<sup>22</sup> A Descant for Gossips, A Boat Load of Home Folk, The Acolyte, Drylands, “The Salad of the Bad Café” and “David Williamson You Must Have Stopped at the Border”**

*“The Fine Arts are five in number; Painting, Sculpture, Poetry, Music and Architecture – whereof the principal branch is Confectionery”* (Antonin Carême, Chef, 1784-1833 qtd Neill 5).

*“A novel should heighten life, should give one an illuminating experience; it shouldn’t set out what you know already”* (Patrick White qtd. in Lawson 1994, 273).

*“Art, especially literature, is a great hall of reflection where we can all meet and where anything under the sun can be examined and considered”* (Murdoch 86).

The representation of food in literature is wide-reaching and complex. From sophisticated dinner parties to anthropophagy it has the capacity to either enthrall or disgust.<sup>23</sup> It is the capacity to alternately enrapture and repulse that Astley displays in her fiction through her

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<sup>22</sup> As mentioned previously, this quote is taken from the title of Laurie Clancy’s book review of *The Acolyte*.

<sup>23</sup> See for example the essays in Part 2 “Social Differentiation: Food Consumption and Identity,” in John Germov and Lauren Williams, eds. *A Sociology of Food and Nutrition: The Social Appetite*. (Australia: Oxford University Press, 1999). Each essay ably discusses the sociological aspects of food consumption, eliciting disparate social interactions involving food and cultural impact. It is worthwhile noting the etymology of disgust: 1. to excite nausea or loathing in; sicken. 2. to offend the taste or moral sense of; repel. Late Old French *desgouster*, to lose one’s appetite: *des-*, *dis-* + *gouster*, to eat, taste (from Latin *gustare*).

biting satire.<sup>24</sup> The link between food and satire is consistent in many of her novels, including for example *Girl With a Monkey*, *The Well Dressed Explorer*, *The Slow Natives* and *It's Raining in Mango*. In this section however, due to space constraints, I have limited the ambit of my research. As foreshadowed in the general introduction I will concentrate my discussion on *A Descant for Gossips* (1960), *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968), *The Acolyte* (1972), *Vanishing Points* (1992), *Drylands* (1999), and two short stories, “The Salad of the Bad Café” (1981)<sup>25</sup> and “Travelling Farther North: David Williamson You Must Have Stopped at the Border” (1982).

This section considers how the representation of food in Thea Astley’s fiction is linked to satire. Through the representation of food in her novels Astley conveys diverse foibles and contradictions in Australian culture and society, and appears to recognise that food, as metaphor rather than as essential for existence, is able to project her message. Socrates reputedly said, “The rest of the world lives to eat, while I eat to live” (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 726). In other words, in analysing the multiple representations of food and its accoutrements, I elucidate how food imagery exposes both the writer and the reader to the fecund potential of the imagination by the mode of what Spence calls “metaphor that represents a further step in the process of association” (915).

To lay the groundwork for my discussion, I will focus initially on *A Descant for Gossips*. This novel is set in the late 1950s in a small fictional Queensland town, Gungee. The major theme of psychological violence interweaves the town’s inhabitants with the three main characters, Vinny Lalor, Helen Striebel and Robert Moller.<sup>26</sup> Astley uses satiric

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<sup>24</sup> Brian Matthews, *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. James Vinson (London: St. James, 1972) 66. Matthews refers to the “excessive sordidness and grotesqueness which suggest purgation” in Astley’s oeuvre. Such a notion certainly extends to the subversive food elements which often underlie the major themes.

<sup>25</sup> Subsequent page references will be to the 1997 edition.

<sup>26</sup> In my honours thesis I explored the violence in Thea Astley. That is to say, not only violence as subject matter, but the violence of her prose. A close reading of *A Descant for Gossips* and *Drylands* resulted in the genesis for the theme of this thesis – food. I have elaborated on several ideas promulgated in my honours thesis.

food imagery to expose the malevolent undercurrent that lies beneath the apparent torpidity that pervades the town. As in many of her novels, place and character are fragmented and dislocated. She attacks society's fraudulent insistence on conformity and spiritual mediocrity. She often incorporates food and its consumption in her satirical observations of social interaction among the town's inhabitants. Through this satiric imagery Astley demonstrates the disturbance that non-conformists like Vinny, Moller and Striebel create in such a society. Their values are incommensurate with the malicious and indifferent attitudes that surround them. The tragic despair that the dénouement of their story imparts reveals the banality of Gungee's inhabitants and their failure to nurture human potential.

Vinny's life is solitary; she lacks support from her overwrought mother who has been left by the father to bring up the family. Her peers vilify her, and in one episode her mother inadvisably suggests that Vinny hold a celebration for her thirteenth birthday. Astley incorporates natural phenomena into much of her imagery. In this instance she combines the "huge intolerable rocks" that become "the avalanche of Vinny's anger" with the abject poverty that her peers deride (*DG* 54). Their words are part of a train of events that lead to inescapable disaster. The party food that her mother spends an inordinate amount of time preparing is described in detail and becomes a metaphor for the emotional upheaval that is all too prevalent in Vinny's life. Above all, the food is a trigger that satirically reveals the pretentiously materialistic nature of her young guests, who continuously disparage her family, and whose "prissy dissatisfaction" with the food is foremost in her shame (54).

Vinny experiences happiness only in escape from the claustrophobic atmosphere that pervades her existence in Gungee. In a brief sojourn in Brisbane she rejoices in the chutzpah of Helen's sister Margaret and, for the first time, is offered an optimistic view of the future (66-7). Vinny's tumultuous emotions reflect her adolescence: conterminous

between childhood and adulthood. Astley depicts that liminality by using city food emporia hitherto unavailable to Vinny as a metaphor. She is “seduced” by the “murky ... dreg colour” interiors of the coffee lounges. Further satiric observation of the temptations offered by the “mendacities” of the “milk bars youth-stool-cluttered” and “frock shops” (69) casts Vinny in the role of consumer. Astley thereby explores the dichotomous position that females were placed in after World War II. Vinny’s conflicting emotions reflect the tensions that many women experienced when society demanded their return to domestic servitude, after they had experienced the comparative freedom and opportunities of paid work. Food is a leading product of the domestic domain, yet Astley uses it as a literary device to highlight Vinny’s tenuous position, caught in the Gungee domestic sphere, but associating food with her longing to escape. Likewise, in her short story “Travelling Even Farther North: David Williamson You Must Have Stopped at the Border” (1982), Astley laments the proliferation of supermarkets and the effects of consumerism on intellectual engagement (or, indeed, on any form of social interaction):

This isn’t the only food-drome in the north...They are killing our muscle-tone. Our mental lives have collapsed as we sing fast-food commercials and whisper advertising clichés to each listless other in lieu of weather-breakdowns, political gazettes, even instead of ‘How’s the leg dear?’ (440)

Astley’s merciless attacks on the institutions of society and the constructedness of social expectations pervade her oeuvre and no character or situation escapes her wrath. In *A Descant for Gossips* her excoriating depiction of the lifestyle prevalent in the small towns, and by extension the suburbs, of post-war Australia is unerringly pertinent. The pretentious and predatory doctor, Harold Lunbeck, at an “intimate little gathering [with] a breast in one hand and a *canapé* in the other,” encapsulates Astley’s derisive perspective on the males who wield the power in small-town Australia (DG 76). Clearly he degrades and objectifies women’s bodies, and the image of him literally weighing up a piece of female anatomy

against a *canapé* emphasises his disdain for women. To use Shirley Walker's analogy, he is one of Astley's "prejudicial stereotypes" who act as foils to her "finely realised characters" (1985 20). Astley concurrently satirises Lunbeck's disdain with her own unspoken disdain for his sexism, through the absurdity of his position. Indeed the omission of punctuation in the descriptions of such social exchanges parodies the incessant gossip and the continuous chatter bereft of intellectual structures, content or engagement. Not only suburban living rooms accommodate this behaviour, but other social institutions such as the pub and the backyard barbeque.

The sardonic observations and exaggerated imagery of *A Descant for Gossips* challenge such institutions and their participants' superficial behaviour by bemoaning their intellectual barrenness. The following passage succinctly encompasses this aspect of Astley's denunciatory food satire:

Like communion breads, thought Moller, like tribal tokens of an infinite ill-will towards others outside the group. The crowd blessed themselves and ate the flesh of their victims with such overt smacking of scandalous lips it was really intolerable. Fragments of conversation, the clichés standing out skeletal, the frame on which the verbose platitudes fleshed themselves, reached Moller's ears as he sat on the lawn. (98)

Religious imagery is foremost here (Clancy 1986, 43). The irony of the alliterative simile, "tribal tokens," that merges communion bread with the flesh of the victims is grotesque. Further alliteration in "smacking," "scandalous," "standing" and "skeletal," as well as the increasingly fragmented sentences, imparts the potential of gossip to voraciously consume. In this way, the partakers in Astley's vivid, imaginative conception, who tear their victims apart in a "ceremony of mockery" (Ross 1993, 506) and then symbolically resurrect them with clichéd platitudes, dismiss the redemption implicit in the sacrament of communion. The violent malevolence is underpinned in the "skeletal ... frame" on which the veneer of respectability is "fleshed" with "verbose platitudes." The descriptive techniques expose group's intolerance of outsiders and their lack of intellectual substance.

Lack of Christian compassion and intellectual vacuity likewise lie at the centre of *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, a satiric narrative set in the Pacific about a group of despots whose duplicitous behaviour reveals their tyrannical nature. That cruelty is epitomised in the “weeties” scene which highlights the barbarity of humans towards each other and their dysfunctional interactions. In the midst of a cyclone Miss Paradise, one of “two maiden ladies in the sad years” (*BLHF* 2), “was filled with enormous hate” whilst concocting a “small witch brew ... which turned out to be a harmless white sauce” (179-80). Her hate is directed at the subservience of women to men, but she subverts that role whilst literally enacting it. She discovers “an empty weeties packet” and proceeds “to tear the cardboard packet into appetising bite-sized pieces” and put them into the “harmless” white sauce (180). The scene deftly parodies the dichotomies of nature/culture, animality/humanity and male/female: “‘This is the difference,’ Gerald pronounced fatuously, ‘between animals and us. That we make attempts to survive. Plates and so on’” (181). Through the “pandemonium” of the cyclone they all take “the communion from priestess Paradise who watched, spooning herself, her punishment shared about” (182). Miss Paradise’s paradoxical act is prefigured early in the novel when she unwittingly prevents Gerald Seabrook from hitting his wife:

He could have smacked her there and then, but Miss Paradise, busy with crumbs and thoughtless as a fanatic, brushed and flicked, popped chunkier remnants between her puce lips and rose unexpectedly to angular heights. They would all gaze up at her, just for those few seconds, she imagined, and she would in her turn twinkle down at them, not quite flirtatious, but knowing, genteel and adventurous.  
(5)

Astley here elevates Miss Paradise to unexpected heights where she momentarily becomes the bright star of Venus. However, Miss Paradise’s insightful luminosity is later transformed into spiteful vengeance: the act of malevolence which she performs in the “weeties” incident makes her complicit with the despots, but conversely also reveals her disdain for them, particularly the males.



Likewise, in *The Acolyte*<sup>27</sup> Astley foregrounds the absence of Christian compassion in the difficult relationship between Vesper, the acolyte, and Holberg, the blind musical genius (Clancy 1986, 48). As first-person narrator, Vesper<sup>28</sup> laments:

I want to break into obscene cries about his half-baked genius, his gluttony for worship, my pity for him, my latest understanding, my own dismemberment, but I look at him struggling to rise, groping about for his stick, his face redrawn with the shock of truth, and I sense him to be right and me to be wrong, but it is too late for anything like that now. We both munch the eucharist and no grace enters our souls. (154)

Textually, that the “eucharist” is not capitalised signifies the recurring trope of institutional religion in Astley’s oeuvre. Through biting satire she presents the sanctimonious behaviour of her most boorish characters and, in doing so, questions what constitutes true Christian compassion. In this way, food, religion and music are inextricably linked in the texts under discussion. For example, immediately following Vesper’s shattering insight in the passage above, the fluidity of Astley’s prose contrasts with the dissonance of Vesper’s dilemma:

Scrolls of music like those distant scrolls of sea seen through the glass wall beyond the Doric trunks of trees break and recede and break and recede against the ache that has shifted its gristle from my mind and is growing now throughout my entire body. Jamie has gone nesting into the long acres; his mother is burning something in the kitchen and the fumes, a diabolic incense, crowd their pungency in on us. ... The communion bread which I stuffed down so readily on the hill-side rises in my gorge and I chew it again with my blunted irreverent teeth, but it refuses to be swallowed. (154)

The disillusionment central to Vesper’s quandary is sustained through a profanation of sacred food metaphors. The olfactory repugnance of the “diabolic incense” of burned food contradictorily symbolises both disgust and thurification. Wordplay pervades Astley’s prose and here the oxymoronic “diabolic incense” is deeply significant to Vesper’s vacillating emotions. To elaborate: the noun “incense,” as protection or flattery, is juxtaposed with the verb “incense,” to provoke anger. Taken in conjunction with the

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<sup>27</sup> Viewed from a religious perspective, the title itself is self-explanatory.

<sup>28</sup> The pun in his name is obvious, if one considers the two associations of Vesper as evening or, to re-evoked Australian brand-names, Vesper matches. The contradictory meanings of dark/light raise the question of what constitutes Vesper’s character: darkness/illumination; evil/magnanimous, etc.

landscape imagery of the hillside and gorge, the fact that Vesper is metaphorically unable to swallow the communion bread denotes his refusal to sustain his role as acolyte. He is literally and metaphorically unable to “gorge” himself: “Mystically I have outdistanced myself and across the uneasy landscape of my nullified dreams, plans, ambitions, spot this tiny figure that is me stumbling between the cratered dunghills of my achievements. Dunghills? Achievements? Sometimes the wings flap and discordant echoes of echoes of echoes parrot out of my harsh throat” (111).

In this way, the complex relationship between Vesper and Holberg is enacted through food, not ordinary food, however – in this case the symbolic body of Christ – and its consumption or failure to be consumed. Indeed, Astley’s mordant satire both elucidates and compromises that complexity. One vignette that encapsulates both these aspects is enacted at the welcome party Vesper throws for Isle and Slum. Here the imagery is again replete with symbolic foodstuffs, from “Bathgate hooting fruitily and snaffling the savouries,” to Ilse’s physical transformation, “chipping the flesh away ever so little more from the bone. As if she had moved spiritually from the kitchenette” (54). Vesper, whose empathy is thwarted by “the carnal stink of hamburgers,” inspects “Hilda’s older face, still cream-cheese but soured somehow by the trivia of marriage” (55). Much as in *A Descant for Gossips* the sanctity of marriage is depicted satirically through wordplay and food metaphors in social interactions. For example, in the same vignette the word “meaty” is repeated: “meaty lumps of laughter” are transformed through a “mincing [of] foibles,” until: “[Holberg’s] meaty face swung on us both. ‘Matey, who is that tiny sexual maniac with Ilse?’” (56). Ilse, James’ mother, is physical property for all the male characters in this vignette, and Holberg’s new wife Hilda doesn’t fare much better (Kirkby 31). The masculine boorishness that pervades the sketch is neatly encapsulated in “meaty/matey,”

where the transposition of letters depicts the voracious consumption of the feminine by the masculine, both intellectually and physically.<sup>29</sup>

Vesper forms the littoral in the polarised masculine/feminine of *The Acolyte*.<sup>30</sup> Earlier, in response to a plea from Ilse, he pays her a visit in “the grocery van” (128), and is welcomed by “the stench of burned vegetable. A blackened pot was askew in the sink. And now eyelids like swollen pink prawn bulging over grievance” (128). As mother to Holberg’s son, Ilse has already suffered. She has become the “slatterny cave of her being,” the smoke-infused “wine-blessed” place where she resides (129), much like White’s “burnt ones.” As Joan Kirkby notes, “[c]rustaceans of various sorts ... permeate the text, both as meal and as analogy” (30). Rot and decay also pervade *The Acolyte*, and the hard exterior of the crustaceans offers no protection from interior decomposition. Even Ilse’s interior is depicted as “the kernel that if one nibbled would give its own slightly bitter flavour” (44).

Like Vinny, who is aware of the limitations of her life in Gungee, Ilse is denied an opportunity to escape from the restrictive forces that enclose and suppress her. The psychological pressures they endure deny both characters the capacity to dream, to escape in imagination. The religious food imagery that pervades *A Descant for Gossips* continues to the dénouement, in which Vinny’s “raising the bottle” (263) of poison is redolent of communion, and recalls the subversive religious symbolism discussed earlier. Astley’s shocking redeployment of Christian ritual to secular evils like gossip and elitism is a satiric technique that adds impetus and meaning to the satiric representation of food in her novels. This same technique comments upon humanity’s need to worship something, however banal. Her techniques in deploying food imagery force readers to examine their own behaviour on social occasions.

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Perkins, “Hacking at Tropical Undergrowth: Exploration in Thea Astley’s North Queensland.” *Outrider: A Journal of Multicultural Literature in Australia* 10 (1993): 377-86. In her discussion of *Vanishing Points* Perkins points out how the author treats “masculinity with extreme irony” (379), an observation that is true of most, if not all, of Astley’s fiction.

<sup>30</sup> See Margaret Smith’s discussion of “androgenous” men in Astley’s fiction (“Novelists of the 1970s”).

The ambiguity in people's motives is also analysed in depth in Astley's twelfth book, *Vanishing Points*, which focuses on the struggles of a male and a female character, linked respectively in the novellas, "The Genteel Poverty Bus Company" and "Inventing the Weather." The narratives' interconnectivity is a device for exploring clashes of culture and ideals, issues of racism and sexism, the role of the family, and the environment, all contained in an overarching survey of political corruption. "The Genteel Poverty Bus Company" traces Macintosh Hope's increasingly contradictory trajectory from disillusioned academic to tour-bus entrepreneur. Eventually, to escape human contact he buys a tropical island, Little Brother. To vent his despair and counteract the "repetitive thump thump thump" (VP 67) of the music when a tourist resort is constructed on a neighbouring island, he builds an elaborate maze up a hillside, with a platform on top and a loudspeaker for broadcasting Wagner. Here at her satirical best, Astley illuminates Mac's dichotomous position, like Vinny's and Ilse's, through food imagery. When Mac is challenged by Truscott, the developer, he responds by "spooning Weeties [*sic*] as if those bastards of intruders weren't there" (66). Kerryn Goldsworthy notes that food is "one of Astley's favourite stage props; it's often used to render comic, on the surface, scenes which are basically nothing of the kind" (481). Clearly the "Weeties" as stage prop in this instance reflect the comic banality of Mac's repast, while simultaneously expressing Astley's perennial theme of intellectual malnourishment. Truscott is characterised as the boorish instigator of the "thump thump thump" rap-type music, which Astley clearly disdains, and Mac as the epitome of good taste in his predilection for Wagner.<sup>31</sup>

The biting satire in this second "Weeties" scene highlights the ordinary, but it is the extraordinary that foments the message. The ordinary resides in the undeniably Australian

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<sup>31</sup> For an insightful analysis of the way the tropical landscape adds scope to the perennial theme of exploration see Elizabeth Perkins' "Hacking at Tropical Undergrowth: Exploration in Thea Astley's North Queensland" (1993). Perkins also alludes to Mac's choice of music (380).

idiom reflected in the brand-name “Weeties,” the Australian vernacular “bastard” occurring in Mac’s reflections in his journal, and the tourism brochure idyll of a tropical island. The extraordinary resides in the meaning that the reader extrapolates from the skilfully written text, whereby the power of the imagination transforms the consumption of “Weeties” into a significant event. Mac takes great delight in goading his adversary. When Truscott’s minder “swooped unexpectedly and snatched the plate away” he responds with a satiric “‘Why thank you.’ [and after smiling] he took a handkerchief from his shorts pocket and fastidiously wiped his mouth, brushed off both hands and replaced the handkerchief” (66). Astley parodies the resort-style dining experience and satirises the subservience of staff who wait on the clients’ gastronomic needs. Here though, it is the obnoxious resort owner who is “waiting” on his nemesis and Astley depicts the clash of cultures in her inimitable style. Mac later reflects in his journal: “He has, I hear, powerful political friends in the south of this state who take their bribes in brown paper bags. The packed lunch! They believe strongly in the fluidity of used and crumpled currency” (66). The “packed lunch” of bribe money, referring of course to Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s collusion with entrepreneurs, conflates food imagery with the political theme that pervades this novella and represents a more complex development of the link between food and satire. Although this comic passage is replete with biting satire, the underlying message is ominous, warning of the effects of tourist development on the environment, and questioning the ability of environmentalists to withstand *progress*. “The Genteel Poverty Bus Company” raises the topic of tourism’s impact on the environment, resisted by environmentalists, as an issue for further debate.

Astley’s concerns, nevertheless, extend beyond the effects of tourism. The insidious proliferation of air-conditioned shopping malls similarly perplexes her. In the short story referred to earlier, “Travelling Even Farther North: David Williamson You Must Have

Stopped at the Border,” she delights in evoking Australian food brand-names in a satiric opposition to romantic epiphany:

She is singing, singing:

bist du bei mir

*geh' ich mit freuden.*

Oh the lyric waves of it: if thou art by me, I'll go with gladness, to death and to my last repose. How happy it were, how soft my dying if thou wert by where I am lying, gently my loyal eyes to close.

Over over over, over, over the pak-rite tomatoes, the Dairy-Whip, the Coon cheese, Monbulk jams, Papa Guiseppa quick-freeze, soaring, over the four-bean mix, Sunwhite rice, Copper Kettle biscuits, Granny Longdown's puddings, Happy-Pig bacon pieces, butter-ball chickens, sauces, juices, tea-bags, instant custards, television dinners, all all wonderful and subtle metaphors of plastic, over over over over. (441)

Astley almost certainly knew “the famous song *Bist du bei mir* found in Bach's Anna Magdalena book is by Stölzel” (*The Oxford Companion to Music* 1211). Yet, the fact that she ironically counterpoints veracity with “metaphors of plastic,” invites further analysis. These “subtle metaphors of plastic” not only refer to the packaged foodstuffs, but also encompass the air-conditioned interior of the “food dromes” which the inclusive “we” inhabit to escape the “tropic sun” (441). Astley is a complicit observer, likewise taking refuge from the harsh northern sun. However, the food symbolism is more important, in that she here highlights it once again through the musicality of both the subject matter and the prose. The rolling “over over over over” of the single sentence paragraph encloses the Australian brand-name foodstuffs. This enclosure imparts fluidity to the “lyric waves” of *Bist du bei mir* that the floor manager sings, an element of escapism in a quotidian experience that lacks “humanity” (440).

Furthermore, the repetition of “over” in the passage gives a sense of surmounting boundaries. Indeed, the subtitle to this short story evokes Astley's recurring trope of

borders, which is often sustained through food imagery.<sup>32</sup> Contiguity denotes the communal whilst contradictorily signifying marginality and discordance. In other words, without a border communities cannot exist, yet the existence of borders also creates tension. Thus the contradictory notions of community and marginality and how they relate to humanity is highlighted “over over over over.” Moreover, the title itself is bordered and reflects Astley’s disdain for the ineptitude of men in hegemonic positions, particularly in Queensland.<sup>33</sup> She succinctly questions Williamson’s place in the Australian literary canon, and perhaps doubts the depth of Williamson’s research for his writing, which she saw reflected in the narrowness of his satirical vision of 1980s middle-class Australians ([http://www.austlit.edu.au/run?ex=ShowAgent&agentId=A\(JT\)](http://www.austlit.edu.au/run?ex=ShowAgent&agentId=A(JT))). Astley was meticulous in her own research, even spending several months on background material for the highly caustic *Beachmasters*.<sup>34</sup> Her immersion in a society that she depicts so satirically conveys her uncertainties about the human condition (Ross 1993, 509).

In *Vanishing Points* the open ending to the second linked novella, “Inventing the Weather,” invites a similar questioning. Julie Truscott’s tale centres on the overt sexism of her husband Clifford, Mac’s obnoxious developer, and his perversion of ethics. She comes to question family conventions in twentieth-century Australia and, as a newcomer, Far North Queensland racism. To the extent that it incorporates more food imagery than Mac’s, Julie’s tale conforms with traditional gender roles, and a key passage replete with violent imagery revolves on women’s domestic subservience to men. She ponders: “maybe

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<sup>32</sup> Carole Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* (1999) 9. Counihan exemplifies the connection between “[e]ating and intercourse [which] both involve passage across body boundaries of external substances that are then incorporated into the body.”

<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Ellison, *Rooms of their Own* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1986) 54. See for example Astley’s comments in her interview with Ellison. See also Brian Matthews, *Contemporary Novelists* (1972) 65. Note Matthews’ observations about the “eager-to-consume anarchy” that pervades Astley’s writing.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Ross, “Thea Astley’s Long Struggle with the Language of Fiction,” *World Literature Today* 67.3 (Summer 1993): 508-09. In his essay Ross refers to the fact that Astley goes “beyond what the word should allow . . . to make the text’s meaning inseparable from the text’s form . . . she streaks and mars her fiction with designs that are sometimes ugly, offensive, and crude. All too often, so is the human condition as she sees it.”

passivity does *feed* aggression ... All those war-torn Middle Eastern countries gun-blasted each night and each morning – there they are, the girls, out sweeping up after the boys! It’s a laugh” (152). But of course, domestic violence is not “a laugh” and in this passage Astley portrays the female in an unenviable defeatist position. The “beefy hand” of men condemns all her female characters to a life of quotidian subservience. Alarmingly, fifteen years after the publication of this novella, so much remains the same. Even the wars in the Middle East continue, with the approbation of a world politics dominated by males. Like White’s, Astley’s portrayal of Australian life through her food imagery is often unerringly prophetic.

Astley’s parody of McCullers’ novella in the “Salad of the Bad Café” again links food, violence and music as a satirically bleak metaphor for the human condition. Yet, as with most of Astley’s oeuvre the cheerlessness is tempered by her mordant humour. In “The Ballad of the Sad Café” McCullers uses music to convey messages of hope and transcendence from the most desperate of physical circumstances (Cook 100). In “The Salad of the Bad Café” Astley sardonically subverts those messages, yet conversely proffers an element of geriatric hope through enduring love. Fundamentally, this short story parodies love, an observation evident in the opening paragraph:

Have you noticed there isn’t much kissing these days on film? Or in books for that matter. No tentative hand-holding. No delicate touch of a shy finger-tip to another’s elbow. Eyes bore into eyes like sexual drills at parties that sound like grog-sodden political seminars waiting for the gut-response ... and there’s plenty of that! ... and then they’re straight into it, a kind of problem in Euclidean anatomy so that there’s this fearful assault by rumps thighs breasts ... and other parts. Now we study it. Very laid-back liberal. (307)

The first-person narrator, named Toby as the reader learns later, reflects the narrative style of “The Ballad of the Sad Café,” which is, however, told through an omniscient narrator. The first-person narration nevertheless enhances Astley’s short story with a more insightful analysis of sex, love and food. The disillusioned masculine narrator is “puzzle[d] how I suspect there is some other form of behaviour, nourished as I have been at the nipples of



commercial television” (308). Analogous with Astley’s perennial satiric theme of self-discovery, Toby heads north, picking up two itinerant hippies, Lam and Dinny, on the way. Alighting from the plane, “slap into midday heat, punchy and sticky,” they witness “an old couple saying goodbye” (309). The intensity of this couple’s love and dependence on one another, signified by the “hand rubbing [and] worried fingers,” is both warming and “disgusting” (309). The imagery recalls John Keats’ untitled poem:

This living hand, now warm and capable  
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold  
And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights  
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood  
So in my veins red life might stream again,  
And thou be conscience-calmed – see here it is –  
I hold it towards you. (88)

The abyss between life and death is partially filled by creativity and the relationship between the writer and the reader. The reader confers life on the “living hand” that is proffered, just as the relationship between the lover and the beloved fills a void. In this way Astley’s satiric vision of love is ameliorated through her writing and the reader’s interpretation of it. Indeed, the food imagery in “The Salad” is a useful tool for analysing her mordant view of humanity with a view to envisaging finally a full bowl of fruit.<sup>35</sup>

Moving back to “The Salad,” eventually, the trio arrive at “a kind of Nirvana on the range”<sup>36</sup> and head to a hostel, “a torpid bleached building dog-paddling in mango trees. Even from the road outside in the dusk we can hear the sound of endless piano playing a kind of vegetarian music” (310). Astley deploys vegetarianism as a means to parody the vacuity of the hostel’s inhabitants. The “Bad Café” contrasts sharply in this respect with

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<sup>35</sup> The image re-evokes Pender’s allusion to the etymological root of satire, *lanx satura*, meaning a full dish, of fruits and foods comprising many elements, offered to the gods.

<sup>36</sup> Clearly Kuranda in the Atherton Tablelands, where Astley lived in the 1970s and 80s.

Miss Amelia's café in McCullers' novella, where "there was fried chicken . . . , mashed rootabeggars, collard greens, and hot, pale golden, sweet potatoes" (16). However, the focal musical instrument, the piano, is wrecked in both tales: in "The Ballad" it is smashed in an act of vindictive vandalism; in "The Salad" ruined through discordant playing. The literal and figurative destruction signifies the crescendo in both short stories, which ends when hope is confronted by reality, and disenchantment and desolation follow (Cook 97). However both tales also reveal how relationships, no matter how traumatic, alleviate loneliness. Love reveals the person within, so that the other becomes a reality, rather than an abstraction on paper, or indeed in life.

"The Ballad" therefore shows love, not as tragic, ineluctable or destructive, but as an affirmation, an opposition of the "lover and the beloved," where "the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself" (McCullers 33-4). In Astley's tale that opposition resides in the first-person narrator Toby, who suffers as an unrequited lover, but conversely, is incapable of true love. Indeed, he finds it difficult to articulate any emotion. For example, when he approaches the egregious pianist at the hostel who responds in silence, his "smile crawls all round the room like treacle" (311). Toby's attempt to mock the pianist's skill is deflated, and he reflects: "Well, that's a spot of challenge in a meatless world. He's telling me my taste stinks and when I open my mouth, nothing comes" (311). The hostel "is full of carnivores" (312) vociferously groping at one another both verbally and physically.

Toby's disillusionment, however, is tempered by the story's dénouement. As in the epilogue to McCullers' tale, Astley ends with an element of hope. Toby's recollection of the old couple's devotion resolves his cynicism at the hostel's inhabitants, and indeed his own, worldly perception of love into an affirmation: "I have to admit it. My earth has moved" (314). As Cook argues, "The Ballad" reveals the private versus the mutual

elements of humanity (92). Likewise, in “The Salad” cynicism is deflated through a private observation of mutual love: the power of love to endure transcends the cultural preoccupations that initially confound the narrator. The universality of love reveals the order that is always within disorder.

However, the affirmative power of love is thrown into disorder in *Drylands*. This novel explores in outback Queensland the same satiric association between food and violence so far traced in Astley’s oeuvre. The setting returns to an outback country town, the eponymous Drylands, which is, however, inhabited not by pillars of self-righteousness as in *A Descant* or *A Boat Load*, but by a collection of oddballs, outsiders and misfits. Each of the six chapters centres on one such character; five ultimately leave Drylands in despair. The seven parts of Janet Deakin’s framing story interweave with the six internal stories, though the actual teller of the tale is cryptic (Hassall 152). Janet’s discontinuous self-reflexive narrative invites reader identification while it also reflects the narrator’s vacillations. The all-pervasive torpor that she experiences in her quest for authorship drives her towards domesticity and inner reflection: “She turned away and busied herself in the kitchenette, making a sandwich and a pot of tea” (*D* 12).

In *Drylands* Astley challenges the stagnation that she sees as prevalent in Australian culture. Much as in *A Descant for Gossips*, through Janet she directs her readers to question apathy, and invokes thought as a counter to complacency. As in Julie’s tale in *Vanishing Points*, the domestic quotidian underscores Janet’s irresolution in a way that reflects a dichotomy basic to Astley’s writing as it is to White’s: a love/hate relationship with the Australian landscape and its people. However, Astley’s ultimate faith in the power of the human imagination, and in art as a healing force for overcoming division, finds an echo in Judith Wright’s “Patterns”: “The play of opposites, their interpenetration - /there’s the reality, the fission and the fusion” (426). In *Drylands* Astley uses the persona of Janet

Deakin, as well as food imagery, to express the complex emotions and insights that she evidently experienced in writing, and to further the process of understanding life.

Of course, Astley's witticisms pepper her prose endlessly. For example in relating Janet's childhood she diffuses the boundaries of age and years: "Janet was six going on forty. These days the futility of it all made her feel six" (*D* 107). The futility and the frustration that Janet feels reflects Astley's own writing experience. However, the droll pun on "six" adds an element of lightness to a despairing sentiment. Such levity invites the reader to examine the significance in the text of the image of vomiting. It would appear that Janet is literally unable to digest what she sees as the death of the novel. Unquestionably, words in print, the text, invite multiple interpretations and are subject to social construction.<sup>37</sup> Although Astley denounced the extrapolation of symbols from literature, they are clearly significant in her oeuvre (*Ellison* 54).<sup>38</sup> Through Janet Deakin she affirms the intellectual engagement of textual analysis, which she contrasts sharply with the disengagement of watching sport or television. The power of literature to induce multiple forms of behaviour is clearly important to both Astley and Janet.

The power of the word is given conclusive *avoirdufois* in *Drylands* through a food metaphor in the penultimate interlude, where Janet challenges Marshall McLuhan's theories about print and electronic media. She laments that Australian society is producing "a new generation of kids with telly niblets shoved into their mental gobs from the moment they could sit up in a playpen and gawk at a screen, starved of those tactile experiences with paper, the smell of printer's ink, the magic discovery that black symbols on white spelled out pleasures of other distances" (*D* 240). The suggestion of sensory deprivation through the image of children being force-fed non-nourishing "niblets" highlights the

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<sup>37</sup> See for example, Mark Freeman, "Culture, Narrative, and the Poetic Construction of Selfhood." *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 12.2 (1999): 99-116, in which he ably discusses the importance of the interconnectivity of narrative and self.

<sup>38</sup> Here Astley refers to *The Acolyte* as "an anti-symbolic novel . . . [with] many symbols [to] send up."

notion that the next generation may never develop the ability to question apathy or challenge government and other hierarchical institutions. Although Janet's only victory appears to lie finally in leaving Drylands and all that it represents, this is contradicted in the dénouement, the incomplete sentence: "There were no endings no endings no" (294). The avoidance of resolution and suggestion of continuity are hopeful, although not necessarily for small outback towns. What the end does reflect is faith in the power of the imagination to transcend the humdrum that appears to be unavoidable in everyone's life.

To conclude, the metaphor of food in Astley's satiric prose and its link with the emotional stimulation of music impels an imaginative liberation. This section has demonstrated how her biting satire attacks a plethora of targets. Yet the representations of food in the range of fiction discussed empower both the writer and the reader to acknowledge elements, not only of the dark, but also of the light residing in humanity. A *Descant for Gossips* explores the dark underbelly of small town society where any illumination is extinguished by vitriolic gossip. Likewise, *A Boat Load of Home Folk* explores the despotism of humanity, consumed by desire and revenge. The "Weeties" vignette in *A Boat Load of Home Folk* is re-wrought in *Vanishing Points*, a novella that directly satirises the boorish behaviour of entrepreneurs. The trope of conflict through music in the first section of *Vanishing Points*, "The Genteel Poverty Bus Company," was explored earlier by Astley in *The Acolyte*, where the small food vignettes feed the satire that permeates the novel. Her final novel, *Drylands*, similarly exposes the dark elements of humanity through food, but offers an ameliorative illumination through the open-ended narrative. The short story, "David Williamson You Much Have Stopped at the Border" re-evokes Australian food brand-names and mordantly opposes them with a romantic revelation. Finally, the parody "The Salad of the Bad Café" examines the light and dark of the human condition through violence, music and food. An element of hope resides in the

endurance of human relationships and how they alleviate loneliness. The protagonist, Toby, may be immune to self-understanding, but his immunity engenders self-reflection in the reader. Music is indeed the food of love. Thus, food, as literary device rather than as something essential to existence, conveys Astley's satiric observations of Australian culture and society. Used as satiric metaphor, food invites the reader to liberate the imagination and nourish inquiry.

### **Conclusion:**

Chapter Four has demonstrated that the artistic creation is fraught with complexity. However, no matter how onerous, the creative process ameliorates the fear of the unknown, which the isolated thinker must always suffer. Food symbolism both complicates and elucidates the meaning of creation and how it relates to the human condition. As Carolyn Korsmeyer asserts: "Rather than transcend time, as romantic ideas of art suggest is the goal of masterworks, food succumbs to time – as do we ourselves. This perhaps is the final reflection that tasting prompts; not just that it is pleasurable but that it fades so quickly" (47). Effectively artists sublimate in order to create, where the problematical societal and cultural practices that they perceive culminate in their artistic production. As Wilson Harris observes, it is the "mirrored spectre of complacency" that haunts these artists. Sublimation of the fear of the unknown, the fear of what the future may bring, only serves to feed hegemonic governments' power over the individual (1990, 178). It is only through recognising the potential dangers of such power and expressing that recognition through art that humanity can assert its freedom. Effectively, food and its symbolic strength in painting, music and literature offer a way to transcend fear and oppression.

## CONCLUSION

*“I have everything I require, except food, but without food everything is rather less than nothing” (Lindsay 18).*

To borrow from Voss, this *plädoyer*<sup>1</sup> will show how food in literature relates to disenchantment, disaffection, dislocation and decay. Whilst elucidating those themes the conclusion will also address the importance of the acronym in the title, the major focus of this thesis, F.O.O.D. Through an in-depth analysis of food in the selected Australian novels and short stories this thesis has shown that order and disorder are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It has also demonstrated how, in literature, the consumption of food and the way food is transformed during the digestive process symbolically reflects the cultural and social diversity of life. Art opens up dialogues, food opens up dialogues and whether those dialogues are positive or negative is irrelevant.

Each chapter has had its own conclusion. However, this section summarises the concepts reached in the whole thesis. It also offers examples of texts and individual authors which support the overarching argument that food is an integral symbolic element. To elucidate further, what this thesis has revealed is how, “[f]ood ... becomes a logical site for challenging dualistic thinking and projecting new inclusive identities” (Martin 2005, 43). Although it could be argued that this thesis lacks unity, what the structure reflects is the thematic disunity of food. Literally, the composition of food constantly changes. The shifting organic nature of its composition invites a symbolic interrogation of its representation in literature. Indeed, the Australian novelists selected for this thesis all convey concerns that generate speculation about the human condition and its relation to literal and symbolic food. In White’s and Stead’s oeuvres the anguish wrought in their

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<sup>1</sup> German for *pleading* or *summing up*.

prose reflects the authors' dichotomous position in a Eurocentric culture. Similarly, through a close reading of food symbolism in the range of fiction discussed, I have demonstrated how Astley's oeuvre reveals her disdain at the boorishness she witnessed in Australian culture and society.

Basically, food is necessary to live but it is not necessary in literature. It is there, then, for quite a different reason. In "Anorexic Love" I revealed how the protagonist in *For Love Alone*, Teresa Hawkins, suffers from *anorexia nervosa*. That theory was supported through an in-depth textual analysis. Viewed from both a physiological and psychological perspective Teresa starved both her body and her mind in her quest for love. I showed that such deprivation conveys the link between food, desire and identity. Although no evidence survives to suggest that Christina Stead was anorexic, I demonstrated how she clearly understood the psychoanalytical fundamentals of the disorder. I concluded my analysis of Teresa's condition optimistically. Much like Stead, Theresa is empowered by reconciling the psychological conflicts that affected her physically through writing the self. Her debilitated body strengthens as she recognises the profound way in which she has achieved independence and sexual liberation. In *For Love Alone* Teresa's anorexia is a testament to the paradoxes and dilemmas that confront women and their quest for identity.

A quest for female identity is also a major theme in Patrick White's ninth novel, *A Fringe of Leaves*, dealt with above under the section heading of "Cannibalistic Love." Food and eating in *A Fringe of Leaves* are represented not merely in terms of fodder, but as a notion and image important to White's exploration of humanity. For instance, the lavish meals indulged in by the colonisers contrast with the Aborigines' food consumption for survival. White does not depict Ellen Roxburgh as an individual who must turn to an eating disorder to assert her individuality. Instead he employs a transgressive form of eating, that is, cannibalism, to expose a society whose order depends on whether its members conform



to its strictures of decorum (Medeiros 25). Ellen becomes isolated from that oppressive society, and it is through her transgressive consumption that White highlights the binary oppositions that suppress and dehumanise even more than acts of cannibalism do. As outcast from the ceremonial feast that her Aboriginal captors engage in, she is marginalised from their cultural practices. Likewise she is outcast from the colonised society that she experienced in Van Diemen's Land and Australia. As the oppressed side of the binary of white/black, coloniser/colonised, male/female, Ellen epitomises the marginalised, yet her act of cannibalism is perversely liberating. Her freedom from the constraints of society is ultimately illusory, however, and the power that she asserts in her cannibalistic freedom is finally denied her. She is re-consumed by the members of the society that she attempted to escape from, a process that itself invokes an image of perverted cannibalism. There is, however, an element of optimism evident in her re-found ability to transform her persona from compliant wife to assertive female.

In all the novels and short stories discussed food shows how artistic endeavours, that is music, literature and painting, can be acknowledged for their mentally curative powers. Food references in the fiction analysed support these arts as guides to an understanding of being and knowing in the world. In other words, the representation of food shows that they are a source of metaphysical questioning and ultimate acceptance of what constitutes humanity. Essentially, food imagery and motifs in these literary works show that the vitality of mental difference that is conventionally classified as madness produces great artistic endeavour.<sup>2</sup> Chapter Two in particular showed how food symbolism elaborates the disparities evident in any analysis of what constitutes madness. Theodora's inconclusive future typifies those concerns and adds dimension to the conclusions reached

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<sup>2</sup> See Louis A. Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1992, where the author discusses art, literature, aesthetics and schizophrenia in modernism.

in this thesis. In this way the contradictory nature of food and its consumption highlights the self-contradictory nature of humanity. Through a systematic hermeneutic analysis of the novels discussed in this thesis I have illuminated how food impacts on all aspects of life and how its symbolic and literal representations pertain to an understanding of human dynamics. So, food in literature is a theme that lends itself to invoking the capacity to acknowledge a greater experience than merely the literal. In *For Love Alone*, for example, abstract reasoning undermines what constitutes reality but reality as quotidian threatens transcendental thought.

So, White's fiction defies affirmative reconciliation of such binary oppositions of self/other. It underscores psychic dissolution into infinity and thus resolution as a mode of self-empowerment in a fragmented society. Through food, which can itself incorporate self/other in the practice of eating, White questions how the self does relate to the other. The multiple metaphors that he attributes to food underpin the psychic dissolution his protagonists must undergo before re-asserting their sense of self in a disordered society. Essentially, his novels explore crisis of identity. Food and all its accoutrements provide analytical tools to arrive at a conceptually more profound examination of *Voss* and *The Aunt's Story*. The framing metaphors of those basic food staples, flour and pastry, incidentally themselves interconnected, are the cornerstones for understanding the tergiversation of both novels.

That *volte-face* unearths the vacillation between binaries, which in turn shows how reality cannot sustain the hopes of the disaffected protagonists. Faced with the grim reality of the desert, Voss can only die and ultimately decay into that landscape; Laura is subsumed into colonial society, a disillusioned vicarious explorer; and in *The Aunt's Story* Theodora too is subsumed to a certain extent but takes refuge in the perceived dislocation of her senses.

Viewed from a humanist rather than a clinical psychological perspective, White's novels offer a transcendental freedom for the characters. Although adopting the diagnostic criteria that clinical psychologists have identified for various mental disorders may appear to be a contradictory theoretical approach, my reading of both *The Aunt's Story* and *Voss* reveals that the texts themselves operate on multitudinous levels. Poststructuralists would find the concept of a humanist approach to analysing the representation of food and its relationship to the modes of living difficult to swallow. But these novels do not submit to an ataraxic palliative. Instead they proffer disorganisation as an essential element in the human condition if humanity is to move beyond the quest for absolutes.

As already mentioned, the structure of the thesis reflects the contradictory nature of food and its consumption. The narrative framework enfolds White's novels, like the pastry enveloping a pie filling. As the epigraph to this *plädoyer*, taken from *The Magic Pudding*, highlights, "without food everything is rather less than nothing." Without food, this thesis would conclude nothing. However, through an hermeneutic analysis of food in each novel and short story discussed I have shown how food is able to regenerate and sustain the imaginative process. The thesis structure also highlights the nature of humankind's relationship with food. For example, those who wish to nourish believe food is a palliative, whereas those who, like the medieval ascetics (and Voss and Teresa) wish to concentrate or even still thoughts, starve themselves in order to experience a thought-free state and what this state reveals. The hierarchical power structures evident in such an interplay of social dynamics can result in tension. There is certainly an element of tension in the creative process, and indeed in the writing of a thesis.

That tension is evident in Thea Astley's oeuvre. An interconnecting theme between all three authors is vivisection. An exploration in Chapter Four of several of Astley's novels and short stories, showed that all artists are "vivisectors," "feeding off others" for

inspiration. In the course of the argument I maintained further that the representation of food in Astley's fiction is inextricably linked to satire. Indeed, her fiction is replete with food and satire from title to dénouement. The concatenation of food, satire and music offsets her contradictorily mordant and compassionate view of humanity. The symbolic foodstuffs and their consumption in Astley's oeuvre convey the diversity and contrariness of Australian culture and society. Food as satiric metaphor in Astley's fiction invites the reader to release the imagination and nourish inquiry.

In this way, the entire thesis underscores the significance of food in Australian literature. Food in literature is a subject area that invokes the capacity to acknowledge an experience grander than the merely literal, by showing that in their many facets references to food are a multi-interpretative tool for producing an aetiological and phenomenological discussion. The thesis also emphasises how the contradictory nature of food and its consumption highlights the paradoxes of the human condition. Through a systematic hermeneutic analysis of the novels discussed in this thesis I have illuminated how food impacts on all aspects of life and how its symbolic and literal representations pertain to an understanding of human dynamics.

Finally, it is only by acknowledging the disorder in order that the individual can move to a higher level of understanding of what constitutes their being in a world that demands conformity. Without confronting the potentialities of disenchantment, disaffection, dislocation and decay, essentially through the food symbolism in the arts that throw up such potentialities, the individual will remain forever caught in the present confines of unimaginative stasis. And what sort of existence is that?

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