

## CONRAD'S IDEAS OF GASTRONOMY: DINING IN "FALK"

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### *Introduction*

IN THE CENTURY AND more since Joseph Conrad first published "Falk: A Reminiscence," his tale has been examined from a variety of critical perspectives.<sup>1</sup> I would like to begin by reviewing some of these responses in order to locate this paper's perhaps surprising claim that "Falk" is a story about dining.

Conrad himself described "Falk" as a "contrast of commonplace sentimentality with the uncorrupted point-of-view of an almost primitive man (Falk himself) who regards the preservation of life as the supreme and moral law" (Karl and Davies 2: 402).<sup>2</sup> Both Redmond O'Hanlon and Walter E. Anderson have focused on the narrative's depiction of an "almost primitive man" to claim "Falk" as a case-study in reverse evolution. O'Hanlon describes "Falk" as a "dispassionate and closely Darwinian tale still half-treatise, about natural and sexual selection in its least subtle of mechanisms" (127), while for Anderson, the narrative presents "a startling picture of evolutionary emergence" in which the retrogressive figure of Falk himself represents an "elemental commentary on survival" (103, 104). Approaching the tale's claims about primitivism "from a postcolonial perspective," Harry Sewllall has attempted to unravel "the narrator's own preconceptions and prejudices" and to read "Falk" in contrapuntal relation to "Cannibalism as a Trope in Colonial Discourse." For Sewllall, "Falk" subtly deconstructs the "dialectic between . . . the savage and the civilized in the discourse of cannibalism" (1).

Nevertheless, the fullest account of "Falk" as a whole remains Tony Tanner's "'Gnawed Bones' and 'Artless Tales': Eating and Narrative in Conrad." Drawing on Claude Lévi-Strauss as well as Conrad's own preface to his wife Jessie's *Handbook of Cookery for a Small House* (1923), Tanner emphasizes the parallels within the tale between the acts of cooking and eating and the act of narration. Both, Tanner argues, are ways of making sense of the world: "We must eat to live, but we must also narrate to live" (35). In "Falk," "the one piece of fiction by Conrad in which literal cannibalism is at the centre of the action" (Tanner 19), these activities stand in an unusually vexed relation to each other. Tanner approvingly discusses Lévi-Strauss's suggestion that "the cooking of any society is a kind of language which in various ways says something about how that society feels about its relations to nature and culture" (26).<sup>3</sup> For Tanner, "Falk" is a tale about "the breakdown of categories," in which Falk himself is forced by circumstances to reconsider "hitherto unquestioned taxonomies"

(28). Among the categories broken down is that of the edible, the limits of which the tale and Falk himself explore.

This scholarship offers important insights into “Falk” but largely overlooks the issue that forms the crux of this paper: the categorical distinction between eating and dining in Conrad’s tale. If cooking and eating are “a kind of language,” then dining can be seen as the attempt to say something more specific in that language.<sup>4</sup> As Isabella Beeton puts it, “Dining is the privilege of civilization. The rank which a people occupy in the grand scale may be measured by their way of taking their meals, as well as by their way of treating their women” (363). Perverse as it may seem to read Conrad’s 1901 narrative of high-seas cannibalism and social breakdown through Beeton’s 1861 *Book of Household Management*, nonetheless the two works share an important set of anxieties about dining, or rather about what it means to dine. As Beeton makes clear, “It is not a *dinner* at which sits the aboriginal Australian, who gnaws his bone half bare and then flings it behind to his squaw” (363). By contrast, “Falk” presents a series of meals which unsettle the distinction between eating and dining. In so doing, it raises doubts about the idea that meals constitute a way of measuring a people’s rank in the grand scale or indeed even serve to distinguish the “civilized” from the “aboriginal” or primitive. Tanner, O’Hanlon, Anderson, Sewlall, and Conrad himself have all asserted that the relationship between the civilized and the primitive is central to “Falk.” However, this paper argues that more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which the work’s deliberate engagement with theories of the relationship between eating and dining informs and complicates the question of how the civilized and primitive might be distinguished. Dining is, in “Falk” as it is in Beeton, one of the standards by which civilization can be judged.

The first part of this paper considers a key moment in the tale: a discussion of the usefulness of gastronomy in making judgements about character. This discussion highlights the tale’s interest in the question of what it means to dine. The second part of the paper examines previous critics’ efforts to explain the enormous number and variety of references to food and consumption (both literal and metaphorical) in “Falk.” From there, the paper explores Conrad’s own opinions about dining and its significance. The fourth part of the paper investigates the significance of dining in “Falk” in relation to two very different texts: canto 13 of Byron’s *Don Juan* and the chapter devoted to “Dinners and Dining” in Beeton’s *Book of Household Management*. All three texts, I argue, share a common concern with the relationship between dining and human progress. The fifth and final part of the paper continues the comparison between Conrad’s and Beeton’s ideas of gastronomy, reading the frame narrative of “Falk” against “Dinners and Dining” in order to suggest what each text illuminates in the other.

#### *Falk’s Ideas of Gastronomy*

EARLY ON IN HIS story, the unnamed narrator of “Falk” makes it clear that he has no interest in gastronomy, or in theorizing about the meaning of dinner:

I was engaged just then in eating despondently a piece of stale Dutch cheese, being too much crushed to care what I swallowed myself, let alone bothering my head about Falk’s ideas of gastronomy. I could expect from their study no clue as to his conduct in matters of business, which seemed to me unrestrained by morality or even by the commonest sort of decency. (100)

What, then, justifies the claim that “Falk” is centrally concerned with such ideas?

The narrator, a “man of over fifty” who “had commanded ships for a quarter of a century,” is reminiscing to a small party, “all more or less connected with the sea,” in a “small river-hostelry not more than thirty miles from London” (77).<sup>5</sup> He tells the assembled company of “an absurd episode . . . now many years ago, when I first got command of an iron barque, loading then in a certain Eastern seaport.”<sup>6</sup> This “absurdity,” he explains, “concerns only me, my enemy Falk, and my friend Hermann” (78).

The narrator has first encountered Falk in a professional capacity, and he is introduced to the reader with a description of his “conduct in matters of business”:

He was a Scandinavian of some sort, and a bloated monopolist to boot . . . His tariff of charges for towing ships in and out was the most brutally inconsiderate document of the sort I had ever seen. He was the commander and owner of the only tug-boat on the river . . . He extracted his pound and a half of flesh from each of us merchant-skippers with an inflexible sort of indifference which made him detested and even feared. (88–89)

Falk’s vessel is steam-powered, and, as the narrator reflects, “this is an age of steam. The exclusive possession of a marine boiler had given Falk the whip hand of us all” (103). When Falk suspects that he and the narrator are in competition for the affections of the niece of the narrator’s “friend” Hermann, Falk simply drags Hermann’s ship out of the harbour.

To the narrator – who is at the time unaware of Falk’s unfounded suspicion – the act is a mystery. Having complained at the agent’s office and received no explanation, the narrator drops in for tiffin at one of the town’s two hotels. Over his “stale Dutch cheese,” he is told of Falk’s peculiar “ideas of gastronomy” by the keeper of the hotel, the notorious gossip Schomberg.<sup>7</sup> Having offered his opinion that “Falk isn’t a man to make mistakes except on purpose,” and that his motive is to “curry favour on the cheap with Hermann” (97), Schomberg embarks on a bitter account of Falk’s refusal to eat at the hotel:

Last year I started this *table d’hôte*, and sent cards out – you know.<sup>8</sup> You think he has had one meal in the house? Give the thing a trial? Not once. He has got hold now of a Madras cook – a blamed fraud that I hunted out of my cookhouse with a rattan. He was not fit to cook for white men. No, not for the white men’s dogs either; but, see, any damned native that can boil a pot of rice is good enough for Mr. Falk. Rice and a little fish he buys for a few cents from the fishing-boats outside is what he lives on. You would hardly credit it – eh? A white man, too . . . (97)

Two immediate explanations are suggested: “He’s a vegetarian, perhaps,” offers the narrator; “He’s a miser,” insists Schomberg (98). Although the narrator tactfully avoids pointing it out to Schomberg, Falk need be neither miserly nor vegetarian to avoid dining at Schomberg’s hotel. The meat is both bad and expensive, as well as of dubious origin. The narrator speculates about “infamous buffalo meat” (98). Nor has the rest of the European community (for whom the *table d’hôte* is exclusively intended) rushed to take up Schomberg’s hospitality. The narrator dines surrounded by empty chairs, feeling “as if I had intruded upon a tiffin of ghostly Presences” (98).

Schomberg’s “irrelevant babble” (99) about Falk’s eating habits has not come to an end, however. His dismay extends beyond what Falk eats to how he does so. Indeed, this is what Schomberg claims is “the most degrading thing”: “They take the dish up to the wheelhouse with a cover on it, and he shuts both the doors before he begins to eat. Fact! Must be ashamed

of himself" (98). Schomberg has heard from Ferdinand da Costa, Falk's engineer, that the Captain will not allow his crew to cook meat either:

the rows on board every time a little smell of cooking gets about the deck! . . . The other day da Costa got the cook to fry a steak for him – a turtle steak it was too, not beef at all – and the fat caught or something. Young da Costa himself was telling me of it here in this room. "Mr. Schomberg . . . if I had let a cylinder cover blow off through the skylight by my negligence Captain Falk couldn't have been more savage. He frightened the cook so that he won't put anything on the fire for me now." (99)

"Is he expected to eat his meat raw?" Schomberg asks in outrage.

This apparent digression into the proprieties of dining is likely to seem as irrelevant to the reader as it does to the tale's baffled protagonist. If there is a connection in the passage between "conduct in matters of business," "ideas of gastronomy," and "decency," it is Schomberg's own grasping, hypocritical "psychology" that seems to be illuminated.<sup>9</sup> Of course, as the narrator has subsequently discovered, and readers of "Falk" soon will, there is an explanation for Falk's behaviour that hinges neither on vegetarianism nor miserliness. For the origins of Falk's unusual domestic arrangements lay in the fact that he has been compelled, *in extremis*, to kill and eat another human. Most likely raw, if that would compound Schomberg's horror.

Unlike Schomberg, the narrator of "Falk" is openly sceptical about gastronomy – in the sense of a science or philosophy of food and eating.<sup>10</sup> Certainly the narrator does not seem familiar with Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's aphorisms, which include the claim, "Tell me the kind of food you eat, and I will tell you the kind of man you are."<sup>11</sup> Nor does he appear to have read Beeton, in whose text the phrase is translated and approvingly quoted (367). To Schomberg's dismay, Falk refuses to eat like what he is: "A white man should eat like a white man, dash it all," he cries, "Ought to eat meat, must eat meat" (98). Like Beeton, Schomberg asserts that "Dining is the privilege of civilization" – or at least race. Not to eat like or even with the other Europeans is, according to Schomberg, an outrage to racial and gastronomic propriety. It is, of course, the financial effect that this has on Schomberg that he seems to feel most deeply. Schomberg's attitude represents a reductive parody of Brillat-Savarin's aphorism: his judgements about Falk are rooted not in what Falk eats, but in who gets the financial benefit. "I won't talk about the fellow," Schomberg claims, inaccurately. "I don't think he has six drinks from year's end to year's end in my place" (89). Although Schomberg appears to be acknowledging his unfamiliarity with Falk, he instead offers this information as a bitter criticism of him.

However, it is not only Schomberg who is obsessed with the meaning of dining. The narrator's dismissive, facetious reference to Falk's "ideas of gastronomy" paradoxically directs our attention to the ways in which the tale as a whole is based on an attempt to investigate the relationship between dining, civilization, and psychology. Despite the narrator's rejection of Brillat-Savarin's aphorism, nevertheless it is Falk's cannibalism that seems to offer the key to explaining his behaviour. "Falk" itself can be seen to dramatize Brillat-Savarin's aphorism, hinging as it does on the attempt to explain the relationship between what "kind of food" Falk has eaten, and "what kind of man" Falk is. As the next section of this paper explores further, "Falk" is a tale in which food and eating play a remarkably prominent part.

Before going on to consider what previous critics have made of this proliferation of references to eating, however, I would like to explain why I have detached the narrator's

conversation with Schomberg from its context in “Falk” as a whole. Rather than “irrelevant babbling” (as the narrator calls it), it is tempting to interpret the significance of the scene as revealed only by what Ian Watt has dubbed “delayed decoding” (Watt 276). That is to say, what seems like a pointless conversation is later illuminated by the discovery that Falk has been a cannibal. I want to suggest that this is not in fact the case – or at least not entirely. Falk rejects not only meat, but also commensality. Obviously, the two are deeply entangled, but the tale’s interest in eating is distinct from its interest in dining. While Falk is the only cannibal in the tale, he is far from being its only solitary eater. Rather than a series of meals that all prefigure the revelation of Falk’s act of cannibalism, “Falk” can instead be read as a series of dinners that fail, each in different ways, and which comment both on each other and on what it means to dine.

“Tell me the *kind* of food you eat, and I will tell you the kind of man you are,” Brillat-Savarin claims. But in another aphorism, he shifts this emphasis from the question of what is eaten to suggest that “the destiny of great nations depends on the manner in which they are fed” (also quoted in Beeton 367).<sup>12</sup> It is how, and with whom, we eat that distinguishes a dinner from a meal – the questions that trouble “Falk” are how it does so, whether this distinction is tenable, and what such a distinction might mean.

#### *Critical Responses to “Falk”*

IN HIS 1919 “AUTHOR’S NOTE” on “Falk,” Conrad observes that the tale “offended the delicacy of one critic at least by certain peculiarities of its subject” (219). Punning on “delicacy,” Conrad offers an acknowledgement of bad literary taste that wilfully compounds the offence. For subsequent critics, of stronger stomach perhaps, it is this very “peculiarity” that has drawn them to the tale and provided the basis of their ruminations.

Falk is the only survivor of the *Borgmester Dahl*, a cargo steamer that broke down on its maiden voyage “somewhere halfway between Good Hope and New Zealand” (136) ten years before Falk’s encounter with the narrator. Stranded at sea, the ship falls into chaos, the men giving themselves up to despair and pointless quarrelling. “The organised life of the ship had come to an end. The solidarity of the men had gone,” Falk recalls (139). Rather than “delayed decoding,” the horror of Falk’s account derives from our advance knowledge of what is about to occur. The rest of the crew have given up hope of survival, becoming “living skeletons” (139) or destroying themselves. Only Falk and the ship’s carpenter are resolved to preserve themselves by any means. It is the carpenter – at least according to Falk’s account – who first speaks of cannibalism, commenting (not quite accurately) that, “There was nothing eatable left on board” (140). The crew, “listless feeble spectres, slunk off to hide in fear of each other,” leaving only Falk and the ship’s carpenter on deck (140).

Rather than allying themselves to choose a weaker victim, Falk and the carpenter turn on each other. After the carpenter attempts to bludgeon Falk to death with a crossbar while he is drinking at the water-pump, both arm themselves with revolvers and take up positions, waiting for a victim to approach the ship’s only supply of fresh water. After a day and a night, having snuck to a porthole of the cabin into which Falk has barricaded himself, the carpenter reaches through it and tries to shoot Falk. He misses, and he is himself shot dead. By Falk’s logic, “The best man had survived” (141). Falk then proceeds to eat the carpenter, having first thrown his former shipmate’s revolver into the sea – “He was a born monopolist” the narrator comments (141).<sup>13</sup>

Falk finally reveals his secret because he wishes to marry Hermann's niece, but he refuses to wed her before having told her and her family of "his terrible misfortune" (129). Indeed, the desire to do so is "gnawing" away at him (134). Rather optimistically, Falk suggests that his revelation "would affect the domestic arrangements of their home, but, once told, it need not be alluded to again for the rest of their lives" (128). Hermann, who refuses to listen to the details of or circumstances behind Falk's confession, puts his main objection to the marriage succinctly: "The thoughts that would come into their heads every time they sat down to a meal. Horrible! Horrible!" (132). Hermann's outburst echoes Kurtz's more famous cry of "The horror! The horror!" in *Heart of Darkness* (112) and is similarly open to a variety of interpretations. Is Hermann's horror at the act of cannibalism itself, or at Falk's decision to tell them about it? Notably, Hermann's outraged denunciations of Falk repeatedly fail to get to grips with what is distinctively horrific about cannibalism. Falk is a "creature," "a beast, an animal" (132) – epithets which, in denying Falk's status as a human, ignore or avoid the central fact that Falk is a man who has eaten other men. The narrator hears Hermann talking about Falk in German and catches the following: "the word 'Mensch', man, and also 'Fressen', which last I looked up in my dictionary. It means 'devour'" (131). In contrast to "essen," the kind of eating people do, "fressen" indicates the gnawing, gorging, and gobbling of feeding animals.

Falk's insistence that this was the survival of the fittest – that in the collapse of order on the ship, "it was everyone for himself at last" – has encouraged several critics to see "Falk" as a tale of reverse evolution.<sup>14</sup> O'Hanlon and Anderson, for example, discuss the ways in which Falk justifies his behaviour with echoes of and coded appeals to Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer and locate the tale in contemporary anxieties about the social implications of theories of natural selection. Certainly, Falk himself would have us believe that as order on the ship breaks down, the naturally strong begin to feed on the naturally weak. Yet the tale's reservations about the naturalness or inevitability of events may be registered in the fact that Falk's survival depends less upon his own physical strength or even cunning and more on his retention of the ship's sole remaining revolver, which he uses to hunt down his remaining shipmates. Only three others live to be rescued by a whaling ship, and they, too, have died by the time Falk reveals his secret to the narrator. Falk's monopoly of power on the ship depends on technology, just as his steam-powered tugboat gives him the "whip hand" in port.

The parallel (pointedly drawn by the narrator) between these two types of monopoly has lead critics to argue that the tale demonstrates not the exceptionality of Falk's experience, or the ways in which it suspends the rules governing civilized European behaviour, but its continuity with economic and sexual behaviour in the rest of the tale. As Tanner has noted, the tale emphasizes the "inter-relationship" between "three planes of human activity: the biological – eating, hunger, the sexual drive; the economic. . . ; and the linguistic" (22). Thus Falk is a "bloated monopolist" both literally and metaphorically, extracting from the harbour shipping his "pound and a half of flesh" (89). Falk himself comments of his desire for Hermann's niece, "he was hungry for the girl, terribly hungry, as he had been terribly hungry for food" (133). She is "a fine lump of a girl," Schomberg agrees, smacking his lips as he does so (112).

"Falk" is a text invitingly open to both Freudian and Marxist readings. Thus when the title character's secret is considered not as the opposite of his role as modern European capitalist monopolist, but instead as of a piece with it, Karl Marx's famous comparison of

capital to a vampire – which “lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (342) – comes to mind. “Falk” renders the metaphor literal. A similar claim can be made in relation to Freud’s suggestion that sexuality originates in “the oral, or as it might be called, cannibalistic pregenital sexual organization,” where “sexual activity has not yet been separated from the ingestion of food” (7: 198). Discussing Freud, and Melanie Klein’s claim that “[t]he first gratification which the child derives from the external world is the satisfaction experienced in being fed” (Klein 290), Maud Ellmann has argued that “since sexuality originates in eating, it is always haunted by the imagery of ingestion” (38). Falk’s sexual appetite is more haunted than most.

It is helpful in this context to note Diana Fuss’s observation that Freud’s “specific choice of cannibalism to figure psychical identification reminds us that Freud’s theory of self-other relations takes shape historically within a colonialist context” (35). Discussing *Totem and Taboo* (1913) in particular, Fuss points out that, “From the one side,” Freud

employs an evolutionary schema to describe psychosexual development, analogizing the changes in sexual maturity to the “progress” of civilizations, while from the other side he relies upon a psychosexual paradigm to describe evolutionary change, ranking cultures according to a developmental scale. (35)

The cannibal or cannibalistic marks the earliest stage in Freud’s schemata of both psychosexual and cultural development, as well as providing the figure that links the two. Freud would perhaps agree with Conrad’s narrator Marlow when he comments in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) that cannibals are “men one could work with” (61). Marlow famously observes, “Fine fellows – cannibals – in their place” (61). “Falk,” however, is a tale in which cannibalism occurs out of place, disrupting or at least unsettling the attempt to rank cultures on a developmental scale.

Rather than the opposition Conrad presents between the “commonplace sentimentality” of European civilization and Falk as an “almost primitive man,” critical consensus has emphasized the imbrication of the two. Sewlall argues that Falk’s cannibalism collapses the role anthropophagy has played in “the grammar of colonial discourse” as “a signifier of alterity” to unmask the symbolic cannibalism of European civilisation itself (1). Sewlall approvingly quotes Tanner’s observation that “all the main characters are involved in different kinds of hunger, different kinds of devouring and assimilating” (Tanner 22; Sewlall 3). Likewise, Watts argues that “Conrad had little to learn from Freud, who in 1912 declared: ‘Even today, love . . . is in essence as animal as it ever was’” (xvii). “Culture may refine and elaborate it,” Watts suggests, “but basically love is appetitive and egoistic.”

All three of these critics of “Falk” share two basic assumptions, which demand reinvestigation.<sup>15</sup> The first assumption is that Falk’s acts of cannibalism are the central meals in the narrative, and that they provide the model of consumption to which all other eating in the text alludes. The second is that eating is an essentially selfish act – the implication behind Watts’s association of “egoistic” and “appetitive.” Mrs Beeton would be outraged. It is precisely such a charge – that selfishness, self-gratification, is the defining characteristic of all eating – that the discourse of dining attempts to dispel. By implication, all the eating in the tale is like Beeton’s “aboriginal Australian” meal – a naked lunch which exposes the self-centredness of each atomized consumer, satisfying their own appetites. There is no such thing as “essen,” only “fressen” with varying degrees of sophistication. The idea

of commensality or the benefits of dining as opposed to eating are just examples of what Conrad calls “commonplace sentimentality.” The next section of this paper challenges these assumptions about the role of eating in “Falk” by examining Conrad’s own comments on dining.

*Conrad’s Ideas of Gastronomy*

PERHAPS THE KEY REASON that critics have dismissed Schomberg’s and Hermann’s claims for a distinction between eating and dining is that both frame the distinction in racial, indeed racist, terms. As Beeton makes clear, they are far from unique in nineteenth-century gastronomic theory in doing so. For Schomberg, a “white man should eat like a white man, dash it all . . . Ought to eat meat, must eat meat” (98). For Hermann, Falk has revealed himself as both a “beast” and a “common cannibal” – there being little if any distinction in his mind between the two. Beeton similarly comments, “Creatures of the inferior races eat and drink; man only dines” (363). Somewhat unsettlingly, when Conrad himself discusses dining, he sounds a lot like all three of them.

In the 1923 preface to his wife Jessie’s *Handbook of Cookery for a Small House*, Conrad claims that “Good cooking is a moral agent,” adding that “the intimate influence of conscientious cookery promotes” the “serenity of mind,” “graciousness of thought,” and “indulgent view of our neighbour’s failings,” which combine to produce “the only genuine form of optimism.” These are cooking’s “titles for our reverence,” he concludes (v–vi). Conrad illustrates this claim by comparing the serene, gracious, indulgent “Small House” of his wife’s title to the “wigwam” of the Native American. “A great authority upon North American Indians,” Conrad explains, “accounted for the sombre and excessive ferocity of these savages by the theory that as a race they suffered from perpetual indigestion . . . The Noble Red Man was a mighty hunter, but his wives had not mastered the art of conscientious cookery – and the consequences were deplorable” (vi). In addition to the tendency towards “unreasonable violence” that is produced by this indigestion, he is “in abject submission to the wiles of a multitude of fraudulent medicine men” (vi–vii). Developing Schomberg’s argument, Conrad’s preface seems to claim that a white man “ought to,” “must,” eat like a white man, or they will end up like a “Red Man.”

Tanner makes the necessary distinction between “Conrad writing as Jessie’s husband, the sane and contented Western citizen” (18) and the (much younger) Conrad writing as a novelist. For Tanner, the preface sets up an opposition between the “morose irritability,” the “unreasonable violence,” and “gloomy imaginings” produced by life in the wigwam and the “decency,” “serenity,” and “graciousness” of life in Jessie’s “Small House.” In contrast, he claims, Conrad’s fiction “works to dissolve the dangerous habit of dualistic (i.e. oppositional) thinking” (18). Tanner argues that Conrad’s Native American should be associated with Falk himself – both are prey to “gloomy imaginings” and “morose irritability” brought on by inappropriate eating.

“Falk” subverts this opposition, according to Tanner, by collapsing the distinction between eating and dining. In making this claim, however, he oversimplifies Conrad’s preface – and underestimates what it has in common with “Falk.” No reader of Conrad’s preface can ignore the fact that “gloomy imaginings,” “morose irritability,” and outbursts of “unreasonable violence” are not unknown even among civilized European diners. It is worth noting, however, that Conrad’s Native Americans are predisposed by their diet not



simply to violence but to “unreasonable violence” (vi–vii). It is the apparent irrationality of their violent outbursts that the preface sees as markers of alterity and savagery, rather than the violence itself. “Unreasonable,” furthermore, carries the double sense of the violence being both irrational in itself and also apparently resistant to rational analysis.<sup>16</sup> But Tanner overgeneralizes about the perceived audience of the *Handbook* by describing it as the “Western kitchen” and the “stable edifice of the settled bourgeois” (18). Jessie Conrad herself is quite clear that the cookbook is aimed at a specific class: the dweller in a small house, who must undertake many of the household tasks personally, including cooking. As Joseph Conrad’s preface is well aware, this is precisely the class identified most strongly with indigestion. L. Leney’s *Indigestion and How to Cure It* (1904) identifies such digestive complaints as most common not amongst “Red Men,” but amongst “Clerks, typewriters, dress-makers, milliners, shop-assistants” and “workers in factories” (66) – the urban and suburban audience to whom Jessie Conrad’s cookbook addresses itself. At roughly the same time Conrad was writing his preface, F. A. Hornibrook’s *The Culture of the Abdomen* (1924) was addressing the digestive problems of those with sedentary occupations by counselling a return to the dining patterns, posture, and evacuative position (crouching over a specially designed toilet) of “primitive” peoples. An examination of the variety of texts suggesting solutions for the problem of poor digestion suggests both that the problem was pervasive and that it was not only Native Americans who were subject to the advice of a variety of “medicine men” of varying degrees of usefulness.

A literary equivalent to the preface’s uncomfortable Native American resides not in Falk, but in the eponymous protagonist of H. G. Wells’s *The History of Mr Polly* (1910), who “suffered indigestion now nearly every afternoon of his life, but as he lacked introspection . . . projected the associated discomfort upon the world” (7). Mr Polly’s indigestion is also imagined to lead to violence (although only metaphorically):

Mr Polly’s system, like a confused and ill-governed democracy, had been brought to a state of perpetual clamour and disorder, demanding now evil and intolerable and unsuitable internal satisfactions such as pickles and vinegar and crackling on pork, and now vindictive external expressions, such as war and bloodshed throughout the world. (138)

Here, the association is not between primitive eating and savage violence, but between industrialized eating and colonial violence. By locating the preface in contemporary discourses about eating and identity, what Conrad is doing becomes more clearly evident. This paper makes a similar claim about “Falk.”

As Tanner wittily notes, Conrad undoubtedly did not intend that “readers should start to question the prevailing vocabulary of the Western kitchen” (19). Rather, Conrad is putting forwards a semi-serious claim about the effects of bad diet – presumably to be remedied by the advice his wife provides in her cookbook. While Conrad reverses the racialization of the division between dining and eating, in other words, the distinction itself remains valid.

*“Much Depends on Dinner”*: “Falk,” Mrs Beeton, and Don Juan

AS FALK TELLS THE story of the *Borgmester Dahl*, the narrator admits that he has a “head full of preconceived notions as to how a case of ‘cannibalism and suffering at sea’ should be managed” (135). Watts directs the reader’s attention to two contemporary (and widely

reported) cases: that of Thomas Dudley and Edwin Stevens in 1884, and that of Andersen and Thomassen in 1899 (226–27). He further notes that such “preconceived notions” may also be partly literary in inspiration, derived from the depiction of maritime cannibalism in Byron’s *Don Juan*. In canto 2 of the poem, Don Juan is trapped in an open boat after the ship on which he has been travelling, the “Trinidad,” has sunk in a storm. Juan has to watch as his tutor is eaten, after the survivors have drawn lots to determine their fate (*Don Juan* 2.73–75.577–600). It is certainly possible that the narrator has this in mind when he comments to Falk, “You were then so lucky in the drawing of lots?” (135). Falk laughs scornfully at this suggestion: “Do you think I would have allowed my life to go for the drawing of lots?” (135).<sup>17</sup>

It is not only in relation to cannibalism, however, that echoes of *Don Juan* reverberate in “Falk.” Like Conrad’s tale, Byron’s poem is one in which the links between dining and human progress are subjected to sceptical examination. This section explores the relationship between “Falk” and the depiction of the dinner at Norman Abbey in canto 13 of *Don Juan*. Furthermore, it suggests that Conrad’s use of Byron contrasts revealingly with Beeton’s more explicit appropriation of the same meal in her *Book of Household Management*, which quotes *Don Juan* at length. This juxtaposition not only underscores what ideas of gastronomy these texts share, but also illustrates the ways in which they are distinctive from each other.

Like Schomberg, like the preface to the *Handbook of Cookery for the Small House*, the narrator of *Don Juan* is much concerned with the connection between eating and civilization:

Lord Henry and his Lady were the hosts;  
The party we have touch’d on were the guests:  
Their table was a board to tempt even ghosts  
To pass the Styx for more substantial feasts.  
I will not dwell on ragouts or roasts,  
Albeit all human history attests,  
That happiness for Man – the hungry sinner! –  
Since Eve ate apples, much depends on dinner.  
(13.99.785–92)

In his next stanza, however, Byron expresses greater scepticism about dining as a symbol of human progress:

Witness the land which “flowed with milk and honey,”  
Held out unto the hungry Israelites:  
To this we have added since, the love of money,  
The only sort of pleasure which requites.  
Youth fades, and leaves our days no longer sunny;  
We tire of Mistresses and Parasites;  
But oh, Ambrosial Cash! Ah who would lose thee? (13.100.793–99)

Like “Falk,” this stanza disturbingly associates sexual, economic, and gastronomic appetites. Indeed, in *Don Juan* the appetite for “Ambrosial” cash displaces (or consumes) all other appetites. For Freud, the confusion of appetites is characteristic of the earliest phase of sexual organisation and the most primitive phase of human civilization (the cannibal). For

Byron, the opposite is true. Where, then, does this leave Beeton’s attempts to “rank” a “people” in the “grand scale” according to “their way of taking their meal” (Beeton 363)? How, furthermore, can she enlist Byron’s poem in such a schema?

Beeton’s chapter on “Dinners and Dining,” which is the focus of this paper’s interest in the *Book of Household Management*, begins with a lengthy compilation of literary quotations in praise of dining. Locating the beginning of civilized dining in Classical Greece, Beeton’s chapter provides quotations in chronological order from Milton, Keats, and Tennyson. Perhaps more surprisingly, she also includes two lengthy quotations from *Don Juan*. The chapter then proceeds to offer course settings and bills of fare for a wide variety of dinners. Other than Byron, Beeton’s examples of literary meals – Adam and Eve in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), the meal served by Porphyro in Keats’s “The Eve of St Agnes” (1884), the picnic from Tennyson’s “Audley Court” (1842) – are all meals which emphasize intimacy between a couple. All contrast with the savage eating of the Australian aborigine and his “squaw.” It is furthermore somewhat unclear, in Beeton’s example, whether it is the Australian or the bone that is “half bare” – an ambiguity that raises a disturbing spectre of cannibalism.

Beeton quotes Byron’s lines on Lord Henry’s feast, but then skips ahead to stanza 69 of canto 15:

Who would suppose, from Adam’s simple ration,  
That cookery could have call’d forth such resources,  
As form a science and a nomenclature  
From out the commonest demands of nature?  
(15.69.549–52; qtd. in Beeton 364)

In so doing, Beeton avoids the entanglement of economics, sexual desire, and eating emphasized in *Don Juan* to have Byron instead commenting unironically on “the curious complexity of the results produced by human cleverness and application catering for the modifications which occur in civilized life, one of the simplest of the primal instincts” (363–64). Where Byron suggests acidly that commercial appetites have usurped all others, Beeton enlists *Don Juan* to attest to the continual (and mutually inalienable) upward progress of civilization and dining.

Like Beeton, Conrad rewrites Byron, but to a different end. Like the narrator of *Don Juan* in stanza 99, the narrator of “Falk” imagines himself dining surrounded by ghosts. In “Falk,” these are the “ghostly Presences” of those who have (wisely) avoided Schomberg’s *table d’hôte*, ironically summoned into existence to fill the empty chairs ignored by Schomberg’s self-evidently false assertion that, “There’s first-rate company always at my table” (98). While Beeton avoids the relationship between eating and economics that Byron asserts – the idea that economic appetite displaces or subsumes the physical, deadening all pleasure in food – Schomberg’s attempt to do so fails. The *table d’hôte* parodies the ideas of dining that Schomberg spouts – it pretends to ideas of hospitality, commensality, fellowship just as its buffalo meat aspires to pass itself off as beef. It is all too clear, both to the reader and to the narrator, that it is economic considerations that lie behind Schomberg’s hospitality and which frequently surface in his anger at Falk. It is Schomberg, not Conrad or his narrator, who sees participation in such a meal as a marker of being civilized.

Conrad himself undermines the supposed relationship between dining and being civilized even more strikingly in a well-known episode in *Heart of Darkness*. Travelling upriver with a group of pilgrims as his passengers and a group of self-professed cannibals as his crew, Marlow faces a potential mutiny when the pilgrims throw the cannibals' supply of "rotten hippo-meat" overboard. The pilgrims compensate the outraged crew in the regional currency, "pieces of brass wire, each about nine inches long" (70). However, as Marlow observes, this exchange is useless, since there is nowhere for them to purchase food with this "extravagant salary" (70). Like Freud's cannibals, Marlow's belong "to the beginnings of time – had no inherited experience to teach them, as it were" (69). What surprises Marlow, however, is that the "cannibals" refuse to act according to type: "Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us . . . and have a good tuck-in for once, amazes me now when I think of it" (70). Like Beeton, Marlow imagines (even defines) the primitive as a place without dining etiquette, in which the boundaries between people and food are blurred.<sup>18</sup> However, and to Marlow's bafflement, the only confusion of categories that occurs during this incident is on the part of the pilgrims, who confuse food and money. Furthermore, it is the pilgrims who commit a breach of table manners. For both Conrad and Byron, it is commercial modernity, not primitive savagery, that is the antithesis of true dining. This is an apparent paradox to which Conrad returns in the frame narrative of "Falk," a discussion of which concludes this paper.

### *Conclusion*

"FALK" IS A TALE told by a hungry man. The "small river-hostelry" where the narrator's story unfolds provides an excellent view of the Thames but an "execrable dinner": "all the feast was for the eyes" (77). The narrator of this frame story speculatively compares the setting to an ancient "lacustrine dwelling," noting the "antediluvian and worm-eaten sideboard" and the "chipped plates" that "might have been disinterred from "some kitchen midden near an inhabited lake" (77). The "chops" they are served "recalled times more ancient still":

They brought forcibly to one's mind the night of ages when the primeval man, evolving the first rudiments of cookery from his dim consciousness, scorched lumps of flesh at a fire of sticks in the company of other good fellows; then, gorged and happy, sat back among the gnawed bones to tell his artless tales of experience – the tales of hunger and hunt – and of women, perhaps! (77)

Tanner, in his elegant reflections on the relationship between the frame narrative and the story of Falk, observes that this is a fitting "prelude to a tale which will question the accepted differences and distances between the primeval or primitive and the civilized" (25). As Watts adds, "What ensues" in the subsequent narrative is "a tale of extreme hunger, of a man-hunt to the death, and of a woman who is the object of a form of hunting" (xv). This paper argues the opposite.

"The use of a group having a rotten meal in an old restaurant as a frame situation for a story about cannibalism is a suitable ironic device," Tanner suggests (25). The phrase "lumps of flesh" anticipates Schomberg's lip-smacking description of Hermann's niece as "a fine lump of a girl" (112). As Tanner notes, "The connection between hunger and the sexual drive is very explicit in the story" (22). It is a connection with equally explicit overtones of cannibalism, Hermann's niece being the woman for whom Falk symbolically hungers. For

Tanner, the meal in the restaurant – like all meals in “Falk” – gestures towards the moment when it is revealed that Falk is a cannibal. The bad meal at the restaurant and the imagined primeval feast are supposedly similar, conflating the primitive and the present, just as Falk’s actual and symbolic act of cannibalism confuses the distinction between the savage other and the civilized European. However, what also emerges from the juxtaposition of the framing meal and the imagined primitive feast is not their similarity, but their dissimilarity. In one sense, the primitive feast is the only real dinner in the tale: the only time when fellowship, satisfying food, and a sense of shared experience come together.<sup>19</sup>

According to this logic, rather than a series of parodies of Falk’s cannibalism, the other meals in the tale make a series of gestures towards this ideal of dining, all of which fall short in different ways. “Falk,” then, presents a series of meals that go wrong, including the companionable but sadly foodless “dinner” at the river-hostelry, the narrator’s dinner at Schomberg’s, Falk’s solitary meals alone in the wheel-house, da Costa’s burnt turtle steak, and Falk’s attempts at one point to tear a cushion with his teeth (134). Even the breakdown of the *Borgmester Dahl* results not simply in cannibalism, but first in a series of parodies of dining. Preceded by the discovery that the ship’s meat has spoiled and must be jettisoned (136), the breakdown is followed by attempts by members of the crew to make soup of their boots, to drink the oil in the lamps before all eating the candles, even to start eating the wood of the ship itself (139).<sup>20</sup> All this takes place, as Falk emphasizes, in a setting which has all the trappings necessary for dining at its most civilized: “a ship with beds, bedding, knives, forks, comfortable cabins, glass and china, and a complete cook’s galley” (139).

Searching for a pilot who can guide his ship out of the port without Falk’s help, the narrator encounters an “immensely corpulent” Italian, imprisoned in a small cell for murder (110). This Antonio, who does nothing but eat, is a “bloated carcass, apparently more than half filling the sort of cell wherein it sat, recalled . . . a fat pig in a sty” (110). The Italian’s “bloated” body echoes the earlier description of Falk as “a bloated monopolist” (89), feeding vampirically on the local merchant-skipper.<sup>21</sup> But “it” is also like a pig. Elsewhere Falk makes men into food; here the Italian does it to himself. An oddity of Falk’s dining alone is that when he feeds on human flesh on the *Borgmester Dahl*, Conrad emphatically tells readers that he does not do so alone. Having shot the carpenter, “there crept into view one by one . . . a band of hungry and livid skeletons” (141). Similarly, after Falk dispatches his subsequent victims, the other survivors emerge from “their hiding-places at the seductive sound of a shot” (141).<sup>22</sup> Eating alone in his wheelhouse, the Falk of the tale’s present echoes the self-indulgent Italian more closely than the primitives that are imagined in the frame narrative. Although strangely nonchalant about Falk’s cannibalism (as both Tanner and Watts comment), the narrator is outraged by Antonio. If Falk’s cannibalism is a case study in reverse evolution, a reversion to a state of society before dining, his subsequent mode of eating (alone, pleasurelessly, at his place of work) seems to gesture forward – to a society which has left dining behind. The narrator comes across Schomberg eating alone at his *table d’hôte*, “feeding himself furiously” and seeming to “overflow with bitterness” (96). It is in such an atmosphere that the narrator himself eats, joylessly, while dealing with business in town. As in *Don Juan*, commercial appetites are at odds with the ideal of dining – despite Schomberg’s hopeless attempt to reconcile the two.

There is no firm evidence that Conrad had read Mrs Beeton, or had her work specifically in mind when writing “Falk.” In his preface to Jessie Conrad’s cookbook, he confesses, “I find it impossible to read through a cookery book” (v). Nevertheless, where Mrs Beeton

assembles a collection of literary quotations in praise of dining, “Falk” offers a series of dinners-gone-wrong. Where Beeton’s aboriginal meal is the opposite of dining, in “Falk,” it is a primitive feast that represents a lost ideal of dining.

In her edition of the *Book of Household Management*, Nicola Humble makes a key observation for the purpose of comparing Conrad’s text and Beeton’s when she notes the dramatic shift in domestic arrangements that Beeton’s original readership was undergoing. “Husbands,” Humble notes “increasingly travelled into the centre of London and other large cities to work, and took their midday and often their evening meal in town” (xxiii). Beeton alludes to this development in her preface (3), and Humble cites an early twentieth-century commentator who notes in retrospect that the influence of “Beetonism has preserved the family as a social unit” (Nown 60; qtd. in Humble xii). Like that of Falk and Hermann’s niece, the success of such marriages depended on the improvisation of a new set of domestic arrangements. Despite a distance of forty years between the original publication of the two texts, and despite the very different kind of texts that they are, both perform a similar sleight of hand. While both works refract their discussions of dining through the apparent opposition between savagery and civilization, the primitive and the contemporary, both Beeton and Conrad are as concerned with the imminent possibility of the end of dining as with its beginning. In contrast to Beeton’s series of poetic extracts in praise of dining and its continuing progress, “Falk” marks a transition point in the literary prose of dining: midway between the diners of Dickens and the unhappy Mr Polly or the solitary eaters of James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914).<sup>23</sup>

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## NOTES

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1. Written in 1901 but not serialized, “Falk: A Reminiscence” first appeared in *Typhoon and Other Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1903).
2. The citation is for Karl and Davies’s translation of the letter, originally in French (2: 399). Watts also cites this translation (xvi).
3. In *Structural Anthropology*, Lévi-Strauss suggests that food can be interpreted using the methods that structural linguistics applies to language by dividing “the cuisine of a society” into “gustemes,” constituent units of meaning (85–87). Fischler has suggested that food was, for Lévi-Strauss, what dreams were to Freud: “a royal road” to the understanding of the deep structures underlying human thought (qtd. in Mennell, Murcott, and van Otterloo 20). In Lévi-Strauss’s famous culinary triangle, the poles of raw (*cru*), cooked (*cuit*), and rotten (*pourri*) form the structure on which human thought about culture and nature are based (“The Culinary Triangle” 590). Lévi-Strauss later complicated this triangle in his *Mythologiques* (translated into English as *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*) which addresses the significance of the methods of cooking used in transforming the raw into the cooked.
4. Douglas, among others, has criticized Lévi-Strauss’s search for a “pre-coded, panhuman message in the language of food” (250).
5. Watts notes in his introduction to *Typhoon and Other Tales* that the narrator of “Falk,” “whose ship resembles Conrad’s *Otago*, appears also to be the narrator of ‘The Secret Sharer’, *The Shadow-Line*,

- and ‘A Smile of Fortune’; furthermore he has clear resemblances to the young seafaring Conrad depicted in *The Mirror of the Sea*” (xxxix).
6. Identified by Watts as Bangkok (“Notes” 224).
  7. Schomberg first appeared in *Lord Jim* (1900), and he plays a significant role in *Victory* (1915). Axel Heyst in *Victory* is another man whom Schomberg describes as “turning up his nose at my table d’hôte.”
  8. A *table d’hôte*, Watts notes, is “a meal served at a set time and set rate in a hotel or restaurant” (241).
  9. Schomberg uses variants of the word twice: “decent” and “decently” (“Falk” 98). The word is often related to eating in Conrad – it is also used in this context in *Victory* (37) and in Conrad’s preface to the *Handbook of Cookery for a Small House*: “The decency of our life is for the most part a matter of good taste” (“Preface” v; qtd. in Tanner 17).
  10. This is the sense in which it is used in Brillat-Savarin’s *La Physiologie du goût – The Philosopher in the Kitchen*, as the 1970 Penguin translation has it.
  11. In the explanatory notes to her edition of Mrs Beeton’s *Book of Household Management*, Humble describes Brillat-Savarin (1755–1825) as “a French judge, famed for his excellent table as well as his treatise on gastronomy” (587). All quotations from Brillat-Savarin in this article are given in Beeton’s own translation. This quotation can be found on page 13 of the Penguin edition of Brillat-Savarin’s *The Philosopher in the Kitchen*.
  12. This quotation is cited in Beeton’s translation. See also the Penguin edition of Brillat-Savarin’s *The Philosopher in the Kitchen* 166.
  13. The struggle between Falk and the carpenter strongly recalls the fatal conflict between Kayerts and Carlier, the two European inhabitants of an isolated African trading station in Conrad’s earlier story “An Outpost of Progress” (1897). Kayerts and Carlier, who have been reduced to living “on rice boiled without salt” (251), turn violently on each other in a row triggered by Carlier’s desire to dip into the last of the station’s dwindling reserves of sugar in order to sweeten his coffee. In the ensuing conflict, Kayerts accidentally shoots Carlier with a revolver, in the mistaken belief that he himself is about to be shot. As in “Falk,” Kayerts’s faith in “Progress and civilization and all the virtues” (256) is closely associated with the ideals of dining – and Kayerts’s belief in the station as an “outpost” of such virtues is undermined by a meal that goes terribly, fatally, wrong. Unlike Falk, Kayerts is unable to justify his actions to himself, and ends the story by committing suicide.
  14. See O’Hanlon and Anderson. Both are cited in Erdinast-Vulcan 96.
  15. Both Sewlall and Watts are, of course, consciously drawing upon Tanner. I am using them to suggest the different ways in which Tanner’s insights have been developed and to suggest why a re-examination of Tanner’s basic assumptions is necessary.
  16. A fruitful point of comparison might be Ugarte’s discussion of the colonial discourses surrounding the phenomenon of “running amok” in the context of the Philippines.
  17. The narrator may also have in mind Arthur Gordon Pym, of Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838). In chapter 12 of Poe’s novel, Pym finds himself stuck aboard a stranded ship along with an increasingly starving and lethargic crew. Unlike “Falk,” however, the cannibalism in *Arthur Gordon Pym* follows a drawing of lots among the surviving sailors, and the killing, dismemberment, and consumption of Pym’s unfortunate shipmate Peters is an operation undertaken in concert by the rest of the crew. Again unlike Falk, Peters surrenders his life without a struggle.
  18. Similarly, dining plays a significant role in Marlow’s attempts to imagine England in its time as “one of the dark places of the earth.” Marlow’s Roman legionaries find there “precious little fit to eat for a civilized man” (*Heart of Darkness* 19).
  19. Nevertheless, this primitive meal apparently excludes women, as indeed does the dinner at the riverside hostel.
  20. The spoiled meat on the *Borgmester Dahl*, which must be discarded, recalls the rotten hippo meat that Marlow’s pilgrims throw overboard in *Heart of Darkness*. In both stories, the rottenness of the meat unsettles the distinction between the inedible and the edible in ways that anticipate the texts’

later explorations of cannibalism. There may also be another echo here of Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym. Like Falk, Pym is another literary cannibal who has had his rations of meat go rotten (chapter 2). In Pym's case, the spoiled meat proves perfectly palatable to the ship's dog.

21. Bloating is also a physical symptom associated with drowned bodies – a worrying quality to note in a ship's pilot. The series of parallels between Antonio and Falk is perhaps extended in this metaphorical association between the Italian and the unfortunate victims of nautical mishaps – among whom, of course, Falk would number himself.
22. Like Falk, Arthur Gordon Pym's human dinner is shared with his other starving shipmates. In Poe's novel, however, the killing is preceded by the drawing of lots, and the remaining crew take part not only in the act of eating itself, but in the procedures surrounding it (chapter 12). Indeed, the arrangements for the meal in Poe's novel demonstrate that order among Pym's fellow crewmates has not broken down into a struggle for the survival of the fittest. Peters, the crewman who is eaten, is merely the unluckiest of the crew, rather than its weakest member. Indeed, it is Peters himself who first proposes that they draw lots to see who will be sacrificed for the survival of the others. It is also worth noting that the "seductive" sound of the deadly shot in "Falk" is another of the tale's confluences of different physical appetites.
23. I am thinking here of Lenehan's plate of peas in "Two Gallants" (51) and Mr Duffy's "small tray of arrowroot biscuits" (104) in "A Painful Case." In "The Dead," the character of Gabriel Conroy explicitly identifies the Christmas dinner as a relic of the past, part of a dying tradition of Irish hospitality (204).

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