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"All Distress is Food-Related:" T. Coraghessan Boyle's
The Road to Wellville (1993)

In 1993, T. Coraghessan Boyle published his fifth novel, The Road to Wellville, which was not only his funniest so far but also the first to reach a six-digit first edition and which until today is the only one to be made into a film. Its action-packed plot covers about half a year between November 1907 and May 1908 and offers a satirical portrait of the momentous dietary changes in the Progressive Era. Most of the action unfolds in a famous sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan, which was widely known as 'the San' and managed by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, the self-proclaimed healer and nutritionist and the famous inventor of cornflakes and peanut butter. The novel artfully interweaves three separate strands that at first cross each other only accidentally but then increasingly interact. One strand is concerned with Dr. Kellogg's activities and especially his deeply disturbed relationship with the sordid dropout George, one of his numerous adopted sons who seeks revenge for how he was treated. The second strand deals with a rich young couple from Peterskill on the Hudson (the fictional version of Boyle's birthplace Peekskill, known from World's End). The 'neurasthenic' Kellogg fan Eleanor Lightbody returns to the San to recover from the death of her newborn baby and drags along her unwilling husband Will, who suffers from an undiagnosed stomach disorder and, although doubtful about Dr. Kellogg's healing methods, follows her to save his marriage. And the third strand deals with the young and naive would-be entrepreneur Charles Ossining, also from Peterskill, who plans to invest his benefactress' money in the cornflake boom and comes to Battle Creek to get rich quick with a new brand named Per(fect)-Fo(od), but is swindled out of his money by his criminal companion Godloe Bender.

From his first novel onwards, Boyle has been obsessed with the meaning of food. In Water Music (1982), a half-starved African makes a crucial point when he tells the explorer Mungo Park "that all distress is food-related" (Boyle 1983, 171); in World's End (1987), the Van Brunts engage in mysterious and fatal bulimic binges; and in East Is East (1990) the ravenous Hiro Tanaka is brought into ever new difficulties by his constant search for food. In 1990, Tad Friend rightly observed that in Boyle's œuvre 'emblems of man's corporeal nature – a morbid fascination with the food that goes in one orifice and the fluids that come out the others – are a recurrent memento mori' (Friend 1990, n.p.), and two years later, Boyle told Alexander Hilbert that "Essen oder Hunger [sind] Teile meiner schriftstellerischen Obsession (eating or hunger are parts of my authorial obsession)" (Hilbert 1992, 17). Thus, it was no surprise that when a friend gave him Ronald M. Deutsch's The New Nuts Among the Berries, a study of American health-food faddism, to read, Boyle jumped at the topic of "foodism, the attribution of illusionary good or bad qualities to food and how we eat them" (Deutsch 1977, 12; original emphasis), and translated it into a satirical tale about the pursuit of health and wealth which, although it takes place in the first decade of the 20th century,
is highly topical since contemporary Americans are still obsessed with fitness, longevity, and wealth. Once more creating a metafictional historiography by combining historical research with fictional invention, Boyle acknowledged that he was inspired and informed by Deutsch's study, Gerald Carson's *Cornflake Crusade*, and his research in the Battle Creek library, but again he gave precedence to his poetic imagination: "My interest is to use history to explore how I feel about things and to communicate that to others – hopefully in an entertaining and edifying and satisfactory way. Where the facts stand in the way of what I'm trying to accomplish, well, the facts will have to be altered." He also said that "I've always been interested in deflating heroes" (qtd. in Smiley 1993, n.p.) and admitted that his version of Dr. Kellogg is a comic exaggeration.

The Critical Reception

The reception of *The Road to Wellville* was generally positive and sometimes even enthusiastic. In *The New York Times*, Jane Smiley called the book "Boyle's lightest, least fierce novel" and found that his "prose is a marvel" (Smiley 1993, n.p.). In the *Kirkus Review*, an anonymous reviewer praised the novel as the "big, smart, exciting, and often wildly funny" work of "one of America's most exuberant satirists," (Anon. 1993a, n.p.) and in *Publishers Weekly*, another nameless critic extolled it as "a rich plumcake of a book, full of ripely conceived characters, satire both broad and bitter, beautifully integrated period atmosphere and writing that is colorful but considered," and described it as "a tale told with the broad humanism and compassionate eye of a great 19th-century novelist. Truth and fiction are invisibly blended in Boyle's splendid novel, in which a loving concern for the innocent at heart touchingly prevails" (Anon. 1993b, n.p.). In *The Newark Star Ledger*, Roger Harris called *The Road to Wellville* "a work of comic genius that only Boyle, among today's American writers, could conceive" and "a great novel that takes history into the world of fantasy, satire into savagery and extends the foibles of a few to all mankind – beginning with what we eat and shifting to the more universal theme of what we're like" (1993, n.p.). In *Playboy*, Digby Diehl greeted the novel as "a comic tour de force" that established its author "at the top of his literary" game (1993, n.p.). In *Vogue*, Robert E. Sullivan Jr. said that "black humor, kaleidoscopic compound constructions, and characters on the brink of sex, death, and investing in phony cereal-company stocks – all these make what might have been just another thick but flat historical treatment feel like a long, tight rock 'n' roll song," and found that Boyle "still has the gloriously perverse knack of persuading you to laugh at the most disgusting moments" (1993, n.p.). And in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Jim Neilson lauded Boyle's novel as "a richly comic satire aimed at the foolishness of health fanatics and the knavery inherent in commercial culture" and observed that Boyle "reveals within the American dream a corruption that no amount of physiologic living can cure" (1994, 212). In the *Hudson Valley Magazine*, T. K. Whippet found that "Boyle has reached new literary heights with this novel" and that it is "destined to become an American classic" (1993, n.p.). He also provided the information that when asked about his favorite character, Boyle had said that "Will Lightbody is the hero of the book and has a kinship with Tom Crane from *World's End,*"
but that writing Kellogg's character was "the most fun" (1993, n.p.). In the *Lexington Herald Leader*, Kevin Nance made another important point when he stated: "Although Boyle has a reputation for being difficult, arising from his occasional postmodernist experiments, he's solidly accessible here; he's far closer in spirit to John Irving than to Thomas Pynchon. *The Road to Wellville* – deliciously baroque and weirdly logical in the manner of Irving's *The World According to Garp* – is one of the most consistently entertaining books I've read in years." As to the frequent comparison of Boyle's humor with that of Dickens, he clarified that "while Dickens' art moves and changes you, Boyle's tickles and horrifies you. For all his reformist zeal, Dickens was essentially a romantic, concerned with the creation of myth; Boyle is a literary Terminator, bent on the destruction of myth" (Nance 1993, n.p.).

There were, however, also some dissenting voices. In the *Patriot Ledger*, Lindsay Cobb maintained that Boyle "is first and foremost an entertainer, on a par with Dickens or Twain. His intention is not simply to examine the human heart but to exaggerate and lampoon life and thereby to get at its bitter truth, even as his readers are convulsing in laughter." She criticized that "Boyle does not always quite hit his mark," discovered "a few stray plot devices which seem a little threadbare, a few characters that lean further toward cartoons than even Boyle tends to go," and found that "even Boyle's distinct style occasionally sounds almost like a parody of Boyle," but then added that "these are minor flaws is an otherwise first-rate comic novel" (1993, n.p.). In *World Literature Today*, James Knudsen acknowledged that the novel's "plot lines are skillfully blended, and the writing is polished and often funny," but he criticized that "too often [Boyle's] novel reads like an exercise, something he wrote to prove that it could be done" (1994, 126). In the *Independent*, Zachary Leader found Boyle's "indelicate absurdity" exhilarating, but censured that "though the alternating plot strands neatly intertwine, the novel lacks narrative pressure." He also deplored that it "lacks developed characters, something the high realist touches lead one to expect. Though the novel's principal dupes […] finally see the light, no one else changes much or has anything but the most rudimentary interior life" (1993, n.p.). In *The Boston Globe*, David Lipsky admitted that "T. C. Boyle may be the most entertaining writer in America," and in opposition to Leader considered his new novel "a superbly plotted entertainment" and probably "the most fun book of the season." But with regard to the strands of action that make up the plot, he observed: "Boyle reels off these three stories at the same time, relying on breathless crosscut, intertwining coincidence and shameless cliffhangers. Often the cliffhangers come to nothing; Boyle just wants to keep us reading, and will drag his characters through any humiliation – impotence, social disaster, scrounging – to make us smile. He loves not his characters but his reader. Boyle is ruthlessly entertaining." And even with regard to Boyle's usually lauded stylistic versatility he had some objections and expressed his hope that "Boyle will relax and turn his attention to a novel where his prose will be the equal of his powerful storytelling" (1993, n.p.). In *The Buffalo News*, Mark Shechner commented that "it has been quite a while since I've read anything so consistently funny as this novel," but then qualified this praise by adding: "It is all very funny, but *The Road to Wellville* is a comedy of humiliation throughout, and laughter brings unease in its train. Everyone is brought low or unmasked or dealt a blow, precisely at the spot of greatest vulnerability. […]" There is something cruel about
this book; after the first 25 enemas, you may think that the author's sense of humor contains a tincture of nastiness" (1993, n.p.). Among the American reviewers, only two pointed to a potential literary connection. In New York Newsday, Dan Cryer greeted the novel as a "wonderfully droll, seamlessly crafted new novel" and referred to "Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain, which comes immediately to mind," but then quickly qualified his statement by adding that Mann's book "is altogether too dark and brooding to serve as predecessor" (1993, n.p.). And in the St. Petersburg Times, Mindi Dickstein stressed that Boyle's "rich and mind-bendingly delightful language explodes with the early-20th-century's passion for invention, even as he subtly reveals the depth and tragicomedy of the failure of the American dream," and then called The Road to Wellville "a satire of sanitariums as comic as Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain is chilling" (1993, n.p.). As one would expect, reviewers of the German translation followed this track more closely. In Der Standard, Michael Freund claimed: "Boyle's bös-amerikanisches Opus kann als amerikanischer Zauberberg gelesen werden" (Boyle's wicked American opus can be read as an American Magic Mountain' Freund 1993, n.p.)." Martin Halter titled his review in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung "Dr. Kelloggs Zauberberg" (Dr. Kellogg's Magic Mountain)." And Klaus Modick stated in the Süddeutsche Zeitung:

Boyle macht zwar keine direkten Anspielungen auf den Zauberberg, aber die Komposition des Buches im Ganzen und zahlreiche Motive und Details deuten doch darauf hin, dass er Thomas Manns Roman mit beträchtlichem Gewinn für sein eigenes Werk gelesen haben dürfte – falls nicht, wären die Parallelen umso erstaunlicher. (Admittedly, Boyle does not directly allude to the Magic Mountain, but the composition of the book as a whole and numerous motifs and details indicate that he might have read Thomas Mann's novel with considerable profit for his own work – if that was not the case, the parallels are all the more surprising.’ Modick 1993, n.p.)

There is no reliable evidence that Boyle knew and used Mann's novel, but in her unpublished thesis submitted in 2013 at the University of Vienna, Daniele Heumesser maintained:


('Especially with regard to the construction of the world of the sanitarium, the characterization and constellation of the main characters, and the choice of the topics treated, The Road to Wellville shows parallels to the Zauberberg. These literary references establish a dialog between the two texts which opens up a form of communication between German and American culture, between modernity and postmodernity, and between the society at the beginning and at the end of the 20th...
century. In my thesis, I explore these connections by pursuing the question: Why and in which form can T. C. Boyle's *The Road to Wellville* be understood as a postmodern reproduction of Thomas Mann's *Zauberberg*?

Meanwhile, Boyle's fifth novel has been out for a quarter of a century, but still not a single detailed analysis has been published. Both Daniela Heumesser's thesis on possible analogies between Boyle's and Mann's novels and Marc V. Donadieu's Ph.D. thesis on "American Picaresque: The Early Novels of T. Coraghessan Boyle" with a chapter on "Charlie Ossining's Picaresque Quest For Success in *The Road to Wellville*" remain unpublished, and with regard to published scholarship the result is strikingly meager. There are the observations dispersed throughout Markus Schröder's 1997 Paderborn Ph.D. dissertation, there is an insightful but rather short chapter on the novel in Paul Gleason's 2009 introduction to Boyle's œuvre, and there is a 2013 essay in which John E. MacKinnon argues that wellness has replaced illness as our major obsession and uses Boyle's novel to illustrate his thesis.

**The Film (1994)**

The cinematic adaption of *The Road to Wellville* came out only one year after the book, and the proceeds of the film rights allowed Boyle to buy the house built by the star architect Frank Lloyd Wright in Montecito near Santa Barbara in which he still lives with his family and whose controversial builder he immortalized in his twelfth novel, *The Women* (2009). Written and directed by Alan Parker, the film stars Anthony Hopkins as Dr. Kellogg, Matthew Broderick and Bridget Fonda as William and Eleanor Lightbody, John Cusack as Charles Ossining, and Dana Carvey as the Doctor's adopted son George. Despite its loving recreation of the luxurious atmosphere of the San in lavish period details and Anthony Hopkins' rare comic performance, the film flopped at the box office, and its attention to the unsavory details of bowel movements, flatulence and enemas and to such widely tabooed aspects of sexual activity as the 'sin of Onan' or the thrills of erotic massage led to mostly negative reviews, and on Rotten Tomatoes it has a rather poor 41% rating. One reviewer found that "*The Road to Wellville* awkwardly combines satire and the saucy vulgarity of an English 'Carry On' film" but at least conceded that "viewers with a robust sense of humour will discover that laughter is better therapy than a bowl of green cornflakes or a yoghurt enema" (Anon. 1994, n.p.). Gabe Delahaye complained about the "endless discussions of people farting and pooping and getting erections interspersed with long tracking shots of butts. I've never seen a movie more obsessed with human excrement," (2009, n.p.) and rated the film as one of the five worst movies ever. And Matthew Cheney wholeheartedly agreed with a disgusted viewer who had rented the film through Netflix and found that "this movie is all about boobs and poop" (2004, n.p.).

**The Structure of the Novel**

Each of the three initially separate and increasingly intertwined strands of *The Road to Wellville* is concerned with another group of people and Boyle's narrator alternately looks at the world through the eyes of different individual characters. Thus, he can unfold the action from several distinctive points of view, present the same event from...
different angles, and thereby construct a broad social panorama and provide a synopsis of competing versions. The novel is divided into three books titled "Diagnosis," "Therapeusis" (an older version of 'therapeutics') and "Prognosis" and thus imitates the tripartite structure of a medical treatment. With the first and the last book consisting of ten chapters each and the middle one of eight, the novel is symmetrically organized, and all loose ends are picked up in a summarizing "Coda" in 19th-century fashion. Each of the three books is centered around a holiday. In Book I it is Thanksgiving Day, which is celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November, in Book II it is Groundhog Day, which takes place on the second day of February, and in Book III it is Decoration or Memorial Day, which in the time of the novel's action was celebrated on the 30th of May. These three days provide a scaffold for the novel's time structure and also infuse it with additional, and subversive, meaning. Thanksgiving Day is meant to give thanks for the blessings of the preceding harvest, but Book I ends ironically with Will Lightbody's discovery that the live turkey exhibited in the dining hall has died because, as belatedly explained, it was wrongly fed, and it closes with the ringing sentence "Dead. Already dead" (163), expressing hopelessness and finality. On Groundhog Day it is decided whether winter will persist or spring will arrive early, and the San's patients are eagerly watching the groundhog's behavior. But Book II ends with the rodent vanishing into its hole and the ominous statement "The clouds closed over the sky like a fist" (293) again withholding hope and promise. Decoration Day is celebrated in memory of the people who died while serving their country and marks the start of summer vacation. In direct contrast to the two preceding ones, Book III closes with the triumphant sentence "He was John Harvey Kellogg, and he would live forever" (463), thus predicting a glorious future and pitting an ironically undercut promise of life against the threat of death. Boyle builds a precise time structure around these three holidays, according to which the action opens "in the fall of 1907" (7), more precisely on a day in "November" (58, 194) of that year, and ends on "Decoration Day" (448), that is, on May 30, 1908, covering about "six months" (310, 394, 441) altogether. Around this tripartite structure he then places a thematic bracket by opening his novel with the Lightbodys, the ailing patients seeking health, and Charles Ossining, the "apprentice confidence man" (373) seeking wealth, coming to Battle Creek on "the Twentieth Century Limited, the world's premier train" (19), and by closing it with the 'cured' Lightbodys openly leaving and the failed Charles Ossining secretly escaping.

Each of the novel's 28 chapters has a title. Some are simply descriptive, as "The Biggest Little City in the U.S.A." (I, 6), which refers to the nickname of Battle Creek, or as "The Fatal Luncheon" (III, 8), which points to the social event at which Charlie is arrested. Some are metaphorically charged, as "The Sword of Fire" (III, 6), which refers to the historical Sister Ellen G. White, one of the co-founders of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church that owned what would become the Battle Creek Sanitarium and who, when she disagreed with Dr. Kellogg's management of the San, threatened that God had poised "a sword of fire" over it (Carson 1957, 129-146). Some signal a deeper truth as "Father to All, Father to None" (I, 4), which alludes to the fact that Dr. Kellogg is officially the 'father' of 42 adopted children, but, as becomes obvious with regard to George, realistically a father "to none." And some are ironically subversive, as "A
Thankful Bird” (I, 10), which refers to Will's discovery that the Thanksgiving turkey caged in the dining room has ‘thankfully’ died from the ghastly sanitarium food before he can strangle it. The "Thankful Turkey," by the way, is authentic since "on one Thanksgiving Day, the 'San' guests were served something which looked like roast turkey and tasted like roast turkey, but wasn't; while on a raised platform in the dining room The Doctor had placed a live gobbler. A legend on the coop announced 'A Thankful Turkey. ' The turkey ate his grain ration like all the other guests, flapped his wings and gobbled his appreciation" (Carson 1957, 238; see Deutsch 1977, 108-109).

Several chapters build up to a climactic event. Thus, in I, 6, Charlie, the would-be entrepreneur, goes from one disappointment to another, ends his failed day on a cot in a cheap rooming house and cannot sleep because the mattress hurts him. When he cuts it open, he finds that it is filled with shares of a cereal company gone bankrupt, suggesting a similar fate for him. In II, 2, Dr. Kellogg chases Lillian, the tame chimpanzee, and when he finally gets hold of her, "she was grinning [...] and in that moment she looked just like George" (197), foreshadowing his problems with his adopted son. In III, 3, "Freikorper Kultur," Eleanor has her initial erotic massage by Dr. Spitzvogel and experiences her first orgasm. When in the following chapter with the ironic title "Rigid Control and Other Matters," her clueless husband worries about his wife consulting an outside doctor but "just loved the look on her face when she got back from her treatment" (362), the readers know the reason for Eleanor's relaxed look and can enjoy the painful irony of Will's reaction.

Chapter transitions are generally marked by sudden jump cuts from one strand of the action to another. Thus, while in I, 1 Kellogg lectures to his patients, the Lightbodys meet Charlie in the train's dining car in I, 2. Chapter I, 1 is then taken up and continued in I, 4; I, 2 is continued "late that night" (26) in I, 3; I, 5 picks up where I, 4 ended; and so on. Boyle not only alternates between the different strands, but often ends his chapters at decisive moments and thus turns them into veritable cliffhangers. Thus, at the end of I, 1, a stinking bum appears in the San and addresses the embarrassed Dr. Kellogg in front of his rich patients with "Hello, Father" (15). For twenty pages the readers are left in the dark about what this dramatic confrontation will lead to, before the outcome is belatedly explained in I, 4. A similar situation occurs in III, 5, where Charlie betrays his benefactress by showing her someone else's factory as his own. With the suspense about whether she will discover his deception steadily growing, all seems well until the very last minute when they are accosted by the same bum who addresses Mrs. Hookstratten with "George Kellogg, at your service, madam. You wouldn't happen to have any spare change, would you?" (377) This time, the readers even have to wait for about 40 pages before they learn how Charlie manages to explain this encounter to his aunt with yet another web of lies. Towards the novel's end, the growing tension is expressed in ever faster scene changes even within a chapter and finally, with suspense steadily mounting, in the time span of a few hours Will rescues his wife from Lionel Badger and Dr. Spitzvogel, Charlie escapes the police and meets George, Dr. Kellogg confronts his son setting fire to the sanitarium, Will escorts his wife to the train home, and Dr. Kellogg murders George.

The novel's action is told by an effaced and selectively omniscient narrator who often looks at the world through the eyes of one of the characters. Dr. Kellogg, Will
and Charlie serve as the major carriers of the point of view, and David Lipsky rightly defines Will, whom Boyle himself called the hero of the book, as "the clear-eyed vehicle through which we perceive the San" (Lipsky 1993, n.p.). Frequently, however, the narrator oversteps a person's limited perception as defined by his or her character. Thus, the dinner scene on the train is depicted as experienced by Charlie, but when one reads "This was an era of vigorous and accomplished eating, of twelve-course meals, of soups, sauces and gravies, of three meats and a fish course, not to mention a cascade of wine" (20), one clearly hears the voice of the narrator. When the perplexed Will muses about his "complicated" (93) position in the San and goes on with "this was the Progressive Era, after all, and 'reform' was the catchword of the day" (93-94), this sentiment belongs to an external commentator and not to the baffled patient. When Charlie is surprised by yet another criminal trick of Bender’s, the narrator not only comments that "Charlie didn't know the first thing about the breakfast-food business" (123), but he also knows that "he'd be the first to admit it" (123). That Boyle is frequently overstepping the limitations of a chosen point of view to make satirical comments is most obvious in a scene in which Dr. Kellogg abuses the tame wolf Fauna to convince his audience that carnivores can be made vegetarians. He triumphantly cries:

"She will not eat this obscene and unnatural food, not by choice or preference – or even, at the risk of inflaming the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, by compulsion." (What he didn't mention was that she had been trained, through negative reinforcement, to view meat as a prelude to a beating – just touch her tongue to it and she was whipped – or that her vegetarian diet had so weakened her, she wouldn't have had the strength to chew it in any case.) (307; original emphasis)

Here, a situation is seen through the eyes of one of its participants, but then the voice of the ironic narrator intrudes and discloses the doctor’s sham performance. A similar case occurs when Charlie discovers the patent medicine that will make him rich, and one reads that he is "thunderstruck. Stunned and amazed (or at least as stunned and amazed as a three-quarters-inebriated ex-tycoon pursued by the law and wearing a freshly separated and matching pair of steel bracelets could expect to be)” (446). Here, again, the narrator cannot abstain from adding a comically subversive comment.

The Major Characters

In an interview with Bill Rodriquez, Boyle defined one of his reasons for writing The Road to Wellville by saying "I really am suspicious of cant and programs and people to whom you give over your life so that they can make you better […] I'm very suspicious of that sort of thing and have always written to deflate people like Dr. Kellogg" (qtd. in Donadieu 2000, 197). And in another interview he stated: "It turned out that I focused on Kellogg and just exaggerated his actual qualities. I mean, the book is pretty much true. […] I exaggerated him a little bit to reflect my point of view, which has to do with making fun of today's obsession with all the latest health developments” (qtd. in Donadieu 2000, 199). One of his aims, then, is to 'make fun' of the excesses of faddish health movements, many of which are religiously founded, most of which have no
certifiable medical justifications, and all of which are primarily meant to generate money. Therefore, his major narrative strategies are ruthless satirical dissection and unlimited comic exaggeration. Consequently, all his characters are depicted as flawed and vulnerable and their ordeals are often staged as slapstick. The egomaniacal Dr. Kellogg turns out to be a wrongheaded fanatic, the filthy George is repulsive, Will Lightbody is weak, his wife Eleanor is an unfaithful hypochondriac, and Charlie is a lying crook. Thus, the readers do not laugh with but about them, and Jane Smiley made an important point when she said in her review that Boyle's "precise and often delicious comic style and his exuberant wordplay promise pleasure, yet the justly deserved fates of his narcissistic and sometimes cruel characters withhold a final portion of pleasurable satisfaction" (Smiley 1993, n.p.). Boyle's characters are not meant to win the readers' empathy by their complex personalities and the psychological believability of their behavior, but they function mostly as carriers of specific positions and attitudes that are then opened up for ridicule and derision. Nevertheless, Boyle knows that he cannot limit his novel to the present action, but must provide his actors with a past that makes their behavior believable. Therefore, he integrates passages about crucial events in their pre-history. In most cases, however, this is not done by an outside narrator looking back, but these flashbacks are camouflaged as memories of the persons concerned. Since the bitter fight between Dr. Kellogg and George is only comprehensible when one knows why and how it started and how their mutual hatred grew over the years, it comes as no surprise that most of the memory passages are concerned with the pre-history of Dr. Kellogg and his adopted son. In I, 4, the readers learn about the Doctor's adoption of George and his first big fight with the six-year-old (cf. 43) boy in what must have been 1894 since George is "nineteen years old" (35) "in the fall of 1907" (7). In II, 1, they are familiarized with the Doctor's second fight with the now seven-year-old (cf. 176) rebel a year later, and in III, 6, they are informed about Kellogg's dramatic confrontation with the boy of "fourteen" (382) in the wake of the fire at the San on "February 19, 1902" (381). There is also a short passage in which the Doctor reminisces about other troubles such as the fight with his brother Will who stole his cornflake factory, and there are scattered references to the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Western Health Reform Institute of Sister White, the management of which Dr. Kellogg, the son of a poor broom-maker and a student of medicine at Bellevue Medical College in New York, took over in 1876 and renamed the Battle Creek Sanitarium. The past of the Lightbodys, namely Will's stomach trouble, his bout with alcohol and drugs, and the birth and death of Eleanor's baby, is integrated into the plot through Will's troubled reminiscences on board the train to Battle Creek and through Eleanor's brief recollections of her quiet life in Peterskill. Charlie's past is belatedly revealed after the dramatic failure of his first attempt to roast cornflakes in a retrospective passage that explains how he mutated from a sucker into a swindler.

**Dr. John Harvey Kellogg**

The master of the San enters the stage as a demagogic showman who lectures brilliantly on his major obsessions, the detrimental effects of meat and "the nightmare of carnal decay" (4), the deadly dangers of sexual intercourse and "the priapic urge" (187), and...
the risks bred by trichina and tape worms. These "provocative, stimulating and informative" (185) lectures and the manipulative stunts that accompany them are virtuoso performances. And their topics do not arise from Boyle's fertile imagination, but are historically documented. "Once [the Doctor] even arranged a microscope with a piece of diseased meat on a slide in the lobby of the state capitol at Lansing" (Carson 1957, 109). To prove that a carnivore could survive on a vegetable diet, he "maintained many a glossy-coated vegetarian dog, and once even tried to convert a wolf to his progressive views" (Carson 1957, 110). "The Doctor kept an ugly old chimpanzee [...] He could use him for a stunt. The Doctor would toss him a steak, and the intelligent anthropoid would throw it right back at him. Then John Harvey would hand him a banana. The ape would peel and munch it with evident approval" (Carson 1957, 240).

The Doctor's other favorite topics such as the consequences of "self-abuse and the atrophied testicle" (49) or the hurtful effects of "white sugar" (379) are only mentioned in passing. But for all of them he provides striking slogans such as "a steak is every bit as deadly as a gun" (4), "a single discharge of seminal fluids could be fatal" (398), or "tobacco destroys the sex glands" (9).

Boyle's Dr. Kellogg is "a diminutive man" (5) with short legs and a "grand leonine head" (38), who during the action ages from "fifty-five" (272) to "fifty-six" (455). He is "never fully at ease unless he [is] in motion" (41), has an "obsession with interior as well as exterior cleanliness" (62), and is ceaselessly "working from 4.00 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week" (41). His office walls are covered with an "unbroken band of portraits" of "Greek philosophers, celebrated vegetarians, medical heroes and captains of industry" (110; see 51, 474), and like the Doctor's "smoked-celluloid eyeshade" (111) this "unsettling" (110) gallery is yet another authentic detail, since on the historical Dr. Kellogg's walls "hung many pictures, including the Greek philosophers who, he remarked, 'were preaching the simple life two thousand years ago'" (Carson 1957, 236). The Doctor considers himself "the very avatar of geniality and good sense" (6) and is certain of "his control, his benevolence, his wisdom" (11). He believes in his own infallibility, and one of his strengths is his excellent "memory" (39) that permits him to address all patients by their names. His standard diagnosis is 'autointoxication,' and his major obsession is the improvement of bowel movements: "The Peristaltic Optimum" (65). He discourages lounging as a step towards losing control and shrinks back from human contact because it spreads disease. Having single-handedly turned the San into a national success, he considers himself "master of all he surveyed. Chief, king, confessor, and patriarch" (37), "a reformer, a titan, a tower of strength" (193), and "the messiah of health" (176). Since 1879 he has been married to Ella E. Eaton but observes "strict [sexual] abstinence" (115), which is why all his 42 children are adopted (Carson 1957, 111). The historical Dr. Kellogg "made a substantial contribution in forwarding the most important medical principle established in the 19th century, the vis medicatrix naturae, the healing power of nature" (Carson 1957, 58; original emphasis), and Boyle's fictional version also "believe[s] in the curative powers of nature" (104) and proclaims that "Nature alone can cure. The Power that creates is the Power that can heal" (274). In what seems a curious contradiction and points to his coolly instrumental view of his fellow humans, Boyle's Dr. Kellogg is convinced that
"conditions made the man" (42) and that even the worst case can be turned into a model citizen through "behavior modification" (44). In this respect he mirrors the historical Doctor's conviction "that nurture and guidance would produce a uniformly better human being in both a biological and a social sense" (Carson 1957, 246).

The fictional Dr. Kellogg is "a firm believer in the twin principles that work is a great character builder and that no one gets anything for nothing" (43). He is "widely known for his frugality" (51) and always manages to convince his staff that they should be content with their low wages. Again, these details are historically verified, and Carson reports that whenever the underpaid employees of the San asked for better wages, the Doctor gave them a pep talk, pointed out that he himself worked for free, sang with them, and thus managed to make them feel grateful for having the privilege of working for the San (Carson 1957, 105-106). Boyle's Dr. Kellogg thinks of himself as "a humanitarian" (424) and "a sentimentalist at heart" (178), but he does not treat the fatally ill and the poor, rejects patients with contagious diseases, and concentrates on the rich and famous who are only slightly ill and thus pose no risk for his fame as a healer. "Severe cases – the cancerous, the moribund, the mentally unbalanced and the disfigured – were rejected" (7). He is a coolly calculating and power-hungry capitalist and an egomaniac concerned with his own reputation. He knows full well that "time [is] money" (448), and he runs his sanitarium like a small dictatorship. For his obsession with always dressing "entirely in white" (5) there is an important reason: "Dr. Kellogg soon added a new dimension to health reform, and one which foreshadowed our own day. For until his entry upon the scene, wearing medical white – his suit, shirt, tie, shoes, hat, etc., were all white – foodism had been based upon religious and philosophic intuition. Vegetarianism and whole grain advocacies had been born of inspiration. But John Harvey now set out to give these ideas scientific support" (Deutsch 1977, 60; see Carson 1957, 233).

In his overblown self-estimation, Dr. Kellogg is a "veritable saint" (37) who works ceaselessly for a better world, and in the eyes of his nurse Irene Graves he is even a god-like creature, about whom she reverently says with involuntary irony: "When I think of what he's done for mankind – for the alimentary canal alone – I have to say, yes, he is a god, my god, and he should be yours, too" (208). But for the increasingly disillusioned Will, who develops from finding the "Great Healer's" (316) therapies rather questionable towards considering them outright criminal, the Doctor is a totally different person. After the electrocution of Homer Praetz due to negligence and the death of Miss Muntz due to the irresponsible administration of "radium emanations" (289), Will furiously condemns Dr. Kellogg as "a fake, a sham, a charlatan, he's a wife-stealer and a fraud and a …[…] He's a murderer" (223). Full of rage, he considers "the little white-clad dictator" (394) a "zealot" (246) and denounces the methods practiced in the San as "Snake Oil. Voodoo. […] quackery, plain and simple" (244). Since Dr. Kellogg's self-assessment and Will's estimation of him are mutually exclusive, it might seem that Boyle leaves it to his readers to decide which is more believable. On closer scrutiny, however, his narrator employs two iterative motifs to manipulate them into sharing Will's view.

The first motif is introduced in a brief scene about which Paul Gleason rightly said that "it inaugurates a novel-length critique of an authoritarian, dehumanizing, and
ultimately economically motivated medical system" (82). When the Lightbodys arrive at the San and talk to the Doctor, he "suddenly reached out, took hold of Will Lightbody by the lips and forced his fingers into his mouth like a horse trader. 'Yes, yes, say <ah> … the coated tongue. I knew it. As severe a case of autointoxication as I've ever seen.'" (40). Here, the superficiality of his diagnosis and the telltale comparison with a horse trader betray that what Dr. Kellogg engages in is no well-considered medical treatment but a capitalist transaction, and the centrality of this scene is confirmed by the fact that it is referred to three times. Will recalls the Doctor's "cursory but terrifying examination" and thinks back with a shudder that "the great man had stuck his fingers in [his] mouth" (53). Later he complains to his wife that "I've been subjected to all kinds of indignities, […] your Dr. Kellogg sticking his fingers in my mouth" (94). And even after several months he still remembers "the night he'd arrived and Dr. Kellogg had inspected his tongue as if he were a horse going to stud" (399).

The second motif concerns the gradually developing insight that "the doctor's pseudoscientific therapies reduce his patients to a object dependency" (Cryer 1993, n.p.). When upon his arrival Will is dumped in a wheelchair and trundled to his room, he "realized that he'd gone from an old man to an infant in that moment" (56) and that he "wanted to be undressed and put to bed like the antediluvian infant he'd become" (57). Later, Nurse Graves tells the sick man who has not been able to sleep for weeks, that "already you're nodding off like a baby" (109). It is Homer Praetz who sees through the Doctor's strategy when he explains to Will: "Dr. Kellogg likes to humble you, take you right back to the beginning till you're nothing than a squalling little red-faced baby clawing for the teat … I suppose it's some sort of psychological effect he's after" (215-216). And toward the end, the increasingly disillusioned Will realizes that "Homer Praetz had been right: it was the Doctor's method to reduce you to dependency, to a second infancy, and if you wanted to get out of diapers you had to put up with his spoon-feeding, with his grapes and sinusoidal currents and his eternal glasses of milk, not to mention his asinine lectures and the rigid segregation of lawfully married couples" (312-313).

These two strategies push the readers towards sharing both David Louis Edelman's judgment that "under Boyle's razor-sharp pen, Kellogg is reduced to a shallow, self-serving hypocrite who is more out to promote his dubious brand of morality than heal the sick" (Edelmann 1993, n.p.), and Kevin Nance's verdict that "egomaniacal arch capitalist, puritanical quack, fanatical vegetarian, Kellogg towers over this savagely funny novel like some American colossus, so gorged on his own rectitude that his worst abuses are committed without a twinge of doubt" (Nance 1993, n.p.). But the Doctor's ultimate unmasking occurs during his final fight with George, the "avatar of filth and degeneracy" (35) and living proof that his educational methods have failed. When around Christmas administrative problems pile up, the self-assured Dr. Kellogg is suddenly "in a funk" (168), and his believability begins to crumble when he exposes his patients to the supposedly wholesome air of the Michigan winter and himself takes a secret vacation in Florida. It is only during the showdown with George, however, that "the very avatar of geniality and good sense" (6) reveals his hidden self and that the man of whom it is earlier said that he can become violent when he meets resistance
undergoes a frightening change. During his heated pursuit of the hated George the benevolent healer regresses into "one crazed beast of the jungle mauling another" (455), hunts down his adopted son and drowns him. Only briefly is he assailed by self-doubts – "just maybe I've been wrong, maybe my entire life has been a sham" (459) – but then he knows that "he was no ordinary man. He was a man with a mission" (459), and justifies his brutal murder by thinking: "George was an experiment that hadn't worked, and there was no shame in that, not to a man of science" (462).

The novel's ending unmasks the fictional Dr. Kellogg's self-presentation as "a veritable saint" (37) as nothing but mendacious role-play, reveals Nurse Graves' adulation of her boss as "a god, my god" (208) as a deplorable delusion, and confirms Will's enraged condemnation of the self-styled healer as "a fraud and a […] murderer" (223) as correct. It also shows that despite his knowledgeable integration of sundry historical details into his fictional Dr. Kellogg, Boyle takes the poetic liberty of transforming the "humanitarian" (424) do-gooder into an instinct-driven murderer and thereby creates a curiously contradictory character who suits his satirical intentions but remains a figure whose rudimentary inner life and curious mix of incompatible traits prevent him from growing into a fully rounded and therefore believable character.

Will Lightbody

Will, about whom Boyle said that he is "the hero of the book and has a kinship with Tom Crane from World's End" (qtd. in Whippet 1993), is first seen through Charlie's eyes as a "cadaverous-looking" (17) "thirty-year-old schoolboy […] ready for the grave" (18), and he arrives at the San as an emaciated invalid staggering "like a blind man, like an ambulatory corpse" (74). Dr. Kellogg diagnoses him as "a very sick man" (112) and prescribes non-toxic diets and constant enemas, separation from his wife, and abstention from sexual activity. During his stay Will alternately falls in love with his attractive nurse and tries in vain to sleep with his wife. When he discovers his sudden impotence, he pities himself as "an inmate forever, an invalid, not a man but a eunuch, a castrato, a stud put out to pasture" (161), and Dr. Kellogg considers him a "great gangling sack of self-abuse and adolescent lusts" (195). After the shock of Homer Praetz' accidental electrocution in the sinusoidal bath, Will revolts by going to a pub for a hamburger with beer and whiskey, and when Charlie meets him there, he finds a deeply perturbed and incoherent man who looks "haunted, juiceless, withered like last year's apple gone dry in the cellar" (222). After his relapse, Will, who now considers Kellogg's methods mere "quackery" (242), is scolded by his wife and condemned by the Doctor as "recalcitrant and backsliding" (270). Things get worse when he and Charlie drink whiskey on the San premises and he is sentenced to stay in his room and undergo an operation. The listless Will neither dares to take the Doctor to task for Homer Praetz' death nor to rebel against his wife's plans, and shifting from one diet to another, he remains a passive drifter who has "learned not to complain, learned to fake recovery" (310).

Irresolutely oscillating between being in love with his wife and lusting after Nurse Graves, and worrying about his impotence, Will finally braces himself up for a decision and despite his frightful experiences with patent medicines orders a Heidelberg Belt.
from Sears Roebuck to help him regain his potency. When he learns about his wife's new treatment outside the San, he secretly trails her to her new doctor's house and decides to no longer remain passive: "If he'd ever come to hope that the little white-clad dictator's methods were worth anything at all, the loss of his kink, the estrangement of Eleanor and the unequivocal fate of Miss Muntz, Homer Praetz and the Doctor's own sweating amanuensis were enough to tip the balance permanently" (394). And when he learns from Dr. Kellogg that his wife has her womb manipulated by a certain Dr. Spitzvogel, he finally determines to confront her. Most readers will think that this outrageous therapy sprang from Boyle's imagination, but again that is not the case, and the fictional Teutonic therapist with his training at the non-existing "Universität of Schleswig-Holstein" (346) is embedded in a historical context:

Typical of the turn-of-the-century new therapies was Movement Therapy. This held that the body need merely be jiggled to run right again, much as one deals with a recalcitrant wristwatch. What we might call the Movement movement began in Germany, but quickly spread to the U.S. […] The greatest success of Movement Therapy, however, appears to have been with women. For example, breast therapy, using movement by the hands, seemed to help many. Even more effective was manipulation of the womb, including prolonged movement of the female genitalia. The German theorists of Movement found this very helpful in cases of headache and indigestion. But they were never able to explain why. (Deutsch 1977, 92)

When Will tells Eleanor that he has enough and will take her home, he is furiously rejected: "You think you own me?" (402) Since by now he has "lost his volition, his spine, his basic human right to control his own body and its functions" (427), he decides that he is "through with Eleanor" (403) and plans to get a divorce and propose to Nurse Graves. But when she informs him about her upcoming marriage, he realizes "that he loved Eleanor more than anything in the world" (411) and buys a train ticket home, knowing that "he wasn't going anywhere unless Eleanor was going with him" (427). Grimly and with a sudden "surge of hatred" (431) he follows her on her bird-watching excursion and suddenly knows that "he was going to do something, something decisive and final, something dramatic, and there was no turning back now" (432). He finds his wife and another woman in the woods, stretched out on a blanket, naked and moaning, with Dr. Spielvogel manipulating their genitalia and Lionel Badger, the pompous and entirely fictional "President of the Vegetarian Society of America" (386), looking on and masturbating. In what David Lipsky rightly calls "a scene that may make feminists bluster and reasonably educated psychology students grin" (Lipsky 1993, n.p.), Will mutates from a passive drifter into an active avenger. Wrathfully descending on the culprits, he hits Badger in the groin and Spielvogel in the head, grabs his wife, orders her to get dressed, finding "himself growing hard as he watched her" (434), tells her to be silent when she tries to explain, and walks her to the station. During that long walk he ponders "the primal scene, stark in its animality and horror" (452) and suddenly knows "exactly who he was and where he was going and why" (452). And while he and his now obedient wife are sitting on a bench in the station, waiting for the train to bring them home, he gratefully feels another erection.
Like Dr. Kellogg, for most of the story Will Lightbody is one person and then suddenly becomes another. The readers get to know him as a rich idler without self-confidence who allows his wife to betray and almost kill him with dangerous patent medicines. He uncomplainingly submits to Dr. Kellogg's questionable therapies, lives for weeks on "psyllium seeds and hijiki" (117) and diets of milk and grapes, agrees to a superfluous operation, observes the deaths of Homer Praetz and Miss Muntz without taking appropriate steps, and passively bears his wife's changing moods. Like an infatuated adolescent he fluctuates between love for his wife and for his nurse, is worried about his passing impotence, and shows no initiative whatsoever. But finally the hen-pecked husband and easily manipulated patient mutates into a strong-willed dominant male, saves his crumbling marriage and regains his potency by heroically rescuing his suddenly submissive wife and taking her away from all temptations into an idyllic home where, as the coda informs the readers, they will live happily ever after.

Craig Seligman hit the nail on the head when he ironically observed in his review that "in the end [Boyle] frames the case in startlingly Victorian terms: to recover his manhood, Will has to banish the influence of Kellogg, vanquish the womb manipulator, and establish his dominance over his wife. Boyle has never sounded like a troglodyte before [...]. But this novel will make ideal reading matter for Republican bedsides" (Seligman 1993, 44).

**Eleanor Lightbody**

Will's good-looking and self-assured wife Eleanor is "twenty-eight years of age" (39), and her "stunning" (18) features are her mocking eyes that are variously described as "hard green nuggets" (94), "the flashing iridescent green of a pair of hovering dragonflies" (95) or "bright green leeches" (324). Her "regal" and "unabashed" (188) demeanor and her "flawless complexion" (336) make her proud husband think of her as an "elegant showpiece" (286) but have the opposite effect on Charlie who feels that her condescending glances are "mocking him" (134) and signaling that she belongs to a different "class" (234). Eleanor's stay at the San is already her third visit, and she calls herself "one of those 'Battle Freaks' you read of in the papers" (22). She first leaves for the San when her ailing husband begins to drink, and she comes home "preaching a new religion of vegetarianism and 'scientific eating'" (27). When she becomes pregnant, she goes again to the San to have the baby there, and when it dies after its birth, she visits Battle Creek for a third time and now drags her sick husband along. She calls herself a "classic neurasthenic" (232) and insists that it is her nervous disorder that brings her back to Dr. Kellogg, but since "her father had spoiled her shamelessly" and she has "done exactly as she'd pleased ever since Will had known her" (160), it soon becomes clear that she prefers the society of the San to the quiet life in Peterskill. Thus, she complains to Dr. Linniman that "it's just about impossible to eat scientifically in Peterskill, New York" (54), and "the way she pronounced the name of her hometown, she might just as well have been describing some huddle of huts in the Congo" (54). Later she tells Charlie that Peterskill is "the dreariest town on earth" (232) and rejects Will's entreaties to come home with him because "she couldn't bear the idea of going back to Peterskill after the excitement of the San" (344), which she calls "the only place
where I think I'm truly happy anymore" (95) and where she enjoys being "a success" (154).

Eleanor's relationship with her husband is strained and volatile. As a result of Dr. Kellogg's ideas about the dangers of sexuality they are put up in separate rooms and made to dine at separate tables. Although the ailing Will feels like a lost stranger and his wife greatly enjoys herself, their relationship improves, and she even pays him a visit in his room and gives him "a prolonged and very promising kiss" (145). When later Will makes sexual advances, she is not only willing to sleep with him but even implores him to "give me a daughter" (157). But their love play is interrupted by Nurse Grave bringing Will his milk, and after she has left Will finds himself impotent and slinks away in self-disgust. At a later occasion, he once more implores her to sleep with him and tells her that now he is ready, but she coldly points out that "marital relations are strictly forbidden here" (213). After Will's disastrous drinking spree in the Red Onion, Eleanor asks Charlie "how could she be happy with a man like that?" (237) and confesses that she is "depressed [...] low and defeated" (236), but does not believe in divorce. Will, on the other hand, laments "Eleanor's descent into the morass of vegetarianism, neurasthenia, frigidity and quackery" (240). Their estrangement grows when she does not believe her shocked husband's story about Homer Praetz' electrocution, and while he desperately wishes to leave the San, she wants to stay "another three months at least" (285). Despite her prudishness she gradually drifts towards the sexual libertinage of Freikörperkultur, eventually consents to be treated by Doctor Spielvogel, and experiences her first orgasm. When Dr. Kellogg criticizes her behavior she shows "passion," "shame" and "defiance" (391), and when a shattered Will learns that his wife has her womb manipulated and demands an explanation, she hits him, hysterically cries "You think you own me? You think you're my lord and master?" (401), and screams for help. In reaction to this dramatic rebuke, Will follows her into the forest, and in the crucial scene of her rescue from Badger and Spielvogel he sees "something in her eyes he'd never seen there before: fear" (433), and she confesses that "I'm so ashamed" (434). When they are sitting at the station, wordlessly waiting for their train home, she realizes "that she'd gone too far, over the edge, way beyond the bounds of reason and propriety; seeking health, she'd found disease and corruption" (453). Thus, like Dr. Kellogg and Will, Eleanor also undergoes a crucial change at the novel's end.

**Charles Ossining**

Charlie, who is "twenty-four, twenty-five, maybe" (76), enters the scene travelling to Battle Creek in the dining car of the Twentieth Century Limited and enjoying a rich multi-course dinner. He introduces himself to the Lightbodys, who turn out to come from the same place as himself, Peterskill in Westchester County, with an impressive business card as President-in-Chief of "The Per-Fo Co., Inc. of Battle Creek. The 'Perfect Food,' Predigested. Peptonized and Celery-Impregnated. Perks Up Tired Blood and Exonerates the Bowels" (23). Once again, these fanciful details were not invented by Boyle. In Battle Creek there really lived a man named W. H. Hamilton who "sold
out his grocery store to put his money into Per-Fo, a coined name meant to suggest Perfect Food" (Carson 1957, 181); and in 1902 a few miles out of town a cornflakes product called Tryabita was manufactured which was advertised as "peptonized and celery impregnated" (Carson 1957, 183). Charlie has teamed up with a man programmatically named Goodloe Bender (bending the good law) awaiting him in Battle Creek, and they plan to start a cornflakes factory, certain that "in six months they'd be millionaires" (24). Although Charlie tries to behave like a man of the world, he has "never been west of the Jersey Palisades" (21) and he only has "eight hundred forty-nine dollars cash" (24) and a check "in the amount of three thousand dollars" (24) from Mrs. Hookstratten. At the station, where crooks try to sell fraudulent stocks in cornflakes companies, the inexperienced fortune hunter trying to cash in on the cornflake craze is met by a boy sent by Bender, and with him he must walk for twenty blocks in icy winter weather to a cheap rooming house where he is put up. On their way they pass "the White City […] the home of Postum and Grape-Nuts, the hub of C. W. Post's empire [which] had been named after the glorious 'White City' of the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition" (79). Here, Boyle again integrates his fictional character into a historical context:

Within less than a decade the Postum plant became a spectacular 'White City' of wooden factory buildings painted white with green trim, recalling to thousands happy memories of their visit to the 'White City' of the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in '93. Post gathered up all the yeasty forces which had been working in Battle Creek for a generation, some elements of religion, aspects of vegetarianism, Right Living, Hydropathy and Christian Science, dropped overboard the altruism and turned the health crusade into an attractive businessman's risk. (Carson 1957, 157)

Charlie, for whom the 'White City' serves as "an inspiration" (80), then walks back to the luxurious Post Tavern Hotel, which turns out to be yet another historical place. Built by C. W. Post, it opened in January 1901 and was advertised as the finest hotel between Detroit and Chicago, with electric lights, private telephones, private baths, and an English style pub. This is where Bender resides and where Charlie is made to wait until his partner finds time to receive him in his suite. That he puts up with this condescending treatment, accepts Bender's explanation that he needs to build up a rich front to attract investors, obediently puts his money and the check into the hotel safe, and is even proud of having "this dynamo, this titan, this earthshaking figure of a man [as] his partner" (86) shows his inexperience and gullibility and bodes ill for his venture. Later this is symbolically reinforced when he cannot sleep on his uncomfortable mattress, cuts it open, and finds it filled with shares of cornflake companies gone bankrupt.

Charlie, the insecure greenhorn, tries to convince himself that "he was cold and cynical and ruthless and calculating, a tycoon in the making who was born to fleece the rich" (126). He visits the ruins of the Malta-Vita plant, and once more Boyle makes use of a historical fact, because "the first important commercial exploitation of flaked breakfast foods was launched by the Battle Creek Pure Food Company which made Malta Vita. Malta Vita was a wheat flake sweetened by the addition of barley malt syrup, [but it] disappeared from the scene as swiftly as it had risen, a memorial to the
dangers of absentee ownership and shortsighted policies" (Carson 1957, 176-177). The speed with which cornflakes brands rise and disappear makes Charlie ask himself "If so many had come before them and failed, what chance did they have?" (131), and when he cannot find Bender he is haunted by further doubts: "Bender was a confidence man, that was all, and he'd reeled in Charlie like a fish" (139). But then he finally meets him in The Red Onion, a restaurant across from the San, which shows the slogan "Tired of Bran & Sprouts? Try Our Famous Steaks, Chops & Fries & Our Detroit Special Hamburger Sandwich" (140). Here, Boyle is once more historically accurate because "across the street from the 'San' was a shanty restaurant called the Red Onion. It was conducted by a sinner, William Gammanthaler, who specialized in steaks and chops with French fries on the side and steaming cups of strong, hot coffee. The clientele included the patients who couldn't take the nut-butter regimen any longer" (Carson 1957, 235).

Bender has struck up a deal with Kellogg's drunken son George to lend his famous family name to the new venture, but when he, Charlie, and a cleaned-up George approach Dr. Kellogg and suggest that they will spare him the embarrassment of his son's betrayal if he buys them out, Kellogg has them forcefully removed and starts a pair of lawsuits for trademark infringement. Thus, another scheme fails, Charlie's cornflakes factory is still only a dream, and six weeks after his arrival in Battle Creek, "they seemed no closer to their goal than they had the first day" (221). Some days later, Charlie visits The Red Onion again and there meets the desperate Will who, after Homer Praetz' electrocution, has fled the San and is treating himself to everything forbidden by Kellogg. The drunken Will complains incoherently about the Doctor's murderous therapies and Charlie grabs the chance of having the disconsolate man write him a check for $1,000 as an investment in Per-Fo. When he discovers that Will forgot to sign the check, he walks to the San, where he dines with Eleanor on Kellogg's unpalatable food, hates her riches and pretensions, but "ris[es] to his station like the magnate he was destined to become" (231), spews "platitudes and bromides" (237), and craftily lies about his project. Later he sneaks into Will's room and has his check signed before Kellogg discovers them and has him thrown out. By January, Bender has found a dilapidated factory where they start working with corn they have stolen from Will Kellogg, and Charlie writes glowing letters "describing the immaculate new Per-Fo factory headquarters" with "an entirely fictitious list of prominent investors" (255) to Mrs. Hookstratten, who promises an additional investment. Charlie and Bender finally produce 27 variants of their new product, but discover in a "taste test" (260) that all of them are inedible. "In the end, the hogs got the whole lot [...], and the saddest thing was, even they wouldn't eat it" (261). It is only at this low point of his career that the readers get to know about Charlie's past.

Coming from poor "Irish-immigrant parents" (262), Charlie is adopted by the rich widow Hookstratten and sent to prestigious schools but rejects all the advantages he is offered and, too lazy to learn, falls for a patent medicine which advertizes "memory restorative tablets" (264). Having spent a lot of money on these pills and taken growing numbers of them without effect, he understands "that he'd been taken" (264) and has an insight that changes his life. He leaves school and earns "an uncertain living at cards,
dice and pool" (265). Growing "impatient with his two-bit hustles" (265), he meets Bender and dedicates his life to inventing a product like the memory tablets, with which to make the step from deceived to deceiver, from sucker to hustler: "he had a goal and a vision – because he had Per-Fo" (265).

After their failure to make marketable cornflakes, Bender suggests that they steal enough flakes for a first batch of boxes from a Will Kellogg shipment, convinces Charlie that advertising is the way to success, and leaves on an alleged business trip. By March, Charlie is "beating the pavement sandwiched between two stiff new sheets of plywood" (322) that advertise Per-Fo and "feeling like an idiot" (322). In early April, he runs into Eleanor, whose ironical comments make him feel "foolish" and "deluded" (324), but when Bender sends letters about orders flowing in, he has "an epiphany of sorts" (325) and feels sure that now success is just around the corner. In May, Bender returns and produces lots of advance orders, and Charlie's "months of doubt and frustration" end in "a night of redemption, promise, hope, vindication" (326). But then a letter from Mrs. Hookstratten announces her imminent arrival in Battle Creek and her urgent wish to inspect Charlie's factory, and Charlie's life is "demolished" (327). He goes to the Post Tavern Hotel to talk the new situation over with Bender and is informed that Bender has disappeared with his substantial hotel account left unsettled and now shifted to him, and he is handed a note from Bender that reads:

Charlie, you will know by this that i am gone & that there is no reason to look to the per-fo account at the old national & merchants – consider it my fee in your education. with all regrets and best wishes, yours, good. (332)

Since all of Bender's debtors now pursue Charlie, the would-be tycoon has turned into a wanted criminal. When he sneaks into the station to meet Mrs. Hookstratten, for him the big – and authentic – sign "Better Yourself in Battle Creek," which some months ago had "reared like prophecy against the sky" (34) to Will, has turned into "some sadistic joke" (334). But he has decided that "there was no going back now" (364). Handing his benefactress "utterly worthless, Per-Fo stock certificates" (364) and "the last remaining box of Per-Fo in the world" (364), the greedy opportunist without any sense of ethics abandons his loyalty towards her and decides that he will go on pretending and try to get more money out of her:

He was thinking himself of money at the moment, wondering if he could somehow manage to hold off the stroke of doom long enough to get more of it out of her – love, gratitude and the Eighth Commandment notwithstanding. If Bender had taught him anything, it was this: never let mere scruples stand in your way. Bender had taken something soft in Charlie, something weak and yielding, something human, and held it over the torch of his cynicism till it blackened and shrank and grew hard as an ingot. (365)

With Mrs. Hookstratten safely checked into the San, Charlie, having grown side-whiskers and a moustache and wearing dark spectacles, finds "himself a room" (372) on the outskirts of town, and uses "all his skills as an apprentice confidence man and professional dissembler" (373) to explain to his increasingly impatient benefactress why her visit to his non-existent factory must be postponed. Having learnt about someone who works in the new Push plant, Charlie invests Will's money in an
outrageous plan. For two hours on a Sunday evening the Push factory is changed into
the Per-Fo headquarters, and the tour of the facilities goes well until Mrs. Hookstratten
discovers that Charlie's chief office does not have the mahogany furniture he bragged
about in his letters. He can even lie himself out of this predicament triggered by a
ludicrous detail, but on leaving the plant they are accosted by a stinking bum who
introduces himself as George Kellogg and asks Mrs. Hookstratten whether she has "any
spare change" (377). Charlie manages to explain this encounter to Mrs. Hookstratten's
satisfaction, and on Decoration Day she arranges a festive luncheon for him in the San,
at which she will present him with "an additional seven thousand five hundred dollars"
(413) for his venture. Charlie is haunted by a growing fear that something is wrong but
tells himself that his benefactress will never hurt him because "he was her project, her
great experiment" (415). There is an ill-boding interruption when Eleanor accuses him
of having taken advantage of her husband in his weak moment and insinuates that Per-
Fo is "an imaginary company? A sham, a fraud, an illusion?" (418), and then Dr.
Kellogg marches in and reveals that the festivity was a set-up, that Charlie is "a fraud
and criminal of the very worst stripe" (422), and that his accomplice Bender has been
caught in Detroit. Charlie is arrested, but on his way to the prison an accident allows
him to run away and he hides in the ruins of the very factory in which he has tried to
make his first cornflakes. Musing about his abortive career, he thinks about Mrs.
Hookstratten's behavior and "the look on her face as she betrayed him, washed her
hands of him, led him off to the chopping block as if there were nothing between them,
as if all those years and all they'd shared amounted to nothing more than a bad memory"
(441). In his hideout he meets George who is getting drunk on bottles of Lydia E.
Pinkham's Compound, and when he starts drinking the high-proof patent medicine he
has an idea:

\[ \text{Per-To}, \text{ he said to himself, and he said it aloud. The Perfect Tonic. Celery-impregnated,} \]
\[ \text{of course. He wondered if he could call it } "\text{peptonized}," \text{ too, wondered briefly what} \]
\[ \text{"peptonized" even meant, and then dismissed it. Well, all right, maybe it wasn't} \]
\[ \text{peptonized – he'd come up with something else, something even better. It still Made} \]
\[ \text{Active Blood, didn't it? And why settle for thirty proof when it could be sixty – hell,} \]
\[ \text{eighty? Per-To. He liked the sound of it – it was catchy, unique. Almost irresistible. (447)} \]

Thus, at the lowest point of his career as a businessman, Charlie's decisive idea is born,
and in the "Coda" the readers will learn whether Per-To will be more successful than
Per-Fo.

Dr. Kellogg, who is a trained judge of character, identifies Charlie at first glance as an
"apprentice confidence man" (171), whereas the befuddled Will misapprehends him
as a "razor-sharp entrepreneur" (360). Charlie's behavior shows that initially he is a
naive impostor who is still learning from Bender how to cheat people and to "never let
mere scruples stand in [his] way" (365) or, as W. C. Fields would later famously say
"Never give a sucker an even break." He seems to fit the role of the novel's villain, and
thus it comes as a surprise when Jane Smiley says in her review that "at first, it seems
as though the hero of \textit{The Road to Wellville} might be Charlie Ossining," and
characterizes him as "a well-meaning young entrepreneur," whose "sufferings for the
sake of his fortune are to be significant" (Smiley 1993, n.p.). Kevin Nance goes even further when he observes that "if any of the characters earns Boyle's (and our) affection, it's Ossining, whose moral slide from innocent greed (is there such a thing?) to parasitic hustling is all too easy to empathize with. His temptation is ours; so is his terror at being caught red handed, and his elation at his miraculous rescue and subsequent transfiguration. We don't approve of him, but we know him, and he is us" (Nance 1993, n.p.). That these two reviewers saw Charlie, who ruthlessly pursues his personal American Dream by criminal means, as the novel's potential 'hero' and even as an object of the readers' affection is less surprising when seen in the context of Boyle's world view, which also helps to explain the glaring contradictions in his portraits of Dr. Kellogg and the two Lightbodys.

**God or Darwin?**

The title of Boyle's first short-story collection, *Descent of Man* (1979), refers to Charles Darwin's major work *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), that of his seventh collection, *Tooth and Claw* (2005), once again points to his interest in such concerns as sexual selection and competition for survival, and such individual stories as "Descent of Man" or "Dogology" expressly deal with specific Darwinian topics like cross-species sexual competition and hybridities (see Merola 2014). In 1993, Jane Smiley quoted Boyle as having said "I've always written about man as an animal species among other animals, competing for limited resources," and in 2003 he said to Robert Birnbaum that *The Tortilla Curtain* "is about illegal immigration on the surface but the subtext is about the environment and our overpopulation and our being animals in nature." In 2011, he told Sophie Elmhirst on the occasion of the publication of *When the Killing's Done* that "I've always been writing about Charles Darwin and our relation to the environment." Two years later he said to Anne-Catherine Simon: "Kein Umweltexperte erlaubt uns nur einen Funken Hoffnung für unsere Spezies. Wir haben keinen Gott, wir haben Darwin. Und das ist eine extrem trostlose Welt, um darin zu leben ('No environmental expert allows us even a glimmer of hope for our species. We have no god, we have Darwin. And that is an extremely dismal world to live in')."

And in the same year he confessed to Thomas Winkler: "Aber ich kann an keinen Gott glauben, alles was mir bleibt, ist Darwin und das gleichgültige Universum. Der einzige Sinn des Lebens, der meiner Meinung nach Sinn ergibt, ist, sich fortzupflanzen ('But I can believe in no god, all that is left to me is Darwin and the indifferent universe. The only meaning of life which makes sense to me is to procreate')."

In *The Road to Wellville* it is Will who expresses a central Darwinian concept in an easily overlooked brief scene. Waiting to be medically examined after his arrival to the San, he realizes that he has an erection, feels extremely "randy" (102), and muses: "It was downright Darwinian. Deny him his daughter and the hoary voices of his ancestors cry out in priapic urgency; threaten him with extinction, with a childless grave, and he goes stiff in his pants at the mere sight of a woman" (102). When the embarrassed Will later confesses to the Doctor that, being "a slave to the baser appetites" (194), he had wanted to sleep with his wife but found that he was suddenly impotent, Dr. Kellogg gives him short shrift and thinks that it is Will's own responsibility to "control [his]
animal urges" (196). But at the end, the so far always restrained and well-behaved Will gives in to these very urges and, in a "primal scene, stark in its animality and horror" (452), mutates into an aggressively violent male protecting his female spouse and saves Eleanor from the machinations of Dr. Spielvogel and Lionel Badger. All of these scenes confirm that Boyle's world is governed by the law of the survival of the fittest and that in borderline situations his characters abandon their attempts at rational self-improvement and regress to their basic animal nature.

According to Dr. Kellogg, humans not only have to keep their sexual instincts under control, which in his view is best achieved through complete self-denial, but they also need to learn how to deal with their 'civilized' and no longer freely functioning bowels. It is this aspect of man's animal nature which the Doctor is obsessed with, which therefore governs life in the San, and which explains why the novel's dark humor is mostly scatological. Dr. Kellogg's obsession derives from "one of his greatest discoveries" (63) made when he observed "a troop of apes" (62) in Africa freely defecating whenever they felt like it and inferred that many human problems derive from "man ha[ving] civilized his bowel" (63) and relieving himself only at appropriate moments. He wants to mitigate these problems not only with his new kinds of healthy food but also with such techniques as colon washes and enemas, and it is no accident that immediately after the Doctor has reminded Will that he is responsible for controlling his urges he sets out to capture the runaway chimpanzee Lillian and finds to his disgust that she has "loosed her bowels" in "the great cast-iron vat of macadamia butter" (197), thereby ruining a new and very costly project of his. In Boyle's carefully constructed plot, the Doctor's search for Lillian who, when he finally finds the grinning ape, revealingly "looked just like George" (197), prefigures the climactic confrontation with his adopted son, which most clearly depicts Boyle's conviction that in crucial situations the thin veneer of civilization crumbles and even educated humans regress to animal behavior. This time the Doctor does not pursue a chimpanzee but a human being who is the very embodiment of regression, and this time it is not an ape who defecates into the valuable nut butter but a man who breaks into the laboratory with the patients' stool samples and is "throwing shit" (457) at the doctor. And this time even the rational and self-controlled Dr. Kellogg turns from a "healer, [...] doctor, [...] man of mercy" into a "crazed beast of the jungle" (455), utters "a war cry, stark, terrible, stripped to the bone" (455), and savagely fights against the ape Lillian, the wolf Fauna and his adopted son George, whom he murders after a mad pursuit. In this concluding scene, Dr. Kellogg's ambitious attempts to create a reason-based civilization vie with the violence of his instinct-governed animality, and that the latter wins shows Boyle's dark and fatalistic world view.

In terms of economic competition, Boyle's conception of human beings means that everybody must decide whether to become deceiver or deceived, victimizer or victim, swindler or sucker, and that is exactly what Charlie does. Having been cheated by the vendor of useless memory pills, he realizes that he has been the victim of "a sham, a hoax, a confidence game" (264), and this life-changing insight makes him concentrate on finding the vulnerability of others and on mutating from betrayed to betrayer. With his decision to henceforth make the gullibility of his fellow men the basis of his
personal success, he adopts the Darwinian stance of eat or be eaten and thereby fits into the climate of the Progressive Era with its unhindered belief in individual progress and competition and the possibility of a steady improvement of life by scientific advances. On principle, then, Charlie's scheme does not differ from that of Dr. Kellogg, who is also a coolly calculating capitalist and thrives on the gullibility of his patients, runs his sanitarium as a money-making venture, and even risks their death by employing fashionable electrical machinery and using such new and unproven materials as radium. Both Charlie and Kellogg have a detached and instrumental view of their fellow humans, and this becomes frighteningly obvious when the Doctor, after having murdered his adopted son, coolly thinks "George was an experiment that hadn't worked, and there was no shame in that, not to a man of science" (462), and when Ossining thinks that Mrs. Hookstratten would never hurt him because "he was her project, her great experiment" (415). Interestingly enough, Charlie's social Darwinism is less reckless than the Doctor's, since when he talks with Will about President Theodore Roosevelt's demand for a "strenuous life" that combines education and physical strength, he refers to the law of club and fang in Jack London's naturalistic novels and says that "this whole rugged individualist business is just a bit much for me, Jack London and all that" (248).

Many of the nutritional fads of the turn of the century had religious roots. Sylvester Graham, the "Peristaltic Persuader" (Carson 1957, 50) immortalized in the Graham Crackers, was an evangelical preacher; different vegetarian groups traced their convictions to the Bible; and Dr. Kellogg's San was founded in 1866 as the Western Reform Health Institute by the Seventh Day Adventists, who were convinced vegetarians and followed literally the Old Testament injunction: "Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed [...] to you it shall be for meat" (Genesis 1: 29). Both Carson and Deutsch have shown that many cranks and criminals jumped on the bandwagon of the food craze and that holiness and hucksterism formed curious alliances. It is this aspect which Boyle artfully integrates into his novel when he characterizes Charlie's experiences with a special type of exaggerated imagery which appears nowhere else in the novel. Thus, when he and the Lightbodys recognize that they all come from Peterskill and know Mrs. Hookstratten, "the heavens opened; trumpets blew" (25); when Bender tells him that they will be able to add Kellogg's name to their Per-Fo, "worlds collided, ships went down in the time it took Bender to flick the ash from his cigar" (142); and when he learns that Bender has disappeared leaving his bills unpaid, "mountains were toppling into the sea, lava erupting all around him" (332). More importantly, however, Boyle subversively describes Charlie's development in religious terms and ironically characterizes his moral decline as if it were a process of religious conversion. Upon his arrival in Battle Creek, the big sign in the railroad station appears to the naïve tycoon-to-be "like prophecy against the sky" (34). When after many setbacks his success seems finally possible, he has "an epiphany of sorts" (325), and after Bender's successful return, he experiences "a night of redemption" (326). When, after some hesitation, he finally makes up his mind to pursue his con game, he experiences "his baptism" and "his trial by fire" (364), and with his continued lies to Mrs. Hookstratten he tries to "hold off the stroke of doom" (365). And when after
his exposure he starts drinking the high-proof patent medicine in his hiding place, "he experienced a moment of grace" (447, my emphasis).

**Patent Medicine and Charlatantry**

At the time of the novel's action, Dr. Kellogg's Battle Creek Sanitarium was not the only place where people's new fascination with health and longevity found its expression. The momentous movement towards innovative foodways and new medical treatments in turn-of-the-century America was "a reaction against gluttony, against the frontier's 'hog and hominy,' against the frying pan; against drunkenness and against an orthodox medical practice which relied upon bloodletting and ipecac" (Carson 1957, 26). Due to an excessive and fat-laden diet and a hasty mode of eating known as 'gobble, gulp and go,' ever more Americans suffered from intestinal and gastric disorders, and 'dyspepsia,' which a cookbook writer even rechristened "Americanitis" (Carson 1957, 41, 100), was a standard diagnosis. Thus, the replacement of a heavily meat-based diet by 'scientific' eating seemed overdue, vegetarians who had long fought against meat with Biblical arguments enjoyed a growing clientele, politicians became interested in 'pure food,' and vegetarian food in the form of ready-made cereals promised an ideal solution, since it provided housewives not only with healthy nourishment but also with a shorter kitchen workday. Regarding business chances, a stream of would-be entrepreneurs followed Russell Conwell's famous injunction that it was a sin to be poor when it was so easy to get rich and invested in cereals. "By 1911 there were 108 brands of corn flakes alone being packed in Battle Creek" (Carson 1957, 4), and the small city in Michigan in which the Adventists had founded their Western Health Reform Institute had become nationally known as 'the Biggest Little City in the U.S.A., Cereal Bowl of the World, Foodtown' (Carson 1957, 73).

As expected, the craze for a healthier life encouraged a lot of swindlers to offer a broad range of 'healing' gadgets, and it is in relation to both Charlie's career as a con-man and Will's search for a cure that Boyle introduces an important chain of references to the patent medicines which in the early stages of consumerism and mass-marketing around 1900 a new industry began to sell as panaceas promising to heal every known disease and promoted with aggressive and often fraudulent advertising and sales techniques that made "the patent-medicine pitchmen [...] probably the biggest group of national advertisers at the time" (Deutsch 1977, 103). As a schoolboy, Charlie falls for a patent medicine which is advertised as follows in *Scribner's*:

BE BRILLIANT AND EMINENT! Brainworkers. Everybody! The new physiological discovery -- MEMORY RESTORATIVE TABLETS quickly and permanently increase the memory two to tenfold and greatly augment intellectual power; difficult studies, etc., easily mastered; truly marvelous, highly endorsed. Price, $1.00 post-paid. Send for circular. MEMORY TABLET CO. 114 Fifth Ave, New York. (264)

Having spent a lot of money on these fake pills and taken growing numbers of them without effect, Charlie realizes "that he'd been taken" (264) and has a sudden insight that changes his life: "He'd been sucked in because he was vulnerable, because he had a need, a weakness, the gull's hope" (264). Consequently, he gives up school and
dedicates himself to inventing a product like the memory pills, with which to make the step from deceived to deceiver – "he had a goal and a vision – because he had Per-Fo" (265). With that product, however, he fails, but on his flight from the police he meets George and they get drunk on a famous patent medicine, "Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound. A Sure Cure for Prolapsis Uteri and all Female Weaknesses. Contains 15 Percent Alcohol. This Is Added Solely as a Solvent and Preservative" (446-447). This herbal-alcoholic medicinal product invented and successfully marketed by Lydia Estes Pinkham (1819-1883) was a "women's tonic" meant to relieve menstrual and menopausal pains, and it contained pleurisy root, life root, fenugreek, unicorn root, and black cohosh solved in drinking alcohol. Although health experts regarded it as quackery, it sold extremely well, and the company continued under family control until the 1930s. Drinking it solely for the effect of its alcohol, Charlie has finally found his product. He will replace the abortive Per(fect) Fo(od) by the "instant success" (469) of Per(fect) To(nic), which has

an attractive and eye-appealing label of shiny embossed silver-and-gold paper, it was celery-impregnated, it made active blood, sturdy legs and sound lungs, and it was a specific for pleurisy, heart ailments, diphtheria, the flu, general weakness, men's troubles, women's troubles and rectal itch. Charlie floated its active ingredients – "Celeriac, Gentian, Black Cohosh, True & False Unicorn Life & Pleurisy Root" – in a forty-percent-alcohol solution ("Added Solely as a Solvent and Preservative"). (469-470)

The ineffective memory pills, Lydia E. Pinkham's questionable compound, and Charlie's bogus tonic with its high amount of alcohol are not the only patent medicines spawned by the alliance of medicine, advertising and fraud which flourished in the Progressive Era. When Eleanor decides to keep her husband from spending his nights in a pub, she orders the following cure from the Sears Roebuck catalog:

SEAR'S WHITE STAR LIQUOR CURE. Housewives; are you tired of spending the night alone in an empty house while your spouse ruins his digestion and throws away good money at the local saloon? Try Sears' White Star Liquor Cure – just 5 drops a night in your drinking husband's coffee and he will roam no more. (28)

Treating Will with this patent medicine, she not only keeps him home in a semi-comatose state but also makes him a drug addict, because this 'medicine' turns out to be "nothing more than a tincture of opium" (29). When Will discovers with what he has been treated, Eleanor switches to

SEAR'S WHITE STAR NARCOTIC CURE. Housewives, are you tired of spending the night all but alone while your spouse ruins his digestion and throws away good money in a narcotic-induced stupor in your own living room? Try Sears' White Star Narcotic Cure – just 5 drops at night in your nodding husband's coffee and he will be as bright and alert as a squirrel. (31)

The new and "about eighty-four proof" (31) drops change Will into an alcoholic, and he soon returns to the real thing, his beloved Old Crow. One might think that these two extremely dangerous 'medicines' were made up by Boyle, but they really existed and could be freely ordered by mail. "By the end of the century, there was Sears' White Star Liquor Cure." In the Sears-Roebuck catalog, the wife was instructed simply to slip this
When, as a helpless patient in the San, Will is shocked by his sudden impotence, he, too, looks for help in the Sears Roebuck catalog despite his frightful experiences and finds an advertisement for a so-called Heidelberg Belt which reads:

Don't suffer in silence, don't endure in secret. $18.00 will buy our Giant Power 80-Gauge Current Genuine Heidelberg Electric Belt. $18.00 will bring you health and strength, superb manliness and youthful vigor. The Heidelberg Belt, for disorders of the nerves, stomach, liver and kidneys, is worth all the drugs, chemicals, pills, tables, washes, injections and other remedies put together. (314)

He orders it, secretly applies it to his genitals, and finds that it works. But then his nurse discovers it, gives it to Dr. Kellogg, and Will is told that "this thing can kill you" (398) because "even a single discharge of seminal fluids could be fatal" (398).

Around the turn of the century, then, a variety of bogus patent medicines and medical gadgets were freely available from mail order companies, and they represented a fast growing market that catered to the widespread trust in self-medication and medical progress. Boyle, who bases his story on detailed research, uses this trend to contextualize Dr. Kellogg's activities and to show that although he was one of the most influential, he was not the only healer who based his career on "The Road to Wellville" (118), the famous title of a small booklet which Charles W. Post, a former patient of Kellogg's who was inspired by the latter's diet to form his own cereal business, put in his boxes of Grape-Nuts (Carson 1957, 152, 154, 162). Post does not appear in person in the novel but is constantly referred to as Kellogg's hateful competitor (5, 37, 79, 80, 85, 90, 118-119, 128, 168, 170, 235, 256, 258, 315, 324, 359, 467ff.), and Will must learn from the irate Doctor that "we do not mention that name in this institution" (118).

Among the celebrities who take a cure at the San are Upton and Meta Sinclair, who are only briefly mentioned at the novel's beginning (7). Later, Meta is referred to in passing (37) and Upton is called "the novelist and reformer" (150). In his April 1908 lecture on the hidden evils of meat, Dr. Kellogg points out that those among his listeners who are not conversant with "the shocking and deplorable conditions in the abattoirs of this country [...] might consult The Jungle, Mr. Upton Sinclair's excellent novel on the subject" (299). He proudly adds that the writer "was our guest here just this past fall" (299) and then deplores that unsanitary conditions still exist "despite the efforts of Mr. Sinclair and Dr. Wiley and the Federal Food and Drug Administration" (300). With this remark, he refers to a cause célèbre of February 1906, when the novelist, socialist and political activist Upton Sinclair exposed the unsanitary conditions in the Chicago slaughterhouse and meat-packing industry in his muckraking bestseller. His bold depictions created a public outcry and triggered a surprisingly fast legal reaction which was led by Dr. Harvey Washington Wiley, a pioneering activist for food safety whose legendary investigations, for which he had human volunteers nicknamed the 'poison squad' ingest different food additives to test their impact on health, led to the passage
of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Naturally, Sinclair's work must have been dear to Dr. Kellogg, the master of "the civilized bowel" (53). Only a little later, Mrs. Hookstratten arrives from Peterskill, and when she hears that the Sinclairs stayed at the San, she moves the table talk to Helicon Home, the short-lived colony which Sinclair formed with his earnings from *The Jungle* in Englewood, New Jersey. It followed a model proposed by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, was opened in October 1906, and burned down in March 1907. Lionel Badger eagerly asserts that he has been there and that "the experiment in communal living was a noble and progressive one" (354), whereas Mrs. Hookstratten, influenced by the sensational press articles, objects that "there were accusations of all sorts of improper goings-on there, of sun-worship, nudity, free love –" (354). 1 The ensuing debate deals with such new aspects of natural living as nakedness and heliophilia, which will become increasingly important for the further action, and when Lionel Badger pontificates that "conventional marriage is a sort of prison – for the woman, that is" (355), he anticipates the trend towards women's liberation which will characterize Eleanor's development. Later, Will's increasingly disoriented wife goes fasting for twelve days on the model of Sinclair's *The Fasting Cure* (388) 2 and incurs Dr. Kellogg's wrath for following the advice of a man who is not even "a physician" (390).

Another historical figure who plays a supporting role in the novel is Horace B. Fletcher (1849-1919), a health food enthusiast who was known as "The Great Masticator" (71) because he argued that food had to be chewed about one hundred times per minute before being swallowed. In the San's dining room hangs a banner that exhorts the guests in bold black letters to "FLETCHERIZE!" (70), and here again Boyle makes use of a historical fact since "on the top floor, was the Grand Dining Room, at its head the imperative 'Fletcherize,' posted prominently to remind the guests of a pleasant and wholesome duty" (Carson 1957, 137). Fletcher himself is first mentioned in a list of prominent guest curing at the San (7, 64), but then "this hero of the oral cavity" (70) appears in person, teaches the ailing Will how to masticate his dry toast, and attends Eleanor's lecture about her husband (150, 154). When the aging man, whose theory made him a millionaire, is later "turning somersaults on the lawn" (292), this surprising behavior is again not invented by Boyle but refers to Fletcher's famous tests at Yale University in which, at the age of fifty-eight, he outperformed the college athletes in several vigorous tests of strength and endurance (Carson 1957, 235; Deutsch 1977, 111-120).

1 In his autobiography, Sinclair would later comment on his troubles with the press: "It was generally taken for granted among the newspapermen of New York that the purpose for which I had started this colony was to have plenty of mistresses handy. They wrote this up on that basis – not in plain words, for that would have been libel – but by innuendo easily understood. So it was with our socialistic colony as with the old-time New England colonies – there were Indians hiding in the bushes, seeking to pierce us with sharp arrows of wit."

2 For Sinclair's role as a food crusader see the chapter "The Jungle, the Sausage and the Law" in Deutsch (1977, 95-109).

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2 Here, Boyle takes some liberty with the dates. Eleanor's fasting takes place before Decoration Day 1908, but Sinclair's book, a combination of an April 1910 article from Contemporary Review and a May 1910 article from Cosmopolitan Magazine, was only published in 1911.
By seamlessly integrating pertinent aspects from the lives of these well-known historical persons into the novel's action, Boyle infuses his fictional narrative with historical authenticity. And there are numerous other examples of this strategy. Thus, when Boyle's Dr. Kellogg hires a new assistant, that " saturnine rigid little man" (271) is introduced as "A. F. Bloese" (271), and that was indeed the name of Kellogg's real secretary, whom Carson refers to in passing as the Doctor's "expert secretary, A. F. Bloese" (1957, 107). When Will wants to say that somebody is socially accepted he calls him "as respected [...] as Chaucey Depew" (27), and most readers will not have heard of that man and consider him an invented figure. But he was an attorney for Cornelius Vanderbilt's railroad, president of the New York Central Railroad System, and a U.S. Senator from New York from 1899 to 1911. When Dr. Kellogg wants to assert that George's speech organs are healthy, he calls his vocal apparatus "as normal as William Jennings Bryan's" (50), referring to one of the most popular politicians of his times who was especially famous for his oratorical skills. And when Eleanor reports that a patient has praised her talk as "the most moving speech he'd heard since John L. Sullivan had stood up at an Elks Lodge supper and described how drink had ruined him" (155; cf. 458), she alludes to the Irish-American heavyweight champion in whose sad end by alcohol Kellogg was especially interested (cf. Carson 1957, 114).

When Will and Charlie have a secret nightly chat in the former's sanitarium room, on the night table are an issue of The Atlantic Monthly and a copy of Camping and Tramping with Roosevelt, later referred to as the "Burroughs book" (247). John Burroughs was a well-known naturalist in the American conservation movement. His book appeared in 1907, that is, at the very time the conversation takes place, and the Atlantic Monthly issue might be the one of 1903, in which his essay on "Real and Sham Natural History" opened a debate that became known as the nature fakers controversy. When Charlie says "this whole rugged individualist business is just a bit much for me, Jack London and all that" (248), he refers to President Theodore Roosevelt's notion of a "strenuous life" and to a writer whose naturalistic novels The Sea-Wolf and White Fang had come out in 1904 and 1906 respectively. When he goes on to say that he prefers city stories and especially "racy stuff, too. What's his name, Dreiser?" (248), he points to Sister Carrie, Dreiser's allegedly sordid novel published in only a few copies in November 1900. When he mentions that he saw "that Olga Nethersole in Sappho before they closed it down a few years back" (248), he refers to a major New York theater scandal of 1900, in which the British-born actress Olga Nethersole played the leading role in Clyde Fitch's Sappho, based on a novel by Alphonse Daudet, and was taken to court in an indecency trial which triggered a change of attitude towards gender roles. In this brief conversation, then, Boyle manages to evoke a wide range of events that characterize the cultural climate of 1907. Dreiser is also mentioned in another context when Dr. Kellogg thinks of his recalcitrant patient John Hampton Krinck as "a libertine of the first stripe, a reader of the plays of Shaw and that tripe of Dreiser's" (190). Jack London is once more referred to when the chimpanzee Lillian is described as "as pure and rugged a symbol of nature as anything Jack London had to offer" (305). Two more 'dangerous' dramatists are mentioned when Will is so wrought up that he cannot follow the play staged by the female patients and that "even Wilde or Ibsen
would have seemed a burden" (399), and with Sarah Bernhardt and David Warfield two of the leading actors of the times are also referred to. Yet another type of literature is brought into play when Charlie dreams of having a big house and a well-stocked library and gives in to his adolescent taste by musing that more than in "all those books with their leather-bound spines" he would be interested in owning the novels about "Nick Carter, Frank Reade, Big-Foot Wallace" (128), referring to a private detective, an adventurer and a Texas Ranger who were the heroes of numerous dime novels.

When Eleanor remembers that she had once organized "a speaking engagement for Lucy Page Gaston, the anti-tobacco crusader" (289), she refers to a woman from the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in LaSalle, Illinois, an influential fighter for health who founded the Anti-Cigarette League of America and had considerable success in the early years of the 20th century, when between 1899 and 1909 twelve states passed cigarette bans, before the start of World War II caused the anti-smoking fervor to decline dramatically. When Will finds a book about "carrots and parsnips" by "Asenath Nicholson" (210) on his wife's night table, Boyle alludes to an American vegan and philanthropist who was a follower of Sylvester Graham and later worked hard trying to relieve the Irish famine. And here it can be shown that he takes this reference straight out of Carson's Cornflake Crusade in which one reads: "In Nature's Own Book, a queer cranky volume about carrots and parsnips, Mrs. Nicholson grafted Graham" (59). When at night Will reads a few pages of The Awakening of Helena Richie because "it was putting him to sleep" (350), Boyle makes use of a sentimental novel by Margaret Deland that was first published in installments in Harper's Monthly from January through July 1906 and is thus a contemporary publication for Will. The unbearable Lionel Badger proudly announces that he "knew the Alcotts personally" (287) and that he only drinks "unfiltered spring water imported from Concord, Massachusetts, where Bronson Alcott had made his home" (288). He thereby refers to a major figure of the transcendentalist movement who advocated a vegan diet before the term was coined, stood up for women's rights and was an abolitionist (Deutsch 1977, 37-45) and who is therefore interesting for the San patients. There is also a brief reference to a "crackpot" (315) like Macfadden, the leading American representative of physical culture, who combined body building with nutritional theories and came twice to the San (Carson 1957, 11; Deutsch 1977, 121-136).

Since water-curing was a fashionable movement and also played a role in Kellogg's therapies, and since this movement was started by the natural philosopher Vincent Preissnitz in Grafenburg, Germany (Deutsch 1977, 47-56), Boyle sprinkles references to the watering places of "Baden" and "Worishofen" (6) and to "Father Kneipp in Worishofen" (153) throughout the novel and incorporates German culture by means of references to composers like "Schumann" (108) or "Bach" (167), poets like "Heine and Eichendorff" (181), and particular works like "Brahms Lullaby" (291). Another innovative treatment concerns the still tentative use of radium triggered by "the Curie [who] had discovered it [...]" and won the 1903 Nobel Prize in Physics in acknowledgement of this miraculous substance" (289). Will's faulty notion that it was "a healing stone" (289) and the information that "Dr. Kellogg had picked right up on it" (289) explain why Miss Muntz had to die, and Dr. Kellogg's later musings – "Had
he given her too much of the radium? Not enough?" (302) – show the still experimental state of radium therapies and the Doctor's premature and irresponsible application of it.

With regard to the high society of the Progressive Era, Boyle refers in passing to the fact that in 1907/08 "Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, Thomas Edison, Admiral Richard M. Byrd and the voluminous William Howard Taft" (7) were expected as patients in the San, and that by the 1920's "Johnny Weissmuller stopped by to have his plumbing inspected; [Admiral] Byrd, [Roald] Amundsen, [Wilfred] Greenfell and [Richard] Halliburton paid their homage; J. C. Penney, [Amelia] Earhart, Battling Bob La Follette, Henry Ford" (475) would have visited the San, and again these are historically verified facts (Deutsch 1977, 86). In the course of the novel, "J. Henry Osborne, Jr., the bicycle king" (40, 292) and "Almus Overstreet, the banker" (154) arrive to take the cure, and the history of the period is evoked when Charlie refers to the famous financier "J. P. Morgan" (134), Mrs. Hookstratten's disorientation is compared to being in "one of the Wright's airplanes" (374), the military and patriotic marches by "the king, emperor and god of the march, John Philip Sousa" (393) are played by the San orchestra, and Will thinks of "Harry K. Thaw" (407), the multi-millionaire whose murder of the architect Stanford White in June 1906 on the rooftop of Madison Square Garden created a major scandal and figures prominently in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975). There are references to "Teddy Roosevelt" (65) and his heroic deeds "on the plains of the Wild West" and on "San Juan Hill" (113) as well as his unstoppable machismo. Will thinks about "[Robert] Peary" (407), whose expeditions to the North Pole in 1905/06 and 1908/09 were conversational topics at the time of the novel's action, and "Admiral Nieblock of the U.S. Naval Academy" (7) [correctly Albert Parker Niblack] is mentioned several times as a patient at the San.

The Coda

At the end of the novel proper, Boyle offers yet another – and this time all-encompassing – cliffhanger by freezing the action of all three strands at a crucial moment with

– Dr. Kellogg, having just drowned his adopted son, standing in the cellar of the San in front of the nut-butter vat and rationalizing his murder, while upstairs his employees are busy quenching the fire which George has started,

– Will and Eleanor Lightbody, having silently marched from the forest to the Battle Creek railway station, sitting on a bench, contemplating their relationship, and waiting for their train home, and

– Charlie, having escaped from the police and still in handcuffs, hiding in the ruins of the abandoned cornflakes factory, getting drunk on Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, and waiting for darkness to set in so that he can sneak away.

At this suspenseful moment, the readers still want answers to such crucial question as:
How will Dr. Kellogg explain George's death, and will he be taken to account for his murder and the death of Homer Praetz by electrocution and of Miss Muntz by radiation?

Will the estranged Lightbodys get together again, will Will overcome his stomach problems and be able to fulfill his new role as protective male, and will Eleanor accept her new position as obedient wife and – perhaps – mother in the quiet town of Peterskill?

Will Charlie manage to escape from the police and his debt holders, and will his new plan of getting rich with Per-To be more successful than his fiasco with Per-Fo?

All of these questions are dutifully answered in the "Coda," which heightens the reader's bottled-up suspense through a kind of retarding element because it first sketches the further history of C.W. Post, a man who played a crucial role in the history of cornflakes but in the novel is only referred to in passing.

Only after having learned about Post's career are the readers told that Charlie managed to sneak out of the state of Michigan, got hold of his money in the bank, found a blacksmith in Indianapolis who freed him of his handcuffs, returned to New York, and in a short time made his new Per-To company a rousing success. He became a millionaire, married the polyglot Swiss ambassador's daughter, and owned mansions in Paris and Zurich and a country estate in Westchester. Although he repaid Will's $1,000 check five-fold via bank transfer, he never met the Lightbodys and never became reconciled with Mrs. Hookstratten before he died of heart failure in 1945. Bender, his model and partner in crime, continued his career as an impostor with the so-called soap scheme and was shot at age 85 by a cheated customer near Dawson in the Yukon Territory. Thus, the "apprentice confidence man" (373), who had no moral scruples and ruthlessly cheated his benefactress, became a tycoon and fulfilled his American Dream because he found enough gullible customers who bought his useless patent medicine.

The Lightbodys settled down to a life "of normalcy and quiet" (471) in Peterskill. Will, whose illness was finally correctly diagnosed as a duodenal ulcer and healed on its own, resigned from his firm and enjoyed his comfortable life as an early retiree until he died in his sleep in 1941. "He felt at peace with himself, and if not exactly heroic, then a man who had risen to the occasion and taken charge of his life in that sunlit field by the Kalamazoo River so many years ago" (473). Eleanor, who "never lost her cutting wit or her reforming zeal" (472), became the proud mother of three daughters whom she programmatically named Elizabeth Cady, Lucretia, and Julia Ward

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) was an American suffragist and abolitionist and a leading figure of the early women's rights movement. Her "Declaration of Sentiments" presented at the Seneca Falls Convention (1848) initiated the first organized women's rights and suffrage movements in the U.S. – Lucretia was a noblewoman in ancient Rome whose rape by Sextus Tarquinius caused the rebellion that led to the change of Roman government from a kingdom to a republic. – Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910) was an American author, best known for writing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and also an advocate for abolitionism and women's suffrage.
interest in the women's suffrage movement. When at the age of 78 she observed how
and what young people ate, she became ever "more convinced [...] that Dr. Kellogg
had been right (maybe not Spitzvogel or Lionel Badger, dead of a stroke at forty-nine,
and the thought of them and what had happened between them still made her blush and
got her pulse racing all those many years later – not them, maybe, but Dr. Kellogg)"
(473-474). In 1958, she "opened Peterskill's first health-food store" (474) and died at
the age of 88 in 1967. Thus, after his single assertion of his male prerogative, the
constitutionally passive Will moved again into the background and left his wife room
for her activities, and Eleanor, still embarrassed by her flirt with sexual fulfillment,
continued Dr. Kellogg's obsessions into the post-war concern with health-food.

Dr. Kellogg continued his career in the thriving San and in 1928 even added a
fifteen-story addition. But when the Great Depression hit, the sanitarium had to be sold
at auction to the federal government, and the Doctor retreated to Florida where he died
in 1943. But what happened on the day of the murder? Boyle, who otherwise reports
only summarily about the characters' fates, answers this question by inserting a small
scene into the Coda that takes place on "the evening of May 31, 1908" (474). In it the
wounded Doctor comes up from the cellar, faces his worried employees and, having
"some dirty work to do, some lies to tell, some dirt to sweep under the carpet" (474),
lies to them about what happened: "'It was George,' he cried, his voice trembling, face
ashen, 'he did it all. He attacked me, set the place afire, let the animals loose.' He
hesitated, overcome. They moved toward him, but he gestured them away. "'I tried to
save him,' he choked, and then he said no more" (475). Thus, the "author and presiding
genius of the whole alimentary business" (474) who "received and administered more
enemas than any man in history" (475-476) escaped unscathed and was not taken to
account for the murder of his adopted son and for his medical mistakes that resulted in
the death of at least two of his patients. In a Darwinian world in which only the fit
survive moral considerations have no place.

The Language

Boyle once referred to "the mad, language-obsessed part of me" (qtd. in Adams 1991,
60), and in 2000 he answered an interviewer's question "Do you read the dictionary or
at least the thesaurus?" by saying that I love to save bizarre words, insert them not so
much to show how smart I am but to nudge the reader" (qtd. in Heebner 2000, n.p.).
From his first novel onward reviewers have praised his outstanding linguistic
versatility, and with The Road to Wellville their verdicts ranged from Jane Smiley's
praise of Boyle's prose as "a marvel, enjoyable from beginning to end, alive with astute
observations, sharp intelligence and subtle musicality" (1993, n.p.) to Louisa
Ermelino's commendation of "his exhilaratingly bombastic style and virtuoso
language" through which "the ordinary becomes obscene, the grotesque hilarious"
(Ermelino 1993, n.p.). Whereas in his first novel Water Music Boyle's most noticeable
manners were uncommon and widely unknown words and overflowing enumerations (see Freese 2019), these peculiarities are toned down in his fifth one.
There are still examples of breathless lists, such as the assessment that Bender had
deceived Charlie, "bluffing, boasting, flimflamming and humbugging" (334), and thereby turned him into a fish that had been "hooked, landed, scaled, gutted, stuffed, roasted, chewed, digested and shat out" (334); the statement that Dr. Kellogg is "in a funk. A Hole. A pit. A depression ..." (168); the observation that Nurse Graves is gazing up at Will "like an ecstatic, a crusader, a Mohammedan on the eve of the jihad" (208); or the reference to "a night of redemption, promise, hope, vindication" (326).

There are also numerous sesquipedalian words for which Boyle has a penchant. Some of them are thematically necessary because they refer to the medical conditions treated and the apparatuses used at the San. Thus, the readers need to understand that neurasthenia (e.g. 113, 152, 232, 240, 340) is a condition characterized by physical and mental exhaustion accompanied by such symptoms as headache and irritability and that hyperhydrochloria (100) refers to the presence of an excessive amount of hydrochloric acid in the stomach. They must find out that a sphygmomanometer (290) is an instrument for measuring arterial blood pressure and that vibrotherapy (146) is a therapy that works by vibrating parts of the body, that a colonic (120) is the cleaning of someone's colon with water from a tube put into their rectum and that a sinusoidal bath (148) is a hydro-electric bath in which a low-level oscillating current provides vigorous muscle contraction with least pain. Other terms refer to movements that were fashionable at the time of the novel's action, such as phrenology (312, 339), a pseudo-scientific system based on the assumption that an analysis of someone's character can be made by a study of the shape and protuberances of their skull, and its strange notion of amativeness (342) that refers to the propensity for love or sexual feelings, or the movement of heliophiles (355), that is, organisms attracted to large amounts of sunlight, and Fletcher's theory of mastication (70), chewing, which is part of his belief in naturopathy as a system of treating diseases with natural methods. And symptomitis (106, 287) is Dr. Kellogg's neologism for his patients' exaggerated and therapeutically unwanted interest in their symptoms.

But there are also rare or even widely unknown terms that do not belong to the world of medicine and signal Boyle's love of exuberant wordplay. Thus, Charlie plans to have his non-existing cereals peptonized (23), using a term he himself does not understand (447) and which means that the flakes will contain proteins converted into peptones under the influence of the enzyme pepsin. Thus, Bender's huge body is described as ventricular (86), relating it to a ventricle, a cavity of a bodily part or organ such as a chamber of the heart; Will is said to have been crapulous (240), meaning that he is marked by intemperance especially in eating or drinking, and Dr. Kellogg is characterized as etiolated (246), meaning that he is pale, feeble, and deprived of natural vigor. Dr. Kellogg rejects bad posture as deleterious (97), that is as harmful in a subtle or unexpected way; Bender's progress is testudineous (327), that is as slow as a tortoise; and one of Kellogg's discoveries was serendipitous (259), that is, it occurred by chance in a happy or beneficial way. When Dr. Kellogg denounces "the priapic urge" (187), he refers to feelings of virility or male sexual excitement, when he reflects about whether the stubborn George might "die of inanition" (386), he alludes to a state of exhaustion through lack of nourishment, and Dr. Linniman's description as "eudaemonically sound" (55) refers to the Greek concept of happiness as the proper end of conduct. Talking about gymnastics, the narrator uses the lesser known word
calisthenics (214) that refers to systematic rhythmic bodily exercises performed without apparatus, and talking about boxing he speaks of "the pugilistic arts" (129), for a castrated man he uses the Italian loanword castrato (161), and instead of 'therapeutics' he prefers the older variant therapeusis (165).

More prominent examples of Boyle's exuberant language, however, than both the piled-up enumerations and the choice of rare words are his ubiquitous comparisons. Some of them felicitously characterize human behavior by means of analogies with the animal world, as when Charlie can "smell the money on [the Lightbodys] the way a weasel smells out a hen" (25), when Bender rises "tumbling out of the chair like some great sea lion going into battle on the California beaches" (149), when sandwiched between two advertising boards, Charlie waddles off "ungainly as a tortoise in his plywood shell" (325), or when Mrs. Hookstratten's "eyes, magnified by the thick polished lenses, darted like fish in an aquarium" (364). Others refer to a wide range of different cultures. Thus, a waiter serves a meat dish "as if it were a gift from the Sultan of Morocco" (25), and Dr. Kellogg hands Eleanor a pineapple "as if it were the last and choicest jewel of King Solomon's hoard" (238). Fletcher's great face hangs over Will "like a Chinese lantern" (69), Kellogg's secretary dabs his brow with a damp handkerchief "as if he were staggering around in the middle of the Arabian Desert" (110), and Charlie fingers Will's check as "a red Indian might stroke a favorite scalp or a millionaire his bankbook" (227). Will "roared and hooted and drank like an Irishman at a funeral" (229), and Kellogg's fat secretary is "wrapped like an Egyptian mummy in his scarves" (271). Will "stalked the open ground like a red Indian with a tomahawk clenched between his teeth" (432), and Bender "re-established himself at the Post Tavern like Caesar returning from the Gallic wars" (325). When Charlie enters the San dining room for the first time, for him it "might have been a Roman bath or the training quarters for the gladiators" (231), and when Badger talks about whalebone corsets, he finds them "as appropriate on a modern woman as the bones the cannibals in New Guinea stick through their noses" (337). The porters of the San watch the unloading of baggage "with the impassivity of Indian fakirs" (365), and schoolchildren make "a mad ululating din that was like the charge of the Comanches" (329). When Will surprises his naked wife in the woods, he looks "for a weapon, the weapon of the Neanderthal, a club" (433), and when Kellogg fights with George, pieces of his torn clothes "fringed his waist like a hula dancer's skirt" (459-460), and the two go at each other "with the fierce and utter concentration of the pygmy with his blowgun or the aborigine with his boomerang" (460). Surprisingly, comparisons that make use of literary analogies and that were numerous in Boyle's previous novels are very rare, as when Bender speaks in the voice he uses on the public "like some old Shakespearean faker" (140) or Miss Muntz looks "like a victim of one of Bram Stoker's monsters, sucked dry of blood" (288).

Many comparisons are terse and especially effective because they are unexpectedly to the point. Thus, sleep comes to the tired Charlie "like an avalanche" (90), Mrs. Teitelbaum is "pale as a peeled egg" (405), and during vibrotherapy Will is "shaken like a Christmas eggnog" (147). Charlie sits on a doorstep "as if he'd sprouted from a seed" (436), the excited Will's stomach is "plunging like a runaway elevator" (248), and
Bender's bow tie clings to his collar "like a mounted butterfly" (89). But the most impressive comparisons are the ones that demonstrate Boyle's outrageous inventiveness and work with daring imagery. Thus, Will's sick stomach is said to feel "like there's a hundred little coal miners in there having a torch light parade" (107), and the clerk of the Post Tavern looks at Charlie as if he were "a clot of manure he's just scraped from the bottom of his shoe" (137). His landlady offers Charlie "a fruitcake that might have been put to better use as roofing material" (226), and the tea presented to Will in the San smells and tastes "like something you might use on the woodshed to discourage dry rot" (309). The owner of the Café Nonpareil is run by a former patient of Dr. Kellogg who has had "a quasi-religious revelation in which an anthropomorphic lamb had appeared to her with a butcher's diagram stenciled on its hindquarters" (373), and to the rebellious young George, lying awake at night, "the rain fell with a steady sibilance, the sound of it like distant frying, like a thousand Yankee chefs bent over pans of salt pork and flapjacks with their stomachs of iron" (387).

Conclusion

The Road to Wellville unfolds a fast-paced and tightly organized plot which tells three increasingly intertwined stories at the same time, is full of suspense, and employs such narrative strategies as constant crosscuts between different strands of the action, tension-generating cliffhangers, meaningful cross-references, surprising coincidences, and attention-catching foreshadowings to keep the readers' attention. Although as a 'historical novel' it deals with a bygone era, its theme is highly topical because the concept of 'scientific eating' with its religious implications and accompanying frauds is as relevant as ever. The cruel way in which its characters are satirically unmasked through both situational comedy and linguistic revelation appeals to every reader's Schadenfreude, and the – mostly scatological – humor of a narrator who acts out what Boyle called "the mad, language-obsessed part of me" (qtd. in Adams 1991, 60) impresses every lover of linguistic versatility. The novel's greatest accomplishment, however, is the impressive way in which Boyle uses his careful research and his detailed knowledge to seamlessly mix fact and fiction, have historical figures interact with invented characters, and provide 'real' persons like Dr. Kellogg, Horace B. Fletcher or the Sinclairs and invented figures like the Lightbodys and Charles Ossining with the same degree of vicarious authenticity.

Works Cited


