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TRANSGRESSIVE APPETITES

Deviant Food Practices in Victorian Literature and Culture

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"A FRESH CROP OF LIES": MARRIAGE AND FOOD AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUES IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S "THE RETURN"

Although forcefully criticised by many scholars,[1] "The Return" represents a significant and early attempt to move away from exotic settings towards the genteel English drawing room, a "London story" (Conrad 1983: I, 351) "[…] to give out the gospel of the *beastly* bourgeois", as Conrad wrote in a letter to Garnett (p. 393, italics mine). Its composition cost him a painful struggle and in the end, he managed to enact a story where the urban wilderness proves no better than the African setting about which he would write shortly after. As a Victorian in disguise, Conrad realised that the central structure of the nineteenth-century British novel, the "marriage plot", was haunted, from the shadows, by the "food plot", the other important, although more fragmentary and elusive, narrative structure of the period. I have borrowed the above definitions of plot from Michael Parrish Lee who, in his seminal book, *The Food Plot in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, follows the development of the British novel from the beginning to the end of the century, focusing on the way the two core narrative structures work in tandem and in tension with one another. He shows how the novel's key imaginative constructs – the bourgeois individual and the marriage plot – achieve their coherence by delimiting the materiality of eating. The food plot, as Lee defines it, concerns the way in which a variety of canonical examples, from Jane Austen to the *fin de siècle* and beyond, present food as a tool that shows rather than feeds life. The con-

1 Conrad himself prepared the way for this trend by calling "The Return" "a left-handed production" in the Author's Note to *Tales of Unrest* and referring to it as "odious" and "infernal" in a letter to Garnett (Conrad 1983: I, 386-388, 391-394). Graver considers the story an "example of a road not taken" and "[o]ne of the strangest works in Conrad's canon (Graver 1969: 34). Guerard is quite derogative and so other important critics of the first hour. However, in an unsigned review of the *Daily Mail* (1898) it is stated "[…] 'The Return' grips and holds us by sheer force of the author's psychological insight and his unusual ability to see common things in an uncommon way" (Sherry 1973: 103).

sequence is that more than an instance of feeding, the meal is turned into an occasion for hospitality, togetherness, and identity. However, during the nineteenth century, the construct of the individual and of the marriage plot became less stable as eating broke out of its conventional symbolic role and gained material and narrative force beyond the status as props and occasions for and distractions from more other ostensibly serious matters such as, for instance, the plight of the hungry.

I don't need to make too much of this fresh and provocative reading of the nineteenth-century novel, but I do need to refer to the book for some suggestions it proposes that have led me to analyse the way "The Return", written in 1897, deploys strategies which foreground questions about "the illusory nature of human knowledge" (Billy 1997: 176) – "impossible to know" becomes a haunting refrain in the last pages of the short story – through a typically Conradian interplay between the "marriage plot" and "food plot". Here, a subtle and covert entanglement of the two entwines appetite, desire, hunger to the point of arising suspicions towards a harmonious marriage which indeed resembles more and more an animalistic drive, and is reducible to a survival instinct:

> Thus Alvan Hervey and his wife for five prosperous years lived by the side of one another. In time they came to know each other sufficiently well for all the practical purposes of such an existence, but they were no more capable of real intimacy than *two animals feeding at the same manger*, under the same roof, in a *luxurious stable*. His longing was appeased and became a habit; and she had her desire – the desire to get away from under the paternal roof, to assert her individuality, to move in her own set (so much smarter than the parental one); to have a home of her own, and her own share of the world's respect, envy, and applause. (Conrad 1977: 115, italics mine)

By way of metaphor, the relationship between Alvan Hervey and his wife is described significantly as one between two animals eating "at the same manger […] in a luxurious stable". Their togetherness is part of a social order where hunger for love, desire, and interiority has been appeased and narrative and character require food as fuel in order to keep going and so becoming reducible – if not fully reduced – to biological life, to a bare plot of physical survival. Eating metaphors displace what is left of their marriage, which is reduced to an empty word.

However, considering that Conrad was writing in a period in which the growth of the British Empire was at its peak, this chapter will be interspersed with some suggestions that already swirled around the writer's head

concerning the phenomenon of cannibalism.[2] In his hands cannibalism takes on new nuances and becomes a metaphor for an act of accusation against the slowness of the bourgeoisie that, as a social class, demonstrates its total lack of ideological inclination in favour of the absolute safeguard of its *status quo*, income, and its sacred set of rules. The idea is implied in the many passages of "The Return" where Victorian conventions are called into question and the human existence inside the marriage plot becomes a life in death. Hence, social interest is envisioned as a kind of cannibalism of which the English middle-class couple is victim as part of

> […] all the crowd of houses outside, all the flimsy and inscrutable graves of the living, with their doors numbered like doors of prison-cells and as impenetrable as the granite of tombstones.
> "Yes. Restraint, duty, fidelity – *unswerving fidelity to what is expected of you*". (p. 114, italics mine)

The character of Alvan Hervey is the focalization of all the evidence, a single "centre of consciousness", whose inner break-down is signalled also in terms of his growing linguistic failure, in a world which shows that all external signs may be painfully deceptive. He is a very conventional person who works in the City of London and commutes from the suburbs. On arriving home early from work one day, he finds a letter from his wife which says that she has left him and gone off with the editor. Overwhelmed by shock and outrage, he does not know how to understand or deal with the situation. While he is in the middle of a kneejerk reaction of incredulity, dismay and worries, according to bourgeois convention, about the way to keep his wife's desertion secret, she comes back without any explanation for her action.

Since Conrad is venturing into the uncharted waters of London bourgeois society, "The Return" shows also a high level of experimentation,

2 Cannibalism will be a recurring feature in Conrad's writing and its significance will be explored analytically in *Heart of Darkness* as well as in "Falk". However, in "The Return" it is considered in its subtle metaphorical meaning and the relevance it can acquire in the relationship between human beings and their social environment. In this respect, I own a lot to the way metaphorical cannibalism has been acutely and extensively investigated in the chapter on *The Secret Agent*, by Kim Salmons (2017). Her discourse is very articulated and involves all the implications that references to food and eating may have in a period where the difference between "them" and "us" was necessary to justify the outrageousness of the colonial mission, to underline the opposing forces of anarchy and capitalism and to explore revolutionary tensions.

and it is interesting to follow the way the writer draws his story, dividing it into narrative sequences which correspond to the different places where "the weak *fabula* of the return (the action) develops through the obstacles of a plot that grows more and more complex till it explodes in the bedroom of the final scene".[3]

The opening scene is the only external one and shows a typical moment of metropolitan life: a train bringing home all those who work in the City. Among them, Alvan Hervey is one "of a band of brothers who through prudence, dignity, disgust or foresight would resolutely ignore each other" (p. 111). With due distance, the narrator here describes his character as the epitome of social conformity, and his marriage as a paradigm of the bourgeois marriage:

> They understood each other warily, tacitly, like a pair of cautious conspirators in a profitable plot; because they were both unable to look at a fact, a sentiment, a principle, or a belief otherwise than in the light of their own dignity, of their own glorification, of their own advantage. They skimmed over the surface of life hand in hand, in a pure and frosty atmosphere – like two skilful skaters cutting figures on thick ice for the admiration of the beholders, and disdainfully ignoring the hidden stream, the stream restless and dark; the stream of life, profound and unfrozen. (p. 115)

Both Mr Hervey and his wife are described primarily and insistently as healthy and good-looking people; they share connections, education and intelligence and a "charming sphere, the abode of all virtues, where nothing is realised, where all joys and sorrow are cautiously toned down into pleasure and annoyance" (p. 113). In fact, such a familiar story, where "emotion, enthusiasm or failure" are feared "more than fire, war or mortal disease" (p. 113), and only "the commonest thoughts" are tolerated, and "the profitable facts"[4] recognised, hides a tension between desire and appetite which challenges the cohesion of a five-year marriage of "prudent bliss unclouded by any doubt as to the moral propriety of their existence" (p. 113). To give some further hints to what he calls a "sacred and poetical

3 Cf. the perceptive introduction by Benedetta Bini to her new translation of "The Return" (2016: 18; the English translation is mine). She divides the narrative into sequences which follow the places of the house where the two characters try to bury their self-discovery. I am deeply indebted to her for my analysis since I have followed her way of decomposing the short story.

4 Cfr. Karain who wishes to escape into the "civilized" world where material facts alone have power and things unseen cease to exist, where men "understand all things seen, and despise all else" (Conrad 1977: 46).

fiction" (p. 112), the narrator has already compared Hervey's desire for the woman who would become his wife to "a longing stronger and a little more complex no doubt, but no more reprehensible in its nature than a hungry man's appetite for his dinner" (p. 113). It seems that the only appetite allowed is for food, and the longing for a woman is reduced to an innocuous impersonal bodily drive widely accepted as a system, the less dangerous to fight against, and the easiest to keep under control.

The following sequence inside the house confirms Hervey as the perfect middle-class man also in his ambitious tastes in the choice of furniture and picture on the walls: "His tastes were distinctly artistic" (p. 116). In particular, a marble statue of a woman stands as a mysterious guardian of the place. In the drawing room, significantly full of mirrors which multiply his image and later his emotive storm, the drama begins: there, he finds, with great annoyance, a letter from his wife addressed to him which says that she has eloped with another man. From now on, interior monologues and brief dialogues will alternate and the narrative voice will no longer report the actions coherently but will let Hervey's confused, disrupted and unfinished thoughts come on the page in a free indirect speech that blurs the boundaries between author and narrator:

> He felt very sick – physically sick as though he *had bitten* through something *nauseous*. Life that to a well ordered mind should be a matter of congratulation appeared to him for a second or so perfectly intolerable. He picked up the paper at his feet and sat down with the wish to think it out, to understand why his wife – his wife! – should leave him, should throw away respect, comfort, peace, decency, position – throw away everything for nothing. He set himself to think out the hidden logic of her action – a mental undertaking fit for the leisure hours of a madhouse […] He thought of her as a well-bred girl, as a wife, as a cultured person, as the mistress of a house, as a lady but he never for a moment thought of her simply as a woman. (pp. 119-120, italics mine)

Evidently, the trauma of the protagonist is neither sentimental nor emotive but social, since it is the bourgeois order that has been transgressed with Hervey feeling/falling the victim of a society which *cannibalises* the people who try to go outside the so-called safe borders.[5] His sickness is physical because it is the only one he can recognise and say. He does not have the words to express properly what is happening inside him, and when he

5 Hervey's drama discloses in many ways Kurtz's nightmare, notwithstanding the obvious differences of the context. Hervey's wife's elopement produces the same

recurs to his "ordered mind" the only available answer is a metaphor of eating which seems to fit perfectly his feelings. Mrs Hervey's faint attempt to get rid of the boredom of her existence, and to desire truth, openness and sincerity in her relationship produces in her husband such a stunned disbelief that makes his whole world no longer knowable, and he is on the point of "deteriorating":

> He was *disgusted* with himself, with the *loathsome* rush of emotion breaking through all the reserves that guarded his manhood. Something unknown, withering and *poisonous* had entered his life, passed near him, touched him – and he was *deteriorating*. (p. 121, italics mine)

The semantic field of food provides here signifiers showing how Hervey's identity has been shaken together with the ideology of a social class that represents itself in marriage. Moreover, Hervey's lexicon is perfectly in line with the idea developed by Stallybrass and White (1986) who maintain that the bourgeoisie defines itself by eliminating all that is considered to be low, dirty, disgusting and deteriorating. It is not surprising that these adjectives are obsessively repeated by the deranged man at every turn.

At this point, nothing is spared once "passion […] the unpardonable and secret infamy of our hearts […] [has] laid its unclean hand upon the *spotless* draperies of his existence and he [has] to face it alone with all the world looking on" (pp. 121-122). He has assimilated himself to his house, erasing any differences between in/side and out/side and thus, even the external reassuring landscape turns into something threatening by a mere "shameful impulse of passion" (p. 123) that cannot avoid the interior of the house either: "[…] the destructive breath, the mysterious breath, the breath of passion stir the profound peace of the house" (p. 121). Everything around him has collapsed, not least what he has believed so far to be the only truth. But the sheet of ice has been broken showing to Hervey "the novelty of real feelings […] that know nothing of creed, class or education" (p. 122) and signing definitively the end of the dominion of the marriage plot by revitalising the complexity of desire and foregrounding epistemological questions related to the degree, limit, and reliability of knowledge:

> The violence of the short tumult within him had been such as could well have shattered all creation; and yet nothing was changed. He faced his wife

effect the African wilderness will have on Kurtz, that is the collapse of all that has been sustaining and nourishing his idea of self and life. The abyss revealed shows the lie behind a marriage and, later, underneath the imperialistic ideology.

> in the familiar room in his own house. It had not fallen. And right and left all the innumerable dwellings, standing shoulder to shoulder, had resisted the shock of his passion, had presented, unmoved, to the loneliness of his trouble, the grim silence of walls, the impenetrable and polished discretion of closed doors and curtained windows. (p. 134)

The dining room is where the next sequence, short but revelatory, takes place and where Hervey begins the fight against the *cannibalisation* of that same world he belongs to. Nobody should know about what has happened, first of all the servants, and so the Herveys, looking for a starting point from which to make their life anew, in an act that perversely stands for ritual communion, find themselves together in the dining room:

> The important thing was that their life would begin again with *an every-day act* – with something that *could not be misunderstood*, that, thank God, had *no moral meaning*, *no perplexity* – and yet was *symbolic of their uninterrupted communion* in the past – in all the future. That morning, at that table, they had breakfast together; and now they would dine. It was all over! What had happened between could be forgotten – must be forgotten, like things that can only happen once – death for instance. (pp. 155-156, italics mine)

Breakfast and dinner have become a narrative frame in which their marriage is reduced into pieces, and eating is no longer a shared act, nor the table the place where familiar and social relationships are grounded and nurtured. In fact, nothing is what it seems, and if "deception" is the new course of their life, "[i]t seemed to him necessary that [it] should begin at home" (p. 156), because it is at home that he realizes how knowledge of subjectivity through investigation into others is partial and uncertain. Married for five years, Hervey suddenly has learnt he knows little of his wife's soul "of which, unjustifiably, he had thought himself […] the inexpugnable possessor" (p. 157). At dinner, Hervey is surprised to note that she looks the same whether she is true or false to him:

> [H]e was shocked to see it unchanged. She looked like this, spoke like this, exactly like this, a year ago, a month ago – only yesterday when she… What went on within made no difference. What did she think? What meant the pallor, the placid face, the candid brow, the pure eyes? What did she think during all these years? What did she think yesterday – to-day; what would she think to-morrow? He must find out… And yet how could he get to know? She had been false to him, to that man, to herself; she was ready to be false – for him. Always false. She looked lies, breathed lies, lived lies – would tell

> lies – always – to the end of life! And he would never know what she meant. Never! Never! No one could. Impossible to know. (pp. 157-158)

Around that table, Hervey discovers that his wife will always be partly inaccessible to him. The disrupting "moment of vision" is signalled by the dropping of cutlery and by the hint to poison in his plate. It is as if food and eating had acquired a new narrative force and an unpredictably, so far, symbolic power by being elevated into a metaphor for the deep unstoppable longing for knowledge, for truth:

> He dropped his knife and fork brusquely as though by the virtue of a sudden illumination he had been made aware of *poison* in his plate; and become positive in his mind that *he could never swallow another morsel of food as long as he lived*. (p. 158, italics mine)

Far from being an attempt to re-establish a communication – if ever there has been one between them – and a new way of life, eating together is not enough to satisfy his desire to know, nor to exercise the power he thinks he has over his wife.[6] It does not even fulfil her need of a relationship which would give a meaning to a life sustained in fact merely by food. What is also interesting in the above passage, and that once again underlines the complex metaphorical use of cannibalism, is the reference to the fear of contamination.[7] Here Hervey is trying to reaffirm his identity within his own class that, rather than being contaminated, chooses to feed itself only with its solid beliefs: "One had simply to be without stain and without reproach to keep one's place in the forefront of life" (p. 122), the narrator had said interpreting Herveys's thought soon after the discovery of the misdeed. In the room "that had been steadily growing from some cause hotter than a furnace" (p. 158), dinner comes to an end with Hervey "disturbed to find himself in such an unhealthy state of mind" (p. 158), still persuaded that "[…] any excess of feeling was unhealthy – morally unprofitable; a taint on practical manhood" (p. 158). The use of symbolic boundaries within particular social arenas does not fit Hervey's aim; the

6 "Eating" as Cozzi (2010: 6) says, "is about more than physical nourishment or sensual pleasure, it is about power: power over life, and power over death, power over the self and over the Other". An idea originating in the conviction that "Like ideology, food is neither innocent nor neutral, nor is it merely nourishing fuel" (p. 4).

7 Cannibals show an uncontrollable appetite which is looked at with disgust but, at the same time and paradoxically, represents the limitless capitalistic desire.

couple's "natural" behaviour, based upon boundary concern, played out through actions with relation to the body, food and material culture does not maintain the condition of the symbolic purity in which Hervey has believed so far, and that he wants to restore "within the faithful walls that would stand for ever between the shamelessness of facts and the indignation of *devouring* mankind" (p. 156). With this in mind,

> [e]ven when […] both the servants left the room together he remained careful natural, industriously hungry, laboriously at his ease, as though he had wanted to cheat the black oak sideboard, the heavy curtains, the stiff-backed chairs, into the belief of an unstained happiness. (p. 156)

The state of confusion in which Hervey has fallen is here foregrounded by his clumsy behaviour aimed at protecting the "heart of the house" as the site of the bourgeois ideals of comfort and security hinted at through the reference to some pieces of furniture in the room "he had wanted to cheat". But such an awkward attempt is not helpful, and Hervey's conflict and sharp delusion are anything but calmed down when, after dinner, they go upstairs in the drawing room.

The penultimate scene of the story shows all the signs left by "the gust of passion" (p. 160) which has beaten the house and the life of the Herveys, depicted at the beginning as "a pair of cautious conspirators in a profitable plot" (p. 115). Now, both of them have changed their perspectives and both of them have acquired a new awareness. When Hervey, trying to put things back in their places, tells her: "Pon my word I loved you – I love you now" (p. 161), her reaction is emblematic and explains that she has returned to throw away the mask both of them have been wearing for five years. Later, however, she will say that she can stand all this, sadly aware of burying herself:

> She stopped for an almost imperceptible moment to give him an indignant glance, and then moved on. That feminine penetration – so clever and so tainted by the eternal instinct of self-defence, so ready to see an obvious evil in everything it cannot understand – filled her with bitter resentment against both the men who could offer to the spiritual and tragic strife of her feelings nothing but the coarseness of their abominable materialism. (pp. 161-162)
>
> "If I had believed you loved me," she began, passionately, then drew in a long breath; and during that pause he heard the steady beat of blood in his ears. "If I had believed it [...] I would never have come back," she finished, recklessly. (p. 162)

On the other hand, "[w]hile she had been speaking […] [Hervey] had wandered on the track of the enigma out of the world of senses into the region of feeling" (p. 162). At this moment, they have learned the vacuous *heart of darkness* that lies at the core of many abstract codes of morality where profit has replaced passion, and marriage – the institution par excellence of the bourgeois world – has been shaken to the point where "the getting, the enjoying; the blessing of hunger that is appeased every day; […] all the blessings of life" (p. 165) become something Hervey would give away for "his longing for truth" (p. 165). The story could end here, with the two protagonists exchanging reproachful words, with the sound of a fan broken by the rage of the woman with loosen air[8] to her husband's reproaches, but time has come for the last scene, in the bedroom.

The twelve strikes of the clock mark the end of a day in which, between breakfast and dinner, Hervey has learned that his wife was about to be unfaithful; therefore his firm beliefs are shattered. Now that "[a]nother day [has] beg[u]n and the "bolt [has been] shot […] shutting out his desire and his deception from the indignant criticism of a world full of noble gifts for those who proclaim themselves without stain and without reproach" (p. 164), Hervey's mantra has changed from "impossible to know" to "nobody shall know" (p. 165) and "nobody would know" (p. 167). Initially these phrases pertain to the jolted husband's rationalization that he can still conceal his wife's temporary desertion. By keeping his doors "as impenetrable to the truth within as the granite of tombstones" (p. 165), Hervey hopes to avoid the taint of scandal and ensure his success in the conformist social world where "Another day had begun. Tomorrow had come; the mysterious and lying tomorrow that lures men disdainful of love and faith on and on through the poignant futilities of life to the fitting reward of a grave" (p. 164).

As a perfect middle-class man, Hervey knows the thin but effective difference between a surface tolerance and a public alienation and a scandal would bring a silent but irretrievable preclusion. His dilemma is to choose between heeding his natural impulses or conforming to the rules, between "obedient thought" and "a rebellious heart" (p. 167):

8 As Bini observes, Mrs Hervey's loosen hair can be considered a sign of her transgressiveness together with another, only apparently insignificant detail, her dirty boots when she comes back from her elopement. These are the only two moments we see her outside the conventional role she has taken on or has been assigned.

> Why was this assurance of safety [Nobody shall know] heavier than a burden of fear, and why the day that began presented itself obstinately like the last day of all, like a today without a tomorrow? (p. 165)

What is here underlined is a structural vulnerability that implies also a vulnerability of identity, "[h]e saw at once that nothing of what he knew mattered in the least. The acts of men and women, success, humiliation, dignity, failure – nothing mattered" (pp. 167-168). *Mutatis mutandis*, it seems as if the old idea of using cannibalism to strengthen the European certainties about the backwardness and cruelty of native people has turned into a means to criticise what was once glorified – progress, individualism, capitalism and imperialism. As stated before, in "The Return" the theme of adultery allows for further considerations about the fears Western societies and their main social class feel towards themselves with more and more anxiety. Among Hervey's raving thoughts, it is worth quoting the following passage which is particularly illuminating:

> He was like a man counting the cost of an unlucky speculation – irritated, depressed – exasperated with himself and with others […]; yet the wrong done him appeared so cruel that he would perhaps have dropped a tear over the spoliation if it had not been for his conviction that men do not weep. Foreigners do – they also kill sometimes in such circumstances. And to his horror he felt himself driven to regret, almost, that the usage of a society ready to forgive the shooting of a burglar forbade him under the circumstances even as much as a thought of murder […] The *contamination* of her crime spread out, tainted the universe, tainted himself, woke up all the dormant infamies of the world, caused a ghastly kind of clairvoyance in which he could see the towns and fields of the earth, its sacred places, its temples and its houses, peopled by *monsters* – by *monsters of duplicity, lust and murder*. She was a monster – he himself was thinking monstrous thoughts…and yet he was like other people. (pp. 125-126, italics mine)

The understated phenomenon of cannibalism is therefore to be understood as a wider attitude or metaphor for a society which has established strict rules that end up destroying one's identity, and longings, leaving without an answer such epistemological themes such as the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the different structuring imposed on the same knowledge by different minds, and the problem of "unknowability" or the limits of knowledge.[9]

9 Aren't these the first steps into the later "Conrad moving between a radical skepticism and a desire to find some points of belief"? (Peters 2001: 124). For the

After all, Peter Hulme is not alone in maintaining that if the debate on the evidences of the historical existence of cannibalism is still going on, it is not open to question its presence as a narrative. The debate then does not revolve around its confirmation or denial, but around the reasons why the Europeans have been so obstinately searching for proofs of its real existence and around the motifs of its heavy presence as a trope in contemporary writings (Hulme 1998: 4). For Hulme, cannibalism is to be understood as a theme within the dialogue between Europe and the Other, its colonial context and modern capitalism (p. 5) and therefore, it develops important connections with other thematic categories such as race, social classes, ethnicity, gender and imperialism.

Conrad undermines this egocentric dreamworld by demonstrating the hollowness at its core:

> He remembered her smile, her eyes, her voice, her silence, as though he had lost her forever. The years would pass and he would always mistrust her smile, suspect her eyes; he would always misbelieve her voice, he would never have faith in her silence. (Conrad 1977: 167)

In fact "[n]othing comes back – not even an echo!" (p. 167) and the missed scandal, silence, the uncertainty of inviolability are not enough to appease the confused labyrinth of Hervey's mind. It is here that "[Hervey's] conscience was born" (p. 168). In this spiritual awakening, he finds out that "morality is not a method of happiness" (p. 167) and that [i]t was an awful sacrifice to cast all one's life into the flame of a new belief" (p. 168).

Thus, a story that begins with a wife's desertion ends with a husband's desertion, and the closing scene highlights that the narrative resolution with a vision of a futurity envisioned by the marriage plot has dissolved into the endless, restless drive that frustrates closure and, at the same time, signals the perpetual closeness to death – "[…] there was chill of death in this triumph of sound principles, in this victory snatched under the very shadow of disaster" (p. 130):

> No sound came from beyond, not a whisper, not a sigh; not even a footstep was heard outside on the thick carpet. It was as though no sooner gone he had suddenly expired – as though he had died there and his body had vanished on the instant together with his soul. She listened, with parted lips and irresolute eyes. Then below, far below her, as if in the entrails of the

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debate concerning the uncertainty of knowledge and hence Conrad's skepticism, see Miller (1974) and Wollaeger (1990), to quote but a few.

> earth, a door slammed heavily; and the quiet house vibrated to it from roof to foundations, more than to a clap of thunder. He never returned. (p. 170)

The Austenian paradigm – so called by Lee Parrish – that dichotomises social interest and appetite has been turned inside out in "The Return", and Conrad is in good company if we think of Hardy and Gissing in conceiving knowledge as a form of food and social interest as a kind of cannibalism.

"The Return" published in a collection that includes African material as well as a middle-class domestic drama set in London cannot mark only an expansion of subjects. It shows instead Conrad taking that mind-bending path which will lead him to acknowledge that it is not the wilderness to create cannibals but the very civilised society responsible for an ideological crisis with unpredictable features.

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