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Conrad’s Ideas of Gastronomy: Dining in ‘Falk’

Paul Vlitos

Introduction

In the century and more since Joseph Conrad’s ‘Falk: A Reminiscence’ was first published, the tale has been examined from a variety of critical perspectives. I would like to begin by considering 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, ii.402). Both Redmond O’Hanlon and Walter E. Anderson have focussed on the narrative’s depiction of an ‘almost primitive man’ to claim ‘Falk’ as a case-study in reverse evolution. Approaching the tale’s claims about primitivism ‘from a postcolonial perspective’, Harry Sewlall 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’ (Sewlall 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 in 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). 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 paper will focus on a related but previously underexamined categorical distinction in the tale: that between eating and dining. If cooking and eating are ‘a kind of language’, dining can be seen as the attempt to say something more specific in that language. 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*, this paper nevertheless suggests that they share an important set of anxieties about dining, or rather 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). ‘Falk’, I will argue, presents a series of meals which unsettle the distinction between eating and dining. In doing so, it raises difficulties for the attempt to use meals as a way of measuring a people’s rank in the grand scale, or indeed even 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 there has not previously been sufficient acknowledgement of the ways in which ‘Falk’’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 in Beeton, one of the standards by which civilization can be judged.

The paper will begin by focussing on what it takes as a key moment in the tale: a discussion of the usefulness of gastronomy in making judgements about character. It will be argued that this discussion highlights the tale’s interest in the question of what it means to dine.
The second part of the paper examines the attempts of previous critics to explain the enormous number and variety of references to food and consumption (both literal and metaphorical) in ‘Falk’. The third part of the paper explores Conrad’s own opinions about dining and its significance. The fourth part of the paper investigates the tale’s allusions to previous literary dinners. The fifth and final part of the paper reads ‘Falk’ against the chapter in Beeton’s text devoted to ‘Dinners and Dining’, in order to suggest what each text helps illuminate 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). 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.’ This ‘absurdity’, he begins by explaining, ‘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. (‘Falk’, 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
suspicions, 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 notorious
gossip Schomberg.7 Having offered his opinion that ‘Falk isn’t a man
to make mistakes except on purpose’, and that his motive was 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,8 and sent cards out — you
know. 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
(both 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 being 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 as ‘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. 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 origin of Falk’s unusual domestic arrangements lies 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. Certainly the narrator does not seem familiar with 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’. Nor does it appear he has 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). While 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, it is nevertheless 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 will explore further, ‘Falk’ is a tale in which food and eating play a remarkably prominent part.

Before this paper goes on to explore what previous critics have made of this proliferation of references to eating, however, I would like to emphasize what I have attempted to highlight by detaching 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, that what seems like a pointless conversation is later illuminated by the discovery that Falk is 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 commensality. I want to suggest that while they are obviously deeply entangled, we can nevertheless distinguish the tale’s interest in eating from its interest in dining. While Falk is the only cannibal in ‘Falk’, 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 in doing so 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). 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’, this is an acknowledgement of bad literary taste that wilfully compounds the offence. For subsequent critics, of stronger stomach perhaps, it is this ‘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, order on the ship collapses, 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, at least according to Falk’s account, the carpenter 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 Carpenter on deck (140).

Rather than alloying 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 cross-bar 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. Missing, 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).

Falk finally reveals his secret because he wishes to marry Hermann’s niece, but refuses to do so without 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!’ (Falk, 132). Hermann’s horror is not so much at the act itself, but at Falk’s decision to tell them about it. Notably, however, 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’ (‘Falk’ 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 him talking about Falk in German and catches:

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’ is used to indicate 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 explore ‘Falk’ as a tale of reverse evolution. Redmond O’Hanlon and Walter E. Anderson, for example, demonstrate the ways in which Falk justifies his behaviour with echoes of and coded appeals to 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. 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, but on
his retention of the ship’s sole remaining revolver, which he uses to hunt down his remaining shipmates. Only three others remain alive to be rescued by a whaling ship, and they too have subsequently 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 tug-boat 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 the economic and sexual behaviour in the rest of the tale. As Tony 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 that ‘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. Freud suggests 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’ (vii.198). Discussing Freud, and Melanie Klein’s claim that ‘The 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’ (Ellmann, 38). Falk’s sexual appetite is more haunted than most. Likewise, when Falk’s secret is considered not as the opposite of his role as modern European capitalist monopolist, but rather as of a piece with it, we might consider 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’ (Marx 342). ‘Falk’ renders such metaphors literal.

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 entanglement of the two. Harry Sewlall argues that Falk’s cannibalism collapses the role cannibalism 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, Cedric 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”’ (Watts xvii). ‘Culture may refine and elaborate it’, Watts suggests, ‘but basically love is appetitive and egoistic.’

All three critics share two basic assumptions, which this paper argues demand reinvestigation. The first assumption is that Falk’s acts of cannibalism are the central meals in the narrative. 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’ 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 will attempt to challenge 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 and Hermann’s claims for a distinction between eating and dining is that both frame the distinction in racial, indeed racist, terms. As we have seen from Beeton, 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 that ‘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 (‘Preface’, 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). He is, in addition to the tendency towards ‘unreasonable violence’ that is produced by this indigestion, ‘in abject submission to the wiles of a multitude of fraudulent medicine men’ (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’.

Tony Tanner makes the necessary distinction between ‘Conrad writing as Jessie’s husband, the sane and contented Western citizen’ (Tanner 18) and the (much younger) Conrad the 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, claims Tanner, Conrad’s fiction ‘works to dissolve the dangerous habit of dualistic (i.e. oppositional) thinking’ (Tanner 18). For Tanner, Conrad’s Native American should be associated with Falk himself — both are prey to ‘gloomy imaginings’ and ‘morose irritability’ brought on by inappropriate eating.

For Tanner, ‘Falk’ subverts this opposition by collapsing the distinction between eating and dining. In making this claim Tanner 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 even outbursts of ‘unreasonable violence’, are not unknown even among civilized European diners. But Tanner somewhat 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 for whom many of the household tasks, including cooking, must be undertaken by themselves. 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’ (Leney 66) — the urban and suburban audience to whom Jessie Conrad’s cookbook addresses itself. At the same time Conrad was writing his preface, F.A. Hornibrook’s *The Culture of the Abdomen* 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 the prevalence of the problem 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.

If we are looking for a literary equivalent to the preface’s uncomfortable Native American we can find it not in Falk, but in H.G.Wells’ Mr Polly, 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 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 did not presumably intend that
‘readers should start to question the prevailing vocabulary of the Western kitchen’ (Tanner 19). Rather, Conrad is putting forwards a semi-serious claim about the effects of bad diet — presumably to be remedied by his wife’s advice in her cookbook. While Conrad reverses the racialization of the division between dining and eating, the distinction itself remains valid.

‘Much Depends on Dinner’: Literary Allusion in ‘Falk’

As Falk begins to tell 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). Cedric 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 (Watts 226-7). Falk’s insistence that he deserves pity, not condemnation, echoes the best-selling memoir published by Jean-Baptiste Henri Savigny and Alexandre Corréard, two of the survivors of the 1816 wreck of La Méduse: ‘Reader we beseech you, do not feel indignation towards men who are already too unfortunate; but have compassion on them, and shed some tears of pity on their unhappy fate.’ (Savigny and Corréard, 52-3, quoted in Crain 25). In the event the narrator’s preconceptions prove misleading. Unlike either case, Falk’s cannibalism takes place on board ship, rather than in an open raft, and Falk emphasizes that the Borgmester Dahl has suffered a ‘breakdown’ rather than being shipwrecked (135). Whether we feel pity or horror in relation to Falk’s actions is, of course, left open in Conrad’s tale.

This section will focus, however, on a pair of literary allusions in ‘Falk’. The first, to Byron’s *Don Juan*, is to a text which also features cannibalism at sea. The second, perhaps more surprisingly, is to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. What these allusions have in common is that they are both to texts in which food and eating play a prominent part. Furthermore, they are both texts from which Beeton quotes at length, using them to illustrate the distinction between dining and eating.

In Canto II of Byron’s poem *Don Juan* is trapped in an open boat after the ship on which he has been travelling, the ‘Trinidada’ 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* II.73-5). 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 the suggestion to scorn: ‘Do you think I would have allowed
my life to go for the drawing of lots?’ (135). Watts, however, detects
an earlier reference to Byron in the tale, when the narrator refers to
‘tides in the affairs of men which taken at the flood… and so on’ (94).
The primary reference is to *Julius Caesar* (IV.iii.216-7) — ‘There
is a tide in the affairs of men./Which taken at the flood, leads on to
fortune’. Watts detects a further echo — of *Don Juan*’s lines ‘“There
is a tide in the affairs of men./ Which taken at the flood,” — you
know the rest’ (VI.i, noted Watts 226). In a tale set in a tidal port,
which hinges on the resulting reliance of craft like Hermann’s and the
narrator’s on Falk’s steam-powered tug, the reference is particularly
apt.

This paper suggests a further echo of Don Juan in ‘Falk’, and
one far removed from the eating of Don Juan’s tutor: the dinner at
Norman Abbey in Canto XIII. Like Schomberg, like the preface to the
*Handbook of Cookery for a Small House*, the narrator of *Don Juan*
expresses the connection between dining and human progress:

> 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.

*(Don Juan XIII.99.785-792)*

Watts (225) also suggests an echo of *Paradise Lost* in Falk: ‘from
early morn to dewy eve. In the last rays of the setting sun’ (89) echoing
*Paradise Lost*’s ‘from noon to dewy eve, / A summer’s day; and with
the setting sun…’ (I, 742-4). Both ‘Falk’ and *Don Juan* allude to the
idea of human history beginning with the act of eating what has been
forbidden.

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?

*(Don Juan, XIII.100.793-9)*

Like ‘Falk’, this stanza disturbingly associates sexual, economic and gastronomic appetites. Indeed in *Don Juan* the appetite for ‘Ambrosial’ cash displaces all other appetites. Where does this leave Beeton’s attempts to ‘rank’ a ‘people’ in the ‘grand scale’ according to ‘their way of taking their meal, as well as by their way of treating their women?’ (363).

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 *Paradise Lost*, Keats and Tennyson. 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 *Paradise Lost*, the meal served by Porphyro in ‘The Eve of St Agnes’, the picnic from Tennyson’s ‘Audley Court’ — 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 if ‘half bare’ — an ambiguity that offers a disturbing hint of cannibalism.

Beeton quotes Byron’s lines on Lord Henry’s feast, but then skips ahead to Stanza 69 of Canto XV:

> Who would suppose, from Adam’s simple ration,<br>That cookery could have call’d forth such resources,<br>As form a science and a nomenclature<br>From out the commonest demands of nature?<br>

*(Don Juan, XV.549-552, quoted Beeton 364)*

In doing so, Beeton avoids the entanglement of economics and eating, to instead have Byron unironically commenting upon ‘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’ (Beeton, 363-4). Where the juxtaposition of ideas in Byron comments acidly on the commercialisation of pleasure in dining, Beeton’s juxtaposition firmly enlists *Don Juan* to attest 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 the physical, deadening all pleasure in food — Schomberg’s attempt to do so fails. It is all too clear, both to the reader and to the narrator, that it is economic considerations that lie behind his hospitality, and which frequently surface in his anger at Falk. 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. For both Conrad and Byron it is commercial modernity, not primitive savagery, that is the enemy of dining.

**Conclusion**

‘Falk’ is a tale told by a hungry man. The ‘small river-hostelry’ where the tale is being told, 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)

Tony 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 take 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). For Tanner this meal, 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 cannibalism confuses the distinction between the savage other and the civilized European. However, it could also be argued that what emerges from the juxtaposition of the framing-meal and the imagined primitive feast is not their similarity, but their dissimilarity. The primitive feast can be seen as the only real dinner in the tale: the only time when fellowship, satisfying food, and a sense of shared experience come together.\^{\text{14}}

Rather than a series of parodies of Falk’s cannibalism, the other meals in the tale can be seen as a series of gestures towards this ideal of dining which in different ways all fall short. Falk’ 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 only 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 the attempts of 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 (all 139). 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 a ‘immensely corpulent’ Italian, imprisoned in a small cell for murder (110). This Antonio, who does nothing but eat, is a ‘bloated carcase, apparently more than half filling the sort of cell wherein it sat, recalled […] a fat pig in a styte’ (110). ‘It’ is 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 fed
on human flesh, we are explicitly told 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). Likewise, after Falk dispatches his
subsequent victims, the other survivors emerge from ‘their hiding-
places at the seductive sound of a shot’ (141). Eating alone in his
wheel-house, the Falk of the tale’s present echoes the self-indulgent
Italian more closely than the primitives that are imagined in the frame-
narrative. 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 appetite takes the place
of the genuine pleasure in eating — despite Schomberg’s hopeless
attempt to reconcile the two.

We cannot be certain 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 that ‘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.

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 being undergone by Beeton’s original
readership. ‘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
ten twentieth-century commentator noting in retrospect that the influence
of ‘Beetonism has preserved the family as a social unit’ (Nown 60,
quoted 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 publications of the two texts, and despite the very different
texts that they are, both perform a similar sleight-of-hand. While both
texts frame their discussions of dining with 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, we might rather consider ‘Falk’ marking 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 Joyce’s *Dubliners*.15

Notes

1 Written om 1901 but not serialized, ‘Falk: A Reminiscence’ was first
published in *Typhoon and Other Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1903).
2 The citation is for Karl and Davies’ translation of the letter, originally in
French (ii.399). Cedric Watts also cites this translation (Watts xvi).
3 Lévi-Strauss suggests in *Structural Anthropology* 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
(85-7). Claude 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 (quoted in translation 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*, which attends to the significance of the methods of
cooking used in transforming the raw into the cooked.
4 Mary Douglas, among others, has criticized Lévi-Strauss’s search for a
‘precoded, panhuman message in the language of food’ (250).
5 Cedric 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* (xxxii).
6 Identified by Watts as Bangkok (‘Notes’ 224).
7 Schomberg first appeared in *Lord Jim* (1900), and 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 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, quoted in Tanner 17).

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.

Nicola Humble notes that ‘Brillat-Savarin (1755-1825) was a French judge, famed for his excellent table as well as his treatise on gastronomy’ (587).


Both Sewlall and Watts are, of course, consciously drawing upon Tanner. I am trying to use 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 may be necessary.

Nevertheless, this primitive meal apparently excludes women, as indeed does the dinner at the riverside hostel.

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 Christmas dinner is explicitly identified by Gabriel Conroy as a relic of the past, part of a dying tradition of Irish hospitality (204).

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