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The Taste of the Other: Relationships of Food in Leavitt's *While England Sleeps*

Four Senses and the Other

It always seems very difficult to define something that pertains to the field of shared common knowledge, and the body is such an entity. Its tautological, ontological, thoroughly human nature implies a common understanding of what it is, and brings forth a subsequent difficulty in coming up with an exhaustive definition for it. From a purely materialistic perspective, the body can be described as a set of cells, tissues, organs, and systems that allows me to fulfill certain functions. This definition, however, raises a linguistic issue that stems from the use of the pronoun 'me,' since considering the body a medium in which I do something, necessarily sets a dichotomous relationship between the I and the body. Far from being a philosophical novelty, this view sees the I – or the Self – and the body, as two separate entities, reaffirming the Cartesian *cogito*. While the body has been subject to philosophical enquiries for centuries, it is the connection between the body and sensory perception which continues to find not only scientific support but also philosophical content. The body is the medium through which humans perceive the world, i.e. all that is outside the body, all that is not the Self. In other words, the body is the medium that creates a connection between the I and the non-I, or between the Self and the Other, while being perceived by humans through the world at the same time.

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty theorises an interchange between the body and the world and describes perception in terms of the experience which stems from such interface.

The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be interwove in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them. [...] If it is true that I am conscious of my body via the world, that it is the unperceived term in the centre of the world towards which all objects turn their face, it is true for the same reason that my body is the pivot of the world: I know that objects have several facets because I could make a tour of inspection of them, and in that sense I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body. (2002, 94-95)

This results in a new definition of the phenomenological *a priori*, which maintains the Kantian not-knowability "in advance of experience, that is, outside our horizon of facticity, and that there can be no question of distinguishing two elements of knowledge: one *a priori* and one *a posteriori*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 256). Experience thus marks the beginning of knowledge through the "opening onto our de facto world" (ibid.), and nullifies the distinction between an *a priori* truth and a *de facto* truth, or, in other words, between "what the world must necessarily be and what it actually is" (ibid.).

1 This differentiation is made real in the discovery of the Other through the reflection in the mirror, with the occurrence of self-acknowledgment and self-recognition through an image of me that is outside of me.
The very first relationship human beings establish is the corporal attachment of the foetus to the mother: a physical bond, the umbilical cord, connects the two bodies, or rather the embodied body to the embodying one; it is only after the incision of the umbilical cord that the mother and the child become two separate bodies. Not only is the umbilical cord the 'rope' that ties mother and child, it is also the channel through which the mother nourishes her baby. Our very first relationship is therefore a relationship of food, which continues with breastfeeding, an act during which the two bodies reconnect. Eating is an invasive experience, since food, an element of the outside, enters the body, and becomes the body. Such entering occurs through the mouth, one of the orifices that channel the outside world to the inside body. The orifices (eyes, nostrils, ears, mouth, genitals, anus) are vehicles through which the mutual relation self-world takes place; however, each interaction delineates its specificity within the domain of perception.

Besides the distinction determined by the dichotomy ingressive/egressive, the orifices relate to aspects of the human that deal with the five senses and with the sexual. Differently from all other ingressive orifices, the mouth is the one in which the ingestion is voluntary, and is the orifice that comprises the sensual, in terms of the sense of taste, as well as the sexual. This brings us back to breastfeeding, where the relationship established by the mother and the child in the act of sucking is both a matter of nutrition and pleasure. In Freud's words:

"The erotogenic zone, which is the term given to an area of bodily organ that is susceptible to stimulation of sexual impulse, in this period, is the mouth. The sexual activity is not yet separated from the ingestion of food so the pleasure of sucking the milk from mothers' breast derives from the pleasure to satisfy its hunger. At the same time, it satisfies its libido. (2011, 198)"

Eating and pleasure establish their connection since the very beginning of our life, and the analogy between eating and sex is to be found in such pleasurable experiencing, as well as in the act of penetration. Not only does food enter the body, it also becomes the body, after the chemical transformations that allow its absorption. Proteins, fats, sugars, minerals, vitamins are processed by our body to produce energy, but they also cover the function of building material for our tissues. Similarly to the experience of conception, eating implies an embodiment of the other, which is processed by the Self to become part of it. The act of eating puts the Self in relation with the Other, through penetration, by allowing the entrance into the body, by providing access through an orifice, by transforming an external element into an internal component. The relationship between food and identity therefore acquires an intrinsic value that goes beyond the sociological implications of the "I am what I eat" but more literally pertains to the biological ones of the "I eat what I am."

The act of tasting is a complex process that involves at least three different senses: in primis the sense of taste, scientifically referred to as gustation, the sense of smell, olfaction, and the sense of touch. The interaction of these three senses is difficult to assess, but indeed everyone has had experience of not being able to fully appreciate the taste of a hot drink when it has cooled off, or when we have a cold and our nasal cavity is obstructed. Gustation occurs thanks to taste receptors, the taste papillae, which are located on the tongue, the pharynx and the larynx. The establishment of a contact between the taste buds and the body of the other is no common
experience, and it is limited to three instances: breastfeeding, cannibalism, and sex. Except for cannibalism, which our culture approaches reluctantly, the other two experiences are common to most human beings.

The Self perceives the world via the body and the five senses, yet the perception of the Other via the sense of taste is relegated in the realm of taboo because of the invasiveness of the act of tasting itself, linked to the increasing of the proximity that the use of the senses requires. The five senses act over different distances: seeing covers the longest distance, then there follows hearing, smell, touch, and finally taste. This gradual disappearing of the distance between the two bodies implies the risk of crossing the physical boundary of the Self, whose safety is jeopardised as the distance approaches zero, that is to say when there is contact, or even when it reaches negative values, that is to say in the act of penetration.

Both food and sex involve penetration of the body through one of its orifices, and this creates an analogy between the two activities, to be recognised in the bodily experience of boundary-crossing, of letting something that is not me, enter me, and somehow become me. This is asserted by the fact that forcing a person to one of these two acts is perceived as a violation, despite the fact the both acts are pleasurable under the conditions of willingness and consent.

**While England Eats**

David Leavitt's novel *While England Sleeps* (1993) has gained more popularity for the literary scandal that it raised than for its actual literary value (cf. Lesher 2000, 228), especially in queer literature (Garber 2000, 355). The novel, set in 1930s England, portrays the story of upper-class writer Brian Botsford and his complicated love for underground worker Edward Phelan, whom he meets at a political meeting. Although their first encounter is random and mainly sexual, the two soon start living together and engage in a long-term relationship. Despite the positive start, the diastatic gap between the two represents an issue that leads Brian to conform to the expectations of a man of his status and his age; he thus begins an adulterous relationship with a woman of his social entourage, Philippa Archibald, who soon understands that Brian's attempts to dissimulate his homosexuality are but vain. The story concludes with Edward's leaving to fight in Spain's civil war, and with Brian's realisation that real love cannot be let go of. The end is tragic: Edward dies after his reunion with Brian and a long nauseating journey back to England. Before arriving on land, the crew throws his body into the sea, leaving Brian wondering over the real reason of his lover's death.

Leavitt's portrayal of England in the 1930s is not edulcorated by the romance of the two young men. If, at times, their love filters their perception of reality with romance, it also crudely depicts the interwar period as a time of fervid political climate where peace was continuously being threatened. English society, with its strict social hierarchies, plays a fundamental role in the shaping of the boys' identities, and instills in the two men doubts over their choice to be together. There are various issues which shape

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2 There are other instances that imply a contact of the taste buds with the other's body; however, these are limited to sporadic events such as a mother using her saliva to disinfect her child's wound, or – as it occurred in the popular Tyson episode (Tyson vs. Holyfield 28 June 1997) – when biting is used during a fight.
their personal identities and collective identities, amongst them politics, social class, sexuality, health, ethics, legality, and morals. In depicting this process of identity-formation, Leavitt draws close connections between food and relationships, contributing to a more holistic understanding of the world by an active engagement of all five senses.

In the very first chapter Brian introduces the reader to the time and place setting of his story, stating that "[i]t was June 28th, 1936 […] In Germany, flocks of Hitler-jugend bullied the customers at Jewish stores; in Spain, the infant republic battled the Fascist threat; in England, women in shops argued over the price of leeks" (White England Sleeps, 22). Hitlerian attitudes, political conflict against Fascism, and the price of leeks share an identifying function at national level, a fundamental social issue that delineates a specific trait of these societies between the two world wars.

In England, agriculture had undergone a deep transformation since the 1920s, shifting from an individulistic perspective onto a more collective one. Farmers had gradually abandoned their individual views in order to embrace an approach which saw agriculture at the service of public good. This political shift, led by the Labour Party, involved the consideration of British agriculture as a public utility. In 1937, a pamphlet titled Labour's Policy of Food for All maintained that the main purpose of agriculture was to provide people with the necessary food and at affordable prices (Griffith 2006). The question of food was decisive in the formation of a national identity, especially at that time, and contributed – with all its variety – to shaping Britain's multicultural society.

Food plays a pivotal role in national-identity formation and conveyance, and draws the line between nationalism and foreignness. "Food is clearly instrumental in the identification of 'other' nations. The distancing of self from those others who eat curry or spaghetti specifically, or in general from consumers of 'foreign muck', has contributed significantly to the definition of Britishness" (Ashley et al. 2004, 83). When Edward leaves England to go to Spain, Brian's concerns are that he will not manage to find ease because of his foreignness, which he summarises in two key aspects of national identity: language and food.

Where was Edward now? Near the frontier? The new language would daunt him. I imagined nervous soldiers stepping from their truck to have supper in some cheap restaurant; the dim light, a toothless old woman in the kitchen. Strange food is placed before him – he would like to ask for something else, but he doesn't know how; and so he gamely cleans his plate, though the seasonings make him long for his mother, for the honey and biscuits and tea, and really, he thinks, swallowing hard, it isn't so bad, is it? Rather – interesting. That is how he was raised: to clean his plate. (WES, 191)

The otherness is immediately associated with the negativity of the ugly, the language is daunting, and the food is not only strange, but also more appealing with the contextualization of the ambience, dimly lit and with the presence of an ugly old woman. Not only does this passage highlight an ontological difference, it also highlights another aspect of British identity related to food, whose manifestation is more phenomenological: that of manners at the table. Most literature about British food maintains that the approach of the British to food was more connected to need than pleasure. As late as the 1950s, in fact,

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3 Subsequently cited as WES.
plainness in food was seen as a virtue [... and the uniformity and blandness characteristic of much early twentieth-century cooking, as well as perception that food should be cheap, may, in part, have been an inheritance from the extreme poverty of the nineteenth century, when few people could afford more than the most basic foods. (Mason 2004, x)

The stress is often posed on the fact that Englishness (or Britishness) at the table manifests itself in manners. George Mikes's popular statement that on the continent people have good food, but in England they have good table manners (cf. Mikes 1966) still holds a fair amount of veridicality despite the sixty-five years that have gone by since its appearance. In her anthropo-ironical study of the English, Kate Fox notices how continental Europeans assume that the English "regard good food as a privilege, not a right," (Fox 2004, 295) which she holds to be true to a certain extent, despite the improvement that British gastronomic culture has undergone in the past few decades. What she also maintains still to be true is the mannerism that distinguishes the English, regardless of their class. In fact, Edward was taught "to clean his plate" without complaining, an act of which he would be incapable of for two reasons: he does not speak Spanish, and he is English. According to Fox the English will avoid complaining, because this would mean "making a scene", 'making a fuss', or 'drawing attention to one's self' in public. [...] It would involve a confrontation, an emotional engagement with another human being which is unpleasant and uncomfortable, and to be avoided if at all possible.4

After Brian agrees to welcome Edward in his house, the Phelans organise a dinner to thank him for doing so. Food acquires here a fundamental social meaning, which on the one hand serves as an expression of gratitude – it is in fact to be noticed that Brian thanks the Phelans for the invitation by taking valuable French cheese as a present – but on the other highlights the class gap between the two young men. The description of the food served on this occasion draws the reader's attention to the distinctiveness of British gastronomy, and restores the belief in Britishness at the table. The British do have distinctive meals, namely afternoon tea, the full English breakfast, and the Sunday roast. Despite regional differences which may include slight variations to the meal, for instance Yorkshire pudding, which is mainly served in the north, the "format of the Sunday roast is relatively stable, built around a large piece of [roasted] meat. Beef is the first choice, although lamb, pork, and poultry are all acceptable" (Mason 2004, 139).

Brian's description of the dinner at the Phelans' concentrates on aspects that go beyond the food itself, and highlights the social aspects that such a dinner would imply for a family of their social class.

Dinner consisted of beef, potatoes and cabbage – the carrots were either abandoned or had been intended for another meal altogether. But though the Phelans acted as if this were an ordinary meal to which I, having "just dropped by," had been invited on the spur of the moment, it was clear that quite a bit of effort and expense had gone into it: not only had the dining room been resurrected; we were eating off good china (or what

4 Fox identifies three different types of English complaining at restaurants: the "silent complaint," in which the person does not say anything and simply avoids going back to that restaurant, the "apologetic complaint," which is introduced by apologetic expressions such as "I'm terribly sorry" and is softened by hesitations like 'er', 'ehm', etc., and finally the "loud, aggressive, obnoxious complaint," which represents the opposite side of this social unease (Fox 2004, 301-302).
passed for good china in Upney). The beef, moreover, was tender, and I couldn't help but worry lest it had cost so much that it would mean no meat at all for the rest of the week. (*WES*, 82)

Not only does Edward's mother want to thank Brian for taking her boy in, allowing the other family members greater ease, both economically and spatially speaking, she also wants Brian to feel welcome, to feel at home. Brian's remarks stress, almost snobbishly, the class gap between this reality and his own, first by wondering about the absence of the carrots (possibly implying that all the money had gone into the meat, thus only two out of three vegetables that would normally appear in the typical British meal could be afforded), and the second by despising the quality of the china, initially defining them as 'good' but immediately relativising that according to the lower-class context in which they were displayed.

Food and language are so closely intertwined in the definition of national identity that typical – or stereotypical – foods often maintain their original names in other languages: pizza, pasta, sushi, brownie, tacos, are but some examples which stress the attachment of such products to a particular culture, their own, and whose intrinsic cultural value we are reminded of in each bite we take. Maintaining the L1 lexeme bares a fundamental implication, which is that of the recognition of that food with another culture. Brian's French cheese, a gastronomical specialty and a treat that Edward's family could never afford, is immediately relegated to the realm of the other, and therefore labelled negatively, compared to faeces because of its strong smell, a remark that is followed by a sarcastic comment on its nationality. "Baby-shit cheese!" Edward laughed. 'And then they say that France is so sophisticated!' (*WSE*, 81).

This is the first of two important meals that Brian and Edward will have at Edward's house, where the familial context underlies the whole scene and where the presence of other family members increments the sense of family that lies behind the roast. This is the same atmosphere that pervades the second dinner as well. It occurs later in the novel, when their relationship's crisis and Brian's parallel relationship with Philippa have already started. Brian has the feeling that "[Edward's] family had conspired in planning this evening, to remind him of everything [he] stood to loose along with him [Edward]" (*WES*, 169).

Another aspect that food and language serve as semiotic modalities is that of class differentiation, therefore a parallel can be drawn between diastratic language varieties and diastratic gastronomic varieties. Indeed assumptions are made both when we hear someone speak (nationality, age, political correctness, etc.), and when we see them eat, an example of which would be someone drinking cappuccino during a meal, inevitably marking themselves as non Italians. Brian changes his speech, "adjusting his vocabulary in order not to use words that [Edward] might not understand" (*WES*, 43). Fox asserts that "English food comes with an invisible class label," (2004, 305) and then she proceeds in making a list of foods that are or are not suitable for that particular class, because they act as a clear indicator of one's social status. This is why when Edward's sister Lucy is told upon her late arrival that the family is "having cheese" she replies with a puzzled "Cheese! […] Since when?" (*WES*, 85), remarking the peculiarity of the event. Her knowledge of the French cheese presented at the table is an expression of her obsession with climbing up the social ladder. This is also evident in her liaison with a wealthy French girl, and her calling each piece of cheese by its French name: "livarot," and "vacherin" (*WES*, 85).
"Besides our individual connections to food, we also use it as a means of communicating our identities to others through our processes of preparation and eating;" (Green and Cramer 2011, ix-xix, xii) hence, it is possible to affirm that eating communicates aspects of our personal identity in the performative perspective of the act of consuming food, a bodily activity through which we perceive and communicate with the other.

Bed Food: Enter the Fifth Sense

The analogy of food and sex drawn by the act of penetration points out the invasiveness of both eating and having sex. Both acts imply an embodiment, both acts initiate chemical reactions that have a fundamental effect on the mind, reasserting the idea that "What touches [or enters] the body, […] touches [enters] the soul" (WES, XX), both acts are perforative and both acts explore the intricate relationship between need and pleasure; in fact they are the only things that Edward journaled about in Spain: meals, bowel movements, masturbation, and reading (WES, 270). Moreover, it seems as if Leavitt regards both acts to be carriers of collective identity as well, since in his description of these pre-war times he affirms that "[t]he world was ending, but in London women gossiped and argued over the price of mutton, men drunk ale and wanked each other in public lavatories before going home to eat the mutton their wives had argued over" (WES, 149).

Brian and Edward's relationship starts with an encounter whose sole finality, at least limited to that occasion, is that of having sex. In an atmosphere that can be described as that of a gay bar, the conversation is immediately finalised to leaving the place and finding a spot where they can be alone. Before they speak, however, they establish a sensorial relationship that starts through the sense of sight. Brian says that he noticed an attractive boy of nineteen or so, standing alone at a slight distance from the chatting crowd. […] His hair was dark blond, shaggy and haphazardly cut, and he had a bracingly clean face and green eyes. […] Our eyes met, and then furiously he turned away from me. […] I felt that rare shock of mutual desire and got an erection, and I could tell from the way he was rearranging his legs that he had got one too. (WES, 39-41)

At this point Brian felt secure in making his move, thus decided to approach him and to go stand next to him. The next sense that is involved in their encounter is the sense of touch, in fact Brian "swung [his] leg out, and [their] pants brushed" (WES, 41). Edward, shocked, retreated, but soon repositioned his leg to where it was. They spoke, thus heard each other's voice, although the line exchange between the two was brief. Soon after they were heading to their "unspoken but obvious destination" (WES, 43), Brian's bed-sitter, where Edward "pulled [Brian's] face towards his and kissed [him]." (WES, 43). It is here that the last two senses, olfaction and gustation, are involved, specifically and explicitly in Brian's comment about that kiss, when he tells the readers that Edward "tasted of honey and cigarettes" (WES, 439). The taste of the other is no longer metaphorical, but becomes literal: it is through the sense of taste that Brian acquires new elements pertaining to Edward's identity. Relating to the other is no longer a matter of just looking good, or even feeling good, but it also becomes a matter of tasting good.

As it has already been noticed, sex is one of the few instances in which the Self and the Other establish a relationship of taste, to be found in many of the practices
that characterise sex. The very act of allowing our taste papillae to be in contact with the other's body implies the acquiring of an income, to be found in kissing, oral sex, licking, etc. The literalness of this acquisition appears in the novel in the description of oral sex between the two men. Brian considers such practice an indecency greater than anal intercourse, and is reluctant at the beginning, when his mouth lies close to Edward's groin. "God knows I felt ashamed — really, I thought, I should go to the sexologists right away — and so I started making my way back up his stomach" (WES, 98), yet finally his resistance ceased.

[H]e pushed my head down again and said "Do it" […] There was need and anger in his voice. He pulled my head toward him […] I took it in. […] Edward jolted and shivered and came without warning, suddenly flooding my mouth with his semen, warm and slightly thickened and tasting like a sauce of milk and flour that has had too much salt added to it. Then he pulled back, he dropped to his knees, his chest shivering, his eyes huge and hungry, and ran his fingers through my hair and, kissing me, sucked his own sperm from my mouth, licked the spillage off my face, so that I knew there was no limit, no distance we could not go with each other (WES, 98; my emphasis).

Here, eating and sex become one part of the other, exactly as the two men do. Edward's kissing Brian afterwards seals the intimacy and uniqueness of their relationship, reasserting that they have gone another step further and cannot come back. The sociological perspective established by the "I am what I eat" is here literally subverted into the "I eat what I am" or rather "I eat what you are." The Self and the Other have become one entity in an exchange that is bidirectional and which, as disgusting as it may at first appear, is passed from orifice to orifice (penis-mouth-mouth), accentuating the irreversibility of the sexual act, and the feeling of profound abandonment that the very act of penetration leads and obliges the Self to.

In attempting to describe identity through the analysis of acts such as eating and sex, it is natural to refer to the concept of performance, and not only in the Butlerian perspective of the performativity of gender (cf. Butler 1990, 2004), but in a more holistic vision that considers the Self not in its individuality alone, but in an individuality that is the result of cultural evolution. In other words, the Self, as a cultural product, ontologically bears traits that are indicative of its own cultural context, and phenomenologically shows them to the Other. This appears clearly in the novel, in the descriptions of the meals that accompany Brian's relationships with Edward and Philippa.

Whilst love with Edward is associated with family dinners, which recall the familial sphere of emotions that Brian's life lacks, sex with Edward is always connected to tea time. Brian states this explicitly:

We almost always made love in the afternoon, Edward and I. Rarely at night […] never in the morning. […] No, the tea hour was our time: the hour, in England, for starched collars and crumpets. How thrilling and dirty it was to strip off at five in the afternoon, to stand naked and hard in the immodest light, while upstairs our lady neighbors spread their toast with Marmite and spoke of the Royal Family! (WES, 103)

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5 Richard Schechner defines performance according to the concepts of being and doing, asserting that: "'Being' is existence itself, 'Doing' is the activity of all that exists, [...] 'Showing Doing' is performing: pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing, 'Explaining "showing doing"' is the work of performance studies" (Schechner 2002, 28).
The reason for this is because Britain's national drink (just like sex) "cross[es] regional, class, and gender boundaries" (Burnett 1999, 69). Burnett's study assembles data retrieved in Sir William Crawford's findings of 1938, and in a summarising table displays the consumption of tea during five meals (breakfast, morning break, midday meal, tea, evening meal) by five different classes (AA, A, B, C, D). These findings highlight two important issues: the first one is that tea consumption is inversely proportional to class, the second is a value that defines the gap between the social classes, which corresponds to the coefficient of x in the equation of the trend line – the lowest being at tea time (-0.56) – highlighting that there is almost no social difference in the consumption of tea at this time of the day (see 'Table/Graph 1' below).7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>AA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>Meal Average</th>
<th>Class Gap</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>breakfast</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td>88.6</td>
<td>93.5</td>
<td>97.6</td>
<td><strong>98.3</strong></td>
<td>92.76</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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<td>39.3</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td><strong>59</strong></td>
<td>45.06</td>
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<td>15.4</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td><strong>52.6</strong></td>
<td>24.68</td>
<td>10.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tea</td>
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<td>89.9</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>90.2</td>
<td><strong>91.56</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>26.0</td>
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</table>

Table/Graph 1. Consumption of tea at mealtimes by social class (1936-37)

Moreover, it must be noticed that the inverse proportionality social class/tea consumption is reversed at tea time, where the highest class also reports the highest consumption; this may be an indicator that consuming tea at tea time was not a mere necessity for the upper classes, but rather consisted in a social act where the perfor-

6 Since what is being considered is the coefficient of x, which indicates the slope of the line, 'lowest' refers to the absolute value, that is the numerical value deprived of its sign. The line approaches horizontality as the coefficient approaches 0, the equation of a horizontal line being y=0x+n.

7 The table appears in Burnett (1999, 66). My additions consist of the row "Class Average," the columns "Meal Average" and "Class Gap," and the graph. I have indicated the highest value per meal in bold. The graph shows that the line which has the greatest tendency to y=0x+n (indicating that the line has no slope and thus there is no class gap) is the one that represents tea time.
mance of social identity was enacted, plausibly echoing a cultural heritage of the Victorian Age (cf. Fromer 2008).

Brian's description of sex during tea time provides readership with a social analysis of England at that particular time of the day; the portrait of the nation, which embodies collectivity in the plural attributed to the female neighbours, can also be found in the use of quintessentially English Marmite, a yeast-extract-based spread that was first produced in 1902 in Burton-on-Trent (Frankenburg 2009, 58) and whose strong and distinct taste originated the slogan to which this product partly owes its success: "Love it or hate it!"

Brian's relationship with Edward is lust-driven, rather than love-driven, a sentiment he will discover only too late in the development of their relationship. Such greediness is also present in the kind of food they eat after sex and in the way they eat it. Tea food, namely "cakes and sandwiches" (WES, 60), is the kind of food that can be consumed anywhere, specifically in bed, it is easy to handle, one piece can usually be eaten in a couple of mouthfuls, it tastes good. After having sex, Brian tells the readers: "I got up and made more tea and brought it to bed, along with the cakes and sandwiches I'd bought. We were both ravenous. We lay naked in bed, stuffing cream cakes into our faces" (WES, 60). The mouth acquires here only the connotation of a face hole, and is deprived of its gustatory capacities; it is only a hole that the two men literally 'stuff' in order to gain pleasure.

Not only does tea cross class boundaries, it also crosses gender boundaries, which, as it has been pointed out, seemed to be the trend in 1930s England despite the severity of the law, with the Labouchere Act still maintaining its validity. Heterosexual men had occasional sexual encounters with other men, but such liaisons never developed any further. Brian discovers this during a lunch to which he had been invited by Tim Sprigg, a former homosexual, whom he suspects has been engaged to a former homosexual, whom he suspects has been engaged to talk him through his own experience, in order to divert him from such indecencies.

[Sprigg] began the lunch by confessing in a low voice that for years he himself had been slave to 'homosexual tendencies' until he met Emma and discovered 'the landscape of woman' a sense of 'peace' and 'well-being' his many tests with boys had never given him. He now saw his homosexual years for what they were, he said: a wasted epoch of 'immature experimentation' that led only to 'emptiness,' 'degradation' and, in one instance, a diagnosis of gonorrhea. 'The love of a woman is enriching, nourishing,' he said. 'With men there is never love, only sex.' (WES, 123)

According to Sprigg, heterosexual love, just like good food, is defined as enriching and nourishing, thus more to be associated with a proper healthy meal; homosexual sex, on the other hand, is more similar to cakes and sandwiches, despite its deliciousness, it has very poor nutritional value.

Brian's relationship with Philippa highlights a few issues that relate to the kind of liaison they have, their class, and the performativity of this through their dinners. They dine out several times8, which Brian could hardly ever do with Edward, given

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8 The Labouchere Amendment is an amendment to the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act which banned acts of 'gross indecency' between men in public or private (Jones 2013, 201).

9 They also dine in public, once at an Indian restaurant (WES, 156) which was to be considered peculiar since in 1937 there were only sixteen Indian restaurants in London. It is interesting to notice that evening meals with Philippa are always referred to as dinners, not suppers, regardless of their informality. The term 'supper' in fact, marks a lower social status. 'Dinner', 'supper', and 'tea' (referred to the even-
the issues that such eating out would raise issues, related to respectability in primis and Edward's restricted economical resources in the second place. Although the first meal they have is described by Philippa as "the simplest supper" (WES, 139), possibly in order to lower Brian's expectations toward the food, it presents a vegetable stew, cheese and bread.

The most indicative performance of Brian's impossibility to maintain his relationship with Philippa, considered the premise that he is not sexually attracted to her, is evident during an upper-class dinner to which they go with other guests. Brian reports that "[a]t dinner that evening the food was tasteless. Nonetheless, by dividing it into equal portions and forcing myself to put one forkful into my mouth every minute, I made a respectable show of clearing my plate." (WES, 182). The tasteless-ness of his food, comparable to the tastelessness of his relationship, and phrases such as 'forcing myself' and 'respectable' are all indicators of an unsatisfactory meal/life that culminates in the use of the word 'show'. Loss of appetite, moreover, is a symptom of either (or both) physical and mental instability, thus Brian's not being hungry and his subsequent refusal to eat are intertwined in the cause-effect loop of nourishment and wellbeing.

Food for Thought: The Power of the Gastronomic Metaphor

A quick GoogleBooks search for the phrase "food for thought" presents 799,000 results in 0.17 seconds. The subjects and topics covered are disparate: cookbooks, literary criticism, motivational literature, philosophy, novels, and more. This expression has entered everyday language and generally refers to something which initiates reasoning, pondering and reflection. Stepping out of the metaphorical like the rest of our body our brain needs food to function, i.e. we literally need food, in order to think. The regulation of feelings, emotions and mood, depends on chemicals in the body, which we can increment or decrease by eating or avoiding certain foods. Thus another analogy that can be drawn between food and sex is their interconnection with thoughts which cause a bodily reaction, such as salivation triggered by thinking about a favourite dish.

Associations between food, sexuality, and life are not only obvious but also present in everyday idiomatic language, in phrases like "not my cup of tea," or "compare apples and oranges," as well as the use of the verb "eat" to indicate orogenital practices. Food acts as a universal mediator which is understood beyond social, gender, national, ethnic, or religious boundaries. This attributes great power to the metaphor of food, augmenting its efficacy and efficiency by establishing in speaker and listener a real bodily connection between what is being said, and what is being meant. In an interesting work on the food metaphor, Owens and Beistle (2006, 201-212) investigating meal, and not to the afternoon meal) are both diatopic and diastratic variations (Fox 2004, 309). See also Monroe (2005, 88-91).

10 On 22 July 2014 at 11:10 am GMT.
11 This is a conditioned reflex, that is "a reflex in which the stimulus is different from the inborn one but produces the same effect. By reflex, salivary glands produce saliva when food is present in the mouth. As a person gets older, other stimuli such as the smell or sight of food, a picture of food, sounds from the kitchen, hearing talk about food, or even thinking of food will produce salivation," similarly to how thinking about sexual images may have arousing effects (Mackenzie et al. 2004, 231).
gate this rhetorical device in interracial desire, namely between black and white people. Although their analysis focuses on the "foodification" of the black body, to be seen as something to "eat" or "consume," they also point at the semiotic power of gastronomic metaphors in a broader sense.

Brian uses the food metaphor several times in the novel: to describe his position in the relationship with Edward as well as to reflect on lies and on sexuality. After the first dinner at the Phelans', Brian woke up in Edward's bed, and described his happiness by saying that he felt as if he "had been handed a cup of ambrosial nectar to drink from and knew that once [he] finished drinking, the cup would be withdrawn forever, and nothing to come would ever taste as good" (WES, 91). Behind this metaphor, the first-person narrator hides the author's omniscience, as if he were able to foresee the events still to come. The second food metaphor also refers to him and Edward, this time, however, it is not a particular food that is being chosen as a metaphoric comparison, but rather the concept of satiation associated to that of boredom. "I remember waking one morning feeling just the slightest tinge of boredom, like a child who balks at having to eat the same thing day after day for breakfast; a satiation, if you will; the tiniest, most tentative bud of wanderlust." (WES, 105).

The third metaphor is the most powerful and it stands at the heart of Brian's problems: Edward has been betrayed and cheated on, Philippa is not being given any truth either, although she shows greater awareness of that, and Brian's self is lost in the public lavatories in which he wanders looking for occasional sex. His life, at this stage, is built on such a great amount of lies that he himself feels incapable of taking control of it.

Lies corrupt you, they provoke you to acts of cruelty your ordinary self would find shocking. Yet you commit them. You hurt people desperately in order to protect your lies, which have become like children to you – gnawing, desperate children not content to suck every drop of milk from your breast, because they are always hungry. So they bite into the nipple itself, they devour the flesh itself, and still you protect them. The problem ceases to be that you cannot live without your lies so much as that your lies cannot live without you. (WES, 181)

The physicality of the act of breastfeeding shifts lying from the realm of the psychological onto that of the physical. Not only do liars assume a parental protective role towards their lies, but the act of feeding them is painful and weakening. There is a subversion in the relationship between the I and the word, where the I, which literally produces the words out of its mouth, becomes the words' food. Feeder and food coincide in a self-negating process whose outcome, the negation of the truth, is also the negation of the self, which leads to denial, erasure, and subsequent extinction. Lies, the children of men, remain, forged of an indelibility that makes them immortal.

Some thought should be given to other aspects related to food, namely digestion and excretion. Once the transformation of food begins in the mouth, with mastication, it becomes something different from food, and it is no longer recognised as such. Once the bolus has acquired the shapelessness of salivated pulverised material, it loses all the links to pleasure. The mouth generally serves the purposes of intaking, and this unidirectionality renders the opposite processes unhealthy, wrong, or simply unpleasant. However, food, or what remains of it, can at times exit the mouth as vomit: a bodily product, which, because it exits the body, is automatically labeled as "dis-
gusting."\textsuperscript{12} Vomit is the body's way to express refusal. In his definition of nausea, Kant draws an analogy between the body and the mind.

It happens that nausea, an impulse to free oneself of food through the shortest way out of the esophagus (to vomit), has been allotted to the human being as such a strong vital sensation, for this intimate taking in can be dangerous to the animal. However, there is also a mental pleasure, which consists of the communication of thoughts. But if it is force on us and still as mental nutrition is not beneficial to us, the mind finds it repellent [...] and thus the natural instinct to be free of it is also called nausea, although it belongs to inner sense. (Kant 2006, 49-50)

Vomiting is therefore an act of liberation, and even though in \textit{While England Sleeps} it is literally nausea that both Edward and Brian experience, it comes at a moment in the story where the metaphorical meaning and the literal one are intertwined in an a bodily exchange, that of disease, in which vomiting acquires the function of liberation. Edward is ill and vomits on himself on his journey back home (\textit{WES}, 259, 267). He dies in Brian's arms, there are no words to be said. After being fed on (and up with) Brian's lies, he has found consolation in Brian's going to rescue him to take him home. Edward's body is in fact dropped into the water once the ship is close to its destination, "[w]ith the coast of England just becoming visible [...] and a sailor playing "God Save the King" on a flute" (\textit{WES}, 271). Also the sea acquires the anthropomorphic traits of an eater and "swallow[s] Edward" (\textit{WES}, 271).

The last metaphor of food appears in the epilogue, as forty years have gone by. Brian reports a scene from the film Spartacus, which at the time, had been censored for its indecency.

You can imagine our reaction to that famous scene where [...] the slave boy Antoninus gives the General Crassus [...] a bath. 'Do you like oysters?' Crassus asks Antoninus. 'When I have them, master.' 'Do you eat snails?' 'No, master.' 'Do you consider the eating of oysters to be moral and the eating snails to be immoral?' 'No, master.' 'Of course not. It is all a matter of taste.' 'Yes, master.' 'And taste is not the same as appetite, and therefore not a question of morals. [...] My taste [...] includes both snails and oysters.' (\textit{WES}, 302)

This scene, commonly referred to as the "snails and oysters" scene, has played a key role in the depiction of Crassus as a distinctively bisexual character, and of course Leavitt quotes it in order to draw a parallel between his personal literary scandal and the censorship of the film which, in 1960 was released without the scene. Yet, he re-proposes a moral question on sexuality, or rather the moral question, and uses the food metaphor to enquire about judgments and taste, when one has the right to say that is disgusted by a specific food, but not by the other people who eat it. Its efficiency acts at a bodily level, that of taste, that all understand and few can explain.

Through food, the body and the mind seem to leaven the duality that they are often obliged to; eating, with all its social, chemical, and performative implications leads the Self through a further exploration within the realm of perception, by allowing the penetration of the other. Are we what we eat, or do we eat what we are? Maybe both: that is indeed some food for thought.

\textsuperscript{12} Literature on the disgusting presents excreta as major "disgust elicitors" (McGinn 2011, 18). See also Miller (2003).
Works Cited


