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| Lancaster University |
| Eating Otherwise  Food and Being in Twentieth-Century Literature  Maria Christou (BA, MA)    Submitted for the award of a PhD in Literature September, 2015 |
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The thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

**Eating Otherwise:**

**Food and Being in Twentieth-Century Literature**

Submitted for the award of a PhD in Literature  
by  
Maria Christou (BA, MA)   
in  
September, 2015

Eating Otherwise: Food and Being in Twentieth-Century Literature thinks the “you are what you eat” adage otherwise, exploring the entanglement of the ontological with the alimentary in twentieth-century literature. Since its inception more than thirty years ago, the booming field of literary food studies has shied away from engaging with the interrelation between the question of being (what one is) and the question of eating (what and how one eats). The assumption behind this is that the “base” question of eating, as something that is located in the “here and now,” is incompatible with “lofty” ontological preoccupations, which are traditionally associated with a conception of being as predetermined and immutable. Eating Otherwise challenges such assumptions, arguing that acts of “eating otherwise” feature as means to ways of “being otherwise” in the literature of the twentieth century, focusing on the works of Georges Bataille, Samuel Beckett, Paul Auster, and Margaret Atwood. This selection of authors provides a distinction between the two halves of the twentieth century, the first generally associated with the modernist movement – where acts of eating otherwise can be seen as implementations of the injunction to “make it new” – and the second generally associated with the postmodernist movement, where acts of eating otherwise can be seen as attempts to ridicule or discredit the modernist vision and to shake off the modernist influence, attempts which paradoxically take the form of incorporation. As well as uncovering the entanglement of the question of being with the question of eating in twentieth-century literature and engaging with the possibility of ontological transformation, the ontologico-alimentary investigations of this study also provide a perspective through which the relationship between the modern and the postmodern can be theorised.

Shorter versions of Chapter 1 and Chapter 5 have been published/accepted for publication in substantially different form in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* (Taylor and Francis) and *Literature and Theology* (Oxford UP), respectively:

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-Maria Christou, “A Politics of Auto-Cannibalism: A Reading of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Literature and Theology* (forthcoming, 2015).

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# 

## Introduction

## You Are What You Eat Thinking Food Otherwise

It is most unfortunate, but the point of this story has been reached where a justification ... has to be attempted. ... A short section ... at this stage will relieve us from the necessity of apologising for it further.

Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*

In these words from Beckett’s *Murphy* (1938), the self-conscious “crritic” may detect a parody of the introduction in academic studies,[[1]](#footnote-1) including the present one, the aim of which is, indeed, to offer a justification – a justification for thinking the “you are what you eat” adage *otherwise* by attending to its ontological implications. Beckett’s narrator is, of course, seeking to justify the repeated use of the expression “Murphy’s mind” in the novel;[[2]](#footnote-2) and, as it happens, this does point to a connection between the question of being and the question of eating. Murphy’s eating habits betray the importance he seemingly ascribes to his mind over his body and are therefore connected with his conception of what he *is*. This is, after all, a character who straps himself to a chair, immobilising his body in order to “set ... his mind” “free,” and who is thus unsurprisingly little preoccupied with issues of bodily sustenance, even as he eats.[[3]](#footnote-3) His meals, we are told, are “vitiated by no base thoughts of nutrition,” featuring instead as exercises of the mind.[[4]](#footnote-4) Think, for instance, of the percentages that Murphy works out before buying a “cup of tea and a packet of assorted biscuits” for lunch, as well as his calculations of the number of the ways in which he could eat those biscuits.[[5]](#footnote-5) His aim, it seems, is to surpass any considerations of bodily pleasure so that he can resist always eating the biscuit he finds least palatable first, and the one he finds most tasty last, in this way maximising the possible combinations of order in which the five biscuits can be eaten. In light of Descartes’ treatment of maths as a mental activity that is dissociated from bodily senses,[[6]](#footnote-6) the mathematical calculations and combinations that direct Murphy’s eating practices would seem to suggest a privileging of the mental over the sensual, the mind over the body. Whether one views Murphy as a Cartesian figure or not, what he thinks about his mind and its relation to his body, that is to say, what he thinks he *is*, or what he would like to *be*, is very much connected with how he *eats*.

In *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf points to another association between one’s being and one’s eating when she says, somewhat enigmatically, that “[t]he lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes.”[[7]](#footnote-7) As she explains a few pages earlier,“halfway down the spine” there is a light to be found, a “profound, subtle and subterranean glow, which is the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The lamp that “does not light on beef and prunes,” it seems, is none other than the light of rationality, which traditionally distinguishes humans from other animals. Here, then, rationality – the quintessence of Man – is effectively presented as the result of eating good food, beef and prunes failing, for Woolf, to qualify as such. To put it another way, Woolf is here implying that what one *is*, or comes to *be*, is a consequence of what one *eats*.

To say that “one is what one eats” is, of course, to use a cliché, and it is perhaps its status as such, a mere cliché, that has prevented us from exploring its implications for the question of being. There is, in fact, even an etymological connection between eating and being; as Christian Moraru points out, the infinitives of the verbs “to be” and “to eat” are identical in Latin (*esse*).[[9]](#footnote-9) The cliché thus raises questions like: What can eating tell us about being, about who we are, about our being in the world, and about our subjectivity? Do we become who we are through what and how we eat? And if we are what we eat then do we eat what we are? In Elspeth Probyn’s words, “Do we eat or are we eaten?” Or, as she puts it in “less cryptic terms,” “do we confirm our identities” through our eating, or are “our identities reforged and refracted by what and how we eat?”[[10]](#footnote-10) In short, does one’s eating affirm, preserve, and even determine one’s being? And if so then might one *eat otherwise* in order to *be otherwise*?

Such ontologico-alimentary questions emerge from the literary texts which will be explored in this study, questions with which I will be engaging throughout. In doing so, however, I am undertaking a task that the literary food scholar or “gastro-critic” would be inclined to view as incongruous: because the act of eating is entrenched in the “here and now” it is considered to be incompatible with the “beyond” with which ontology is thought to be concerned. Yet, as we have already glimpsed, both Beckett and Woolf do, in one way or another, entangle the alimentary with the ontological; indeed, according to Moraru, so does “an entire modernity, complete with its postmodern aftermath.”[[11]](#footnote-11) But since Moraru’s claim appears in a six-page essay which clearly cannot hope to engage with the matter at any depth, we will here take up this task and uncover some of the ways in which the alimentary is entangled with the ontological in the literature of the twentieth century. Although these entanglements have remained by and large unexplored, we will see that they are, in fact, pervasive.

Naturally, this first of all demands some engagement with the ways in which literary representations of food have been interpreted thus far, for if the entanglement of the alimentary with the ontological is, as I say, so pervasive then the obvious question arising is why this has remained underexplored, especially given that literary food studies is booming. As we shall see in this introduction, gastro-criticism does, in fact, inadvertently trace a link between questions of being and questions of eating – a link which is, however, very largely effaced. The gastro-critic is typically preoccupied with the task of “proving” what one might think is the obvious: that literary representations of food and acts of eating are informed by historico-geographical contexts. For the gastro-critic, one’s identity is revealed and even constructed through the particularity of one’s eating within a specific historical and geographical setting. When considered together, however, examples of gastro-criticism show that the link between one’s eating and one’s identity is not only particular but also general insofar as it is manifested in literary texts of different historical periods and geographical locations. The correlation between food and identity thus tips over into a more general correlation between food and the question of being.

For the gastro-critic, the effacement of the generality of this correlation seems to be something of an imperative. One possible reason for this, as already mentioned, might be that eating is undeniably located in the realm of the “here and now” and, as such, is considered to be incompatible with the “universal above” or “beyond” that is traditionally associated with ontology. Related to this is the idea that the ontological speaks of being as something that is effectively detached or dissociated from the material forms that “instantiate” it, that being remains immune to the change or mutation that these material instantiations (can) manifest. To briefly demonstrate the point let us take, say, three eggs and observe that they have something in common – namely, that they are all eggs. Based on this, we can say that they all instantiate what we might call “eggness.” These three eggs, however, may well exist in very different ways: the first may be boiled; the second may be under the hen, developing into a fledgling; and, finally, the third may have the form of powder and, unlike the first and the second egg, has neither come from nor will turn into an animal but has, rather, been created in the laboratory. In the coming chapters, we will indeed encounter such different instantiations of “eggness.” In the second chapter, we will find both boiled and raw eggs that are eaten through the mouth or otherwise and, in the same chapter, we will also discuss the Futurist dream of food – eggs or otherwise – as powder. In the third chapter, we will encounter a character who has a taste for eggs that contain not only white and yolk but also feathers. In the fourth, “eggness” will feature as a symbol in a theory of being and, in the fifth, we will find boiled eggs that are associated with yet another type of egg, the human ovary. Whilst these literary cases will present us with a different conception of the ontological, the traditional conception I am seeking to demonstrate now would state that “eggness” remains totally unaffected by the differences we have identified in some of its possible material instantiations. To generalise, this is a conception in which being is thought to be “located” in an (un-locatable) otherworldly realm that remains detached from the material world in which it is instantiated. Being is, in other words, predetermined, immaterial, immutable, and thus admits no cultural difference.

This schematic account applies to many ontologies (with Plato’s Ideas or Forms being an example) but, of course, this need not mean that being can only ever be thought in this way.[[12]](#footnote-12) Writing in 2002, Cesare Casarino argues that a failure to think being differently has led, in “at least the past three decades,” to a determination to “ignor[e]” or “forget” all about ontology, to “dismiss” it “as something baneful.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The gastro-critic’s resistance to attending to the link between questions of being and questions of eating, then, can be seen as part of a wider determination to dismiss the ontological. There is, however, a very real sense in which this wider debate is not really about whether ontology should be dismissed or not but about whether the term “ontology” can or cannot be used to refer to engagements with the question of being that do not ascribe to being the characteristics that have been traditionally ascribed to it – like, for example, predetermination, immutability, and immunity to the materiality of the here and now. The term “ontology” will be used throughout this study in the broad sense in which Brian McHale uses the term “ontological” in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), that is, to designate any preoccupation with the question of being.[[14]](#footnote-14) Even Jacques Derrida, who disagrees with Antonio Negri on the usage of “ontology,” stating that the term means “what it has always meant,” admits that this meaning has been “arbitrarily established by convention.”[[15]](#footnote-15) There is, though, no reason why this convention should be followed, and there is certainly no reason why the question of being, thought in different ways, should be dismissed. As Casarino says, the “problem with the question of being” is that “no matter how much we may try to dismiss or forget it” we inevitably end up stumbling on it.[[16]](#footnote-16) He therefore argues that we should “reinsert ontology into the study of texts” and attend to the different conceptions of being that they present us with.[[17]](#footnote-17) Particularly susceptible to this, as I hope to demonstrate here, is the study of the treatment of food in twentieth-century literature, a treatment which explores conceptions of being as material, as dependent on the “here and now,” and as mutable.

At hand, then, is the two-part task of showing, firstly, that it is not problematic to think being and eating together and, secondly, that food reconfigures the “baneful” conception of being that gastro-critics seem to associate with ontology. The first chapter is dedicated to the first part of this task. Here, I embark on a survey of seminal examples of Western thought from Plato to Heidegger and beyond that demonstrates the importance of food and eating in articulations of ontological difference. Thus, if gastro-critics are inclined to think that philosophy’s engagement with the “higher” question of being excludes aspects of our bestial corporeality such as nutrition and, therefore, that food and ontology are incompatible then the first chapter serves to remove this obstacle, demonstrating that in the history of Western thought one is (through) what (and how, how much, or whether) one eats.

This will lead us to the second part of our task, the part that focuses on literature and which comprises the bulk of this study; for if, as the first chapter will suggest, I am (through) what (and how) I eat then I can perhaps *eat* *otherwise* in order to *be* *otherwise*. We will thus arrive at a conception of being as potentially mutable. It is this point that Probyn makes when she asks whether “we confirm our identities” through our eating or whether “our identities [are] reforged and refracted by what and how we eat.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Probyn’s answer is loud and clear; of the two options she picks the second, arguing that our eating is proof that “the question of what we are is a constantly morphing one.”[[19]](#footnote-19) As we will see in the first chapter, however, philosophers leave by and large unexplored the mutability of being that eating points toward;[[20]](#footnote-20) the possibility of being otherwise through eating otherwise is, we might say, a possibility that dare not speak its name within the philosophical register. The bulk of this study, then, will engage with literature that dares say what philosophy does not.

In the second chapter, the focus is on the acts of eating otherwise in Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* (1928) and the different ways of being that the characters achieve through these acts.[[21]](#footnote-21) In order to draw out the ontological implications of the otherwise of eating in Bataille’s pornographic novella, I read it in the context of his (anti)philosophical work on religion, economics, and politics. In the third chapter, I turn to Beckett and his poem “Whoroscope” (1930) where a proponent of modern philosophy, René Descartes, features as a speaker.[[22]](#footnote-22) Beckett’s treatment of food and its ontological resonances in this poem will be read in conjunction with some of his most well-known works, and will be shown to offer an alimentary-based reconfiguration of the Cartesian *cogito*. The fourth and fifth chapters move to the second half of the twentieth century: first to Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (1985) and its onto-theologico-alimentary engagement with the detective genre,[[23]](#footnote-23) and then to the onto-theologico-alimentary lines of thought that emerge from Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel *The* *Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and other works.[[24]](#footnote-24) In the first two cases – that of Bataille and Beckett – the conjunction between the otherwise of eating and the otherwise of being is presented in a rather positive light, as a liberating possibility; it can therefore be said to encapsulate the characteristically modernist belief that the pursuit of the “new” constitutes an emancipating project. In the last two cases, however, we encounter a less positive vision; in what can be seen as a characteristically postmodernist move, Auster’s and Atwood’s treatments of food and of the conjunction between the otherwise of eating and the otherwise of being take on the modernist vision encountered in Bataille and Beckett and discredit it, presenting us with its sinister side.

Having shown, in the first chapter, that the investigation of the question of eating is not incompatible with the investigation of the question of being, and having proceeded, in the second, third, fourth, and fifth chapters, to flesh out the entanglements of the alimentary with the ontological in a sample of literary texts from the twentieth century, I will conclude by addressing the question of what these entanglements might have to tell us about the literature of the twentieth century more widely. More specifically, the conclusion will draw on the relationship between the first and second halves of the twentieth century as it emerges from the previous chapters, and will argue that their representation of eating otherwise as a means to being otherwise provides an alimentary perspective through which the relationship between modernism and postmodernism can be theorised.

**Gastro-criticism**

Since our task throughout is to think the “you are what you eat” adage otherwise it would be helpful to first outline some of the ways in which it has been thought so far. “Tell me what you eat and I shall tell you who you are,” Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote in 1825 and, ever since, the phrase has assumed multiple significations.[[25]](#footnote-25) A quarter of a century later, a variation of it appears in Ludwig Feuerbach’s “Natural Science and the Revolution” (1850), a review of Jakob Moleschott’s *The Theory of Food* (1850). Here, Feuerbach declares: *Der Mensch ist was er isst*, “man is what he eats”; like Moraru, then, he provides us with an association – this time an aural one – between “being” and “eating.” Far from a mere play on words, Feuerbach aims to make a bold claim with this phrase: he suggests that the failure of the German revolution (1848-1849) was a consequence of the army’s consumption of non-nutritional food.[[26]](#footnote-26) Some decades later, the nutritional sense that Feuerbach ascribed to the phrase, minus its explicitly political significance, appears in the Anglophone world in a different context. According to Sandra Kumari de Sachy, the phrase is found in an advertisement for beef published in *Bridgeport Telegram* in 1923, which stated that, “Ninety per cent of the diseases known to man are caused by cheap foodstuffs. You are what you eat.”[[27]](#footnote-27) In the 1940s, the publication of nutritionist Victor Lindlahr’s *You Are What You Eat: How to Keep Health with Diet* (1942) came to support the advertisement’s claim and helped to popularise the health-based sense of the phrase.[[28]](#footnote-28)

With the rise of food studies, the expression has entered the academy wherein it is explored in various ways. Paul Swanson, for instance, has recently outlined some of the ways in which the market has exploited and continues to exploit the health-based sense of the phrase.[[29]](#footnote-29) Within the humanities, however, the “you are what you eat” adage is primarily explored in relation to questions of cultural identity. Signe Rousseau, for example, engages with what she considers to be a “major shift” in the role of television cookery programmes and celebrity chefs, and what this tells us about ourselves.[[30]](#footnote-30) Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* (1998), Irvine Welsh’s *The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs* (2006), and Jackie Kay’s short story “Reality, Reality” (2012) are examples of how the literary imagination has delved into these issues.[[31]](#footnote-31) The phenomenon of the restaurant is also worth a mention here, with the abundance of TV programmes that are dedicated to it suggesting that this is yet another food-based fixture of modern life. This fixture, it seems, is not exclusively related to the intake of food. Indeed, in *Dishing it Out* (2011), Robert Appelbaum argues that the restaurant is successful not only because it satisfies “need” but also, and primarily, because it offers “*surplus enjoyment*.”[[32]](#footnote-32) At a restaurant, Appelbaum claims, “I am the role that I have to play in order to achieve my surplus enjoyment,” and the role I play at a fancy French restaurant is, of course, very different from the role I assume at a humble diner.[[33]](#footnote-33) In other words, it seems that for Appelbaum it is not just that one is what one eats but that, in modern times, one *becomes* who one is depending on therestaurant where one eats.

It is such questions that food studies typically explores: what is eaten, by whom, when, where, and what these acts of consumption tell us about the eater, the eaten, and the context in which eating takes place in each case. The same is true of the study of food in literature, as a glance at how gastro-critics outline their projects can swiftly demonstrate. For example, in *Aguecheek’s Beef, Belch’s Hiccup, and Other Gastronomic Interjections* (2006), Appelbaum argues that the “discourse that works with food in the early modern period” is “formulated according to historically and geographically specific conventions” that ascribe to food “a set of ... identities” the character of which he sets off to examine.[[34]](#footnote-34) Just as the Early Modernist gastro-critic looks at food in Early Modern literature in order to explore the specificity of the Early Modern self so the Romanticist gastro-critic seeks to extrapolate the specificity of the Romantic self through food. In *Taste: A Literary History* (2005), for instance, Denise Gigante aims to show the “essential role” of taste “in generating” the “very sense of [the Romantic] self.”[[35]](#footnote-35) For her part, Annette Cozzi studies the Victorian novel, examining “descriptions of food” in order to identify the “anxieties” they reveal, anxieties which “resulted from ... imperialism and industrialism” and which “directly affected how [national] identity” was both “constituted and consumed” at the time.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The sheer number of book-length studies and essay collections on food in pre-twentieth-century literature precludes a substantial overview here. There are not, though, as many such studies on twentieth-century literature and so it is possible to give a more comprehensive list of notable examples. These include David Bevan’s edited essay collection *Literary Gastronomy* (1988), Susanne Skubal’s *Word of Mouth* (2002), and Michel Delville’s *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption* (2008) in which he examines the use of food in the avant-garde.[[37]](#footnote-37) More recently, Lorna Piatti-Farnell has attempted “to offer a full-length study of food in contemporary American fiction,” treating each of the fictional works she examines as “a channel for [the] expression [of] ... social, cultural and ethnic” issues.[[38]](#footnote-38) Another, perhaps better known example to which we shall have occasion to return is Sarah Sceats’ *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (2000), which examines the “central and multiple significances of food and eating” in “relation to [the] specific historical and geographical contexts” of the texts she is working on.[[39]](#footnote-39)

As this brief overview suggests, regardless of the period and place under investigation what is at stake is the “you are what you eat” adage; whether explicitly or implicitly, gastro-criticism invariably suggests that one is according to what and how one eats, that one’s sense of self is revealed and/or constructed through one’s consumption of food. In brief, we may say that the premise of gastro-criticism is the link between food and the question of being. As Sceats puts it, “food and eating entail a link with ... ontological” and “epistemological ... concerns,” concerns about the nature of being and what can be known about it.[[40]](#footnote-40) But if this general link between food and the question of being is indeed the premise of gastro-criticism, it is nevertheless ignored as such since the sole aim is to establish cultural specificity. That eating is both general and particular is what is often called, after Georg Simmel, “the paradox of eating.” Simmel famously argues that eating is the “most common” thing between people, that it can be thought of as the very “substance” of commonality but also that it is simultaneously “the most egotistical” thing, the thing that is affirmative of individuality, and that it is a significant source of social differentiation.[[41]](#footnote-41) In its monolithic preoccupation with historical and geographical specificity, gastro-criticism bypasses the paradox of eating instead of thinking about and through it.

This, in turn, gives rise to certain complications. In the “Steak and Chips” chapter of *Mythologies* (1957), for example, Roland Barthes argues that steak is “nationalized” in France, and that eating it is associated with a sense of national virility.[[42]](#footnote-42) However, Barthes immediately acknowledges that the idea of the steak being “a French possession” is “circumscribed today ... by the invasion of American steaks.”[[43]](#footnote-43) The “problem” here is that beef-eating has a similar signification in two different cultures; indeed, Erica Fudge shows that the same association between beef-eating and national identity/virility (which Barthes identifies in reference to France and America) can be, and has been, made in reference to Britain as well. In fact, Fudge goes further than that, arguing that meat-eating in general, and not just beef-eating, is associated with strength and virility across various nations and historical periods.[[44]](#footnote-44) Further, Barthes’ comment implies that within a globalised world which makes very easy the “invasion,” as he phrases it, of similar or different foods from other countries, the task of locating links between what one eats and one’s sense of national identity becomes very complicated.

If such complications can be addressed through rigorous research, things are far trickier for gastro-critics who make sustained or occasional references to psychoanalysis. The role of food in psychoanalysis will be discussed in more detail in the first chapter but the main point I want to make in this instance is the obvious – namely, that psychoanalysis deals with the universal not the culturally specific. When Freud theorises the nutritional instinct in human beings and its role in the production of a specifically human sexuality, for example, this sexuality is not said to be determined by historical and geographical coordinates.[[45]](#footnote-45) Similarly, when Melanie Klein theorises the ambivalent feelings of love and hate toward the parent on the basis of the nourishing “good breast” and the withdrawing “bad breast,” these are, of course, understood to be feelings that mark the human psyche in general.[[46]](#footnote-46) And, when Kristeva theorises the constitution of the human subject via abjection (often food-related abjection), this is a general theorisation of the constitution of the subject (or “abject”).[[47]](#footnote-47) To come to the point, the psychoanalytic engagement with the universal sits uneasily alongside the gastro-critic’s characteristic interest in historical and cultural specificity.

Sceats is one of few gastro-critics who explicitly acknowledge this difficulty. In her above-cited book, she writes: “Although the specifics of food and eating are clearly defined by their cultural context,” “there is a temptation, especially in the light of psychoanalytic theories, to consider the functions of food as essential to all human beings and therefore [as] somehow ‘universal’ or outside of cultural difference.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Sceats’ phrasing suggests that even hinting at the universality of acts that are clearly universal – like eating – is certain to ring alarm bells. Thus, we are assured that it is no more than “tempting” to think of the functions of food as essential to all human beings and, therefore, to consider eating as “somehow ‘universal’”; and, lest the “somehow” has not done its job, an additional precautionary measure is taken, with the enclosure of the “universal” in scare quotes. What we have here, I would argue, is an unwitting disclosure of the dominant mode of “doing” gastro-criticism – namely, relying upon a universal link between questions of being and questions of eating which must be glossed over as such so that historically, geographically, and culturally specific claims can be made.

If we were to distil but one conclusion from the above, it would be that gastro-criticism both *traces* and *effaces* the link between questions of eating and questions of being. On the one hand, gastro-critics foreground the historico-geographical specificities of the identities that emerge from literary representations of food but, on the other, examples of gastro-criticism inadvertently demonstrate, when taken collectively, a link between food and the question of being that is manifested in literary texts of different historical periods and geographical locations. That acknowledgment of, and engagement with, the latter point is generally avoided seems to rest on the idea that the affirmation of cultural specificity clashes with the affirmation of the link between food and the question of being. And this betrays, as I have suggested earlier, a conception of being as predetermined, immutable, and dissociated from the material world – in short, a conception according to which being admits no cultural difference. In light of this, gastro-criticism appears to be an example of what Casarino sees as a wider determination to dismiss ontology as something “baneful,” a determination which, he says, stems from a failure to think of being in different ways. As I hope to demonstrate in the course of this study, the treatment of food in literature often points to a different conception of being – a conception which shares some elements, but is not identical, with the existentialist school of thought.[[49]](#footnote-49) This is a conception of being which suggests a close connection with the material world of the here and now, indicated in this study by the act of eating, and which admits the possibility of mutation, of being otherwise.

**Thinking Food Otherwise**

In order to follow Casarino’s advice to think being otherwise, we will here also need to think food otherwise. This will involve bringing literature and philosophy together, tracing links between literary representations of eating and the conceptual traditions that they evoke, just as the gastro-critic brings literature and history together, tracing links between literary representations of eating and their historical contexts. I will therefore begin by showing, in the first chapter, that many philosophers entangle the ontological with the alimentary, thereby pointing toward a re-conceptualisation of being as not necessarily predetermined or immutable. As I have already mentioned, however, this is only implicit within the philosophical register and, therefore, the second, third, fourth, and fifth chapters turn to literary texts that explore this implication. It is perhaps because literature so often does what philosophy dares not that Casarino, in calling us to think being differently, outlines a methodology that stages what he calls “inter-ferences” between philosophy and literature. Casarino’s own attempt to implement this methodology takes the form of reading philosophical texts “as if [he] were a literary critic who is trying to read as if he were a philosopher (but who cannot help but also to read as if he were a literary critic)” – and vice versa, that is, reading literary texts as a philosopher who is trying to be a literary critic.[[50]](#footnote-50) It is this method of reading that will be employed in our attempt to uncover the ontological resonances of eating in the coming chapters.

This will not, though, entail ignoring the specificity of eating. My intention is not to suggest that the generality of eating is more important but to think about and through its paradoxical nature as simultaneously general and specific. This task can be clarified through reference to Michel Foucault’s “Abnormal,” a lecture series delivered at the *Collège de France* in the mid-1970s in which he talks about the “monster,” identifying two of its forms: the sexual and the alimentary.[[51]](#footnote-51) Foucault proceeds to discuss the sexual monster in detail, arguing that in the nineteenth century it is manifested in the figure of the “sexually abnormal individual.” However, as Chloe Taylor has recently observed, “the alimentary monster is forgotten.”[[52]](#footnote-52) In this thesis I take up Foucault’s forgotten “alimentary monster,”[[53]](#footnote-53) aiming to attend to its generality – that is, to identify and engage with its ontological implications – whilst also acknowledging its particularity by means of focusing on alimentary “monstrosities” that appear in the literature of a specific century, the twentieth.

To better understand how the simultaneity between the general and the specific plays out, it would be instructive to turn to Foucault’s definition of the monster. “[W]hat defines the monster,” Foucault writes, “is the fact that its existence and form is ... a violation of [both] the laws of society ... [and] nature.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Neither a creature of society nor a creature of nature, the monster is a being that is difficult to classify and thus a being that raises the problem of being, both on a cultural and on a natural or ontological level. Foucault views the monster as a general figure, acknowledging that “abnormalities” have always been said to exist, and suggests that their deviation from certain forms of being helps to establish those forms of being as “proper” or “normal.” At the same time, the existence of such “abnormalities” or “monstrosities” suggests that different, non-predetermined and non-classifiable (hence “monstrous”) forms of being are possible. For Foucault, these different forms of being are not only general – in that monstrosities always exist – but also historically specific. As he demonstrates in his lectures, the monster assumed the specific form of the “sexually abnormal” individual in the nineteenth century. The monster thus suggests that being is mutable and that the manifestations of this mutability are historically conditioned. The forgotten alimentary monster would, then, work in the same way; in giving expression and form to different ways of being it would disclose the mutability of being in general whilst also enabling the identification of specific conceptions and forms of being within a certain historical period. It is with this interconnection of the general and the specific in mind that I examine literary representations of alimentary monstrosities or acts of eating otherwise in the coming chapters.

**Food in the Twentieth Century**

A word on periodisation, then, is now in order. The principal texts under investigation are examples of literature taken from the two halves of the twentieth century and the two movements that shape it – namely, modernism and postmodernism. Chapters 2 and 3 centre on the first half of the twentieth century via Bataille and Beckett, whose works are often seen as exemplifications of modernism. Chapters 4 and 5 move to the second half of the twentieth century and to the other side of the Atlantic (which is when and where the postmodernist movement is widely thought to have thrived) via Auster and Atwood. This is also reflected in the first chapter, where we have examples of Western thought that are often associated with modernity (like Freudian psychoanalysis, Hegel, Marx, and Christianity)[[55]](#footnote-55) as well as thinkers who are usually seen either as precursors or as champions of postmodernity (like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida). Such general classifications do, of course, overlook nuances; various critics, for example, have identified many elements in Beckett’s work which overlap with postmodernism,[[56]](#footnote-56) and Bataille is often viewed as a proto-poststructuralist, his work having been acknowledged as a major influence in the development of theories that are most closely associated with postmodernity.[[57]](#footnote-57) Bataille and Beckett, then, demonstrate manifest overlaps between modernism and postmodernism, thus bearing clear testimony to the difficulty of drawing strict separating lines between the two. All this will be evident in the ontologico-alimentary investigations of the coming chapters, and will be spelled out in the conclusion where I will argue that the very question of how modernism and postmodernism compare and contrast can be thought through an alimentary perspective.

Telling in this respect is the fact that Terry Eagleton has recourse to a specifically alimentary metaphor when outlining some of the characteristics of modernism, and that Charles Jencks also turns to the subject of food in his engagement with postmodernism. Eagleton argues that the modernist text, in its attempt to “transcend” the very language that enables it to *be*, “become[s] as it were either bulimicor anorexic”: it “cram[s] itself with multiple meaning to the point of sheer opacity” or “alternatively sheds as much weight as it dare,” “slim[ming] itself drastically down.”[[58]](#footnote-58) On the “bulimic” side, as described by Eagleton, we think of James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, and on the “anorexic” side of Beckett and Ezra Pound. Moving to Jencks, we observe that in *What is Post-Modernism?* (1986), he suggests that food encapsulates some of the elements that make this “world-wide movement in all the arts and disciplines” what it is.[[59]](#footnote-59) Jencks gives “Cambozola” (a hybrid of Camembert and Gorgonzola) and “California Cuisine (French plus Pacific Rim plus supposedly healthy)” as examples of “post-modern food.”[[60]](#footnote-60) The hybrid cheese manifests what for Jencks is a characteristically postmodernist merging of boundaries: the white soft rind of Camembert discernibly coexists with the blue-green mould veins of Gorgonzola, just as in postmodernist architecture the austere coexists with the ornamental, and just as in postmodernist literature the real, for example, coexists with the fantastical (especially in magic realism). It is the incompatibility of coexistent qualities that “California Cuisine” highlights and, for Jencks, this encapsulates postmodernism’s “new liberalism,” which “combine[s]” things like “multiculturalism and universal rights.”[[61]](#footnote-61)

In light of Eagleton’s and Jencks’ comments it would appear that the alimentary is demonstrative of the two movements that mark the twentieth century, epitomising the different ways of being that they present us with. Foucault would, of course, argue that alimentary “monstrosities” that point to ways of being otherwise can be found in all historical periods but there is a sense in which modernist and postmodernist literature brings them forth in more pronounced ways. In the first half of the twentieth century, for example, we have the injunction to “make it new,” which was, according to Peter Gay, treated as “a professional, almost a sacred obligation.”[[62]](#footnote-62) As Simon Malpass says, “each of the avant-garde movements” of this period “set out in a different way to challenge expectations, shock and scandalise public *taste* and transform the ways in which the world could be represented.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Although Malpass is not talking about *alimentary* taste here, the avant-garde and modernist attempt to be radically new, to break from the shackles of convention and shock, often does translate into representations of the alimentary, representations that, in one way or another, contrast with the realist tradition. At times, this simply comes down to paying attention to what is eaten. In *A Room of One’s Own*, for example, Woolf complains that

the novelists have a way of making us believe that luncheon parties are invariably memorable for something very witty that was said, or for something very wise that was done. But they seldom spare a word for what was eaten.It is part of the novelist’s convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings, as if soup and salmon and ducklings were of no importance whatsoever, as if nobody ever smoked a cigar or drank a glass of wine. Here, however, I shall take the liberty to defy that convention ... [[64]](#footnote-64)

Woolf thus describes her work by opposing it to what she rightly or wrongly views as a literary convention that she seeks to defy, a convention that is here specifically associated with the alimentary. In this instance, then, the alimentary features as one way of “making it new.”

Woolf’s suggestion is that the mere fact of according importance to food as such is in itself radical. The first half of the twentieth century, however, also provides us with plenty of examples in which the treatment of the alimentary is more demonstrably “new” or “radical,” and it is on such particularly pronounced cases that the coming chapters will focus. In our discussions of Bataille in the second chapter, for instance, we shall have occasion to also refer to *The Futurist Cookbook* (1932), which constitutes a vivid example of the “new” within the alimentary context. In this cookbook, developments in technology lead to a vision of food that is radically different from what one is used to – food in the form of pills, for example, or powders. Here, we are even presented with a vision of the technological potential to change not only the form of food but also the very nature of the human being: the Futurist cuisine anticipates, with excitement, a future people being nourished via “radio waves.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

Like the Futurists, the Surrealists also defy convention, with the “First Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924) proudly asserting the “complete *nonconformism*” that defines the movement.[[66]](#footnote-66) The Surrealists exhibit such “complete nonconformism” by “othering” the common-place. Food, being one exemplification of the commonplace, often features in such attempts, as is the case with Salvador Dalí’s *Portrait of Gala with Two Lamb Chops Balanced on Her Shoulder* (1933). It is well-known that Bataille too was associated with the Surrealist movement – albeit very briefly, having quickly realised that the Surrealists (or at least those under André Breton) were far too conventional for his taste. As we will see in the second chapter, Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* includes plenty of “alimentary monstrosities” or acts of eating otherwise: whilst in 1933 Dalí balances lamb chops on Gala’s shoulder, Bataille had already gone a step or two further in his 1928 novella, where he has one of his characters insert eggs into her anus and dip her vulva into a saucer of milk, as if the eggs and the milk were to be consumed not through the mouth but through these other orifices.

Salvador Dalí, *Portrait of Gala with Two Lamb Chops Balanced on Her Shoulder* (1933)

Beckett, too, “others” food; as we will see in the third chapter, he presents us with various alimentary abnormalities, including what from a Western perspective would appear to be an unconventional, if not quite monstrous, taste for fertilised eggs. There are, further, confusions of food with excrement in Beckett’s work, and, in a less extreme manifestation of treating the inedible as edible, the sucking of things like pebbles, which calls to mind the above-noted case of Murphy’s dissociation of food from nutrition, a dissociation that Delville views as characteristic of the treatment of food in the avant-garde in general.[[67]](#footnote-67) To generalise further, we might say that, in their reaction against the realist tradition, modernists are bound to turn again and again to food, food being a common means by which the realist achieves verisimilitude.

Both in Bataille and Beckett, the otherwise of eating is potentially self-destructing and self-constructing. Through a self-destructive abstinence from eating, Bataille’s characters seek to bring forth a different mode of being, their starvation thus featuring as a means through which another kind of self (along with its place and role in the world) may be constructed. In this context, we might also refer to Kafka’s work, where the artist – who, either out of choice or because there seems to be no alternative, rejects the world as it is – is “a hunger artist.”[[68]](#footnote-68) Moraru does, in fact, associate a whole strand of modernism with Kafkaesque hunger; when he says that “an entire modernity” “associates eating ... and being,” he accords particular importance to “various forms” of “not eating,” suggestively entitling his essay “To Eat is a Compromise,” thus implying that abstinence from eating almost goes hand-in-hand with the modernist’s determination to not compromise, to reject the status quo, literary, economico-political, and ontological.[[69]](#footnote-69) In Bataille, the idea that one is what one eats suggests that eating preserves one’s current state of being; therefore, abstinence from eating is seen as a route to being otherwise. As well as starvation – the rejection of the compromise that Moraru equates with eating – we shall encounter cases of figurative autophagy; in Beckett, for example, one seems to eat what one is, eating therefore featuring as destructive of one’s current state of being, transforming it into something else – pointing, in other words, to the possibility of being otherwise.

At stake in both of these interpretations of eating is the question of subjectivity, the very question that is at the core of many discussions of the modern, the postmodern, and the relationships between them.[[70]](#footnote-70) In this respect, it is worth pointing out the related issue of lone eating (or non-eating), for many acts of eating otherwise which will be discussed here are not “collective,” thus emphasising individuality, which feeds into what Michael North describes as “the common cliché of the modernist as lonely rebel.”[[71]](#footnote-71) Whilst North challenges this cliché by pointing out various complications emerging from the question of novelty (the attempt to “make it new”), there are further complications that a specifically alimentary perspective brings to the fore. Steven Connor, for example, talks about an “autophagic” process present in Beckett’s work, observing that it points to a complex relationship between the individual and the external world: If “I endlessly consume myself,” Connor writes, “there is no object outside me for me to assimilate; in just the same way, there is no possibility of emptying myself of myself.”[[72]](#footnote-72) In Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*, however, acts of eating otherwise do involve both external objects (such as the above-mentioned eggs and milk) and more than one character. Here, the question concerning subjectivity emerges in a different way, with the emphasis being on the assimilation of the external world by the organism and, as in Hegelian idealism, by the perceptions of the subject.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Such issues relating to the subject and its relation to the world are pertinent to the investigation of modernist and postmodernist texts, and McHale indicates why in his influential study *Postmodernist Fiction*. Here, McHale argues that the “dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*,” that modernist fiction can be defined on the basis of its preoccupation with questions concerning what the subject can know, say, about itself, the world, and its being in the world.[[74]](#footnote-74) This, McHale asserts, can allow a distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction because “the dominant of [the latter] is *ontological*,”postmodernist fiction being definable on the basis of its preoccupation with questions concerning the nature of being – for example, the nature of one’s being and of one’s being in the world, the possibility of the existence of different conceptions of being, the nature of the relationships between them as well as the possibility of bringing them together or shifting from one state of being to another.[[75]](#footnote-75) Whilst, for some, modernism and postmodernism are opposites,[[76]](#footnote-76) McHale’s distinction between epistemology and ontology is not one of opposition. As Connor observes, this distinction does not suggest “a clean break” between modernism and postmodernism but, rather, a relation of “intensification”:[[77]](#footnote-77) when the epistemological question of what the subject can *know* about itself is pushed further it tips over into the ontological question of what a subject *is*, or can be.

It is a relation of intensification that modernist and postmodernist treatments of food often suggest. Consider, for example, Woolf’s above-quoted call for the inclusion of food in literature, and how this seems to play out in Andy Warhol’s work, as in his (in)famous *Campbell’s Soup Can* (1960). Warhol may be said to take up and intensify Woolf’s call; whilst Woolf is talking about the celebratory inclusion of food in literature – food like ducklings and wine – Warhol does not merely include food in a work of art but makes works of art in which he includes nothing but food, and food that is different to the kind that Woolf favours or even approves of.[[78]](#footnote-78) Indeed, Warhol’s “Soup Can Series” does not engage with food in the way that Woolf does: what Warhol glorifies is not the food itself but its inclusion in his art, and what he seems to be interested in is not food but food-as-a-commodity, apparently celebrating mass production and consumption, which is precisely what the modernists sought to react against in producing literature that is difficult to consume. As Malpass says, however, Warhol’s depictions of commodities are “as much celebratory as they are critical” and, therefore, there is no easy opposition here.[[79]](#footnote-79)

**Image Removed for Copyright Purposes**

Andy Warhol, *Black Bean* (1968), part of the “Soup Can Series” initiated in 1960 with *Campbell’s Soup Can.*

The more nuanced approach that does not see the relationship between modernism and postmodernism as one of straightforward opposition can account for the above-noted overlaps between modernism and postmodernism in the work of Bataille and Beckett. It can, further, help explain how it is that we will encounter acts of eating otherwise not only in the literature of the first half of the twentieth century but also in that of the second. In Auster, for instance, we find a character who, like Bataille’s characters, strives to drastically limit his intake of food as a means to being otherwise and, in Atwood, we are presented with characters that, as in Beckett, figuratively consume themselves and are, as a result, internalising a certain mode of being otherwise.

The treatment of food and eating, it seems, forbids the drawing of an oppositional line between modernism and postmodernism. Cecilia Novero’s examination of food in various examples of the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde suggests that not only are the two not opposed but also that their treatment of food challenges a model of linear periodisation according to which the neo-avant-garde succeeds, and thus replaces, the avant-garde. When Jean-François Lyotard argues that a work of art “can become modern only if it is first postmodern,” he reverses the periodisation usually associated with the two movements but retains a sense of linearity according to which one succeeds the other.[[80]](#footnote-80) Novero’s engagement with the avant-garde from an alimentary perspective, on the other hand, presents us with a more complex model; food, she says, “becomes the site for this art’s internal investigations and experimentation with its own temporal project – its being in time and its construction of temporal imaginations that escape the historicist framework” of linearity.[[81]](#footnote-81) The acts of eating otherwise that we will investigate in the coming chapters will enable us, in the conclusion, to address the question of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism on the basis of the concepts and themes of incorporation and assimilation. This is not to say that the alimentary will be presented as “a single point of departure” from modernism to postmodernism, which would be, as Connor warns, the equivalent of committing “theoretical suicide.”[[82]](#footnote-82) Rather, the modern and postmodern treatments of the alimentary, as they will emerge from the main body of the thesis, will provide one perspective through which the relationship between the two movements can be theorised. In this respect, it is worth quoting yet another critic who has recourse to a specifically alimentary metaphor, in this case not in order to define either modernism or postmodernism but to outline their relationship. The critic in question is Michael Bell, for whom “[t]he change from modernism to postmodernism” is “not a difference in metaphysic so much as a different stage in the *digestion* of the same metaphysic.”[[83]](#footnote-83)

**The Egg**

In bringing together the alimentary and the ontological, Bell’s account of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism further foregrounds the susceptibility of twentieth-century literature to the preoccupations of this study. This also raises the question concerning the principle guiding our selection of texts; since, as Bell’s claim suggests, twentieth-century literature generally lends itself to such investigations, a filter has had to be applied here – namely, the prominence of a specific foodstuff, the egg. This is the foodstuff (as well as gamete) that has been most clearly and lastingly associated with the question of being; the ancient Greeks, for example, called the “egg” *oon* and “being” *on*, providing us with yet another linguistic association that aurally links the alimentary and the ontological – an association that almost dares us or, as it were, eggs us on to reframe *ontology* as *o(o)ntology.* Further cause to make such a leap is found in various quarters, including myth, folklore, biology, philosophy and, as we will see in the coming chapters, literature.

According to one version of cosmogony in Egyptian mythology, the god Ra, originator of life, hatches out of the cosmic egg.[[84]](#footnote-84) Similarly, in the ancient Greek Orphic tradition, Phanes – the “revealer,” he who brings (being) into presence[[85]](#footnote-85) – hatches out of the silver egg lying in the womb of Darkness and sets the universe in motion.[[86]](#footnote-86) “The concept of the primordial egg,” comparative cosmologist Laird Scranton observes, “appears almost uniformly in the cosmologies of widespread ancient cultures.”[[87]](#footnote-87) In fact, this is not confined to ancient accounts of cosmogony but is also found in the modern-day Dogon tribe of Mali. As Scranton points out, the Dogon “describe the universe as having begun” as a kind of primordial atom, “a tiny ball of unrealized potential called Amma’s egg.”[[88]](#footnote-88) The generative and transformative potential of the egg in both ancient and modern-day cosmologies is reflected in Venetia Newall’s *An Egg at Easter: A Folklore Study* (1971), which shows that the folkloric imaginary around the world ascribes supernatural powers to the egg, ranging from the capacity to foresee the future to making things happen, as in fertility rituals and witchcraft.[[89]](#footnote-89)

Folklore, then, ascribes supernatural powers to the egg and myths use it to explain the origins of the cosmos, and thus of being. Psychoanalysis comes up with its own egg-based myth to explain the birth of the human being and the operations of the psyche in terms of desire – namely, the myth of the “hommelette,” which we will touch on in the fourth chapter.[[90]](#footnote-90) Karl Popper would of course insist that what psychoanalysis says about the egg (or, indeed, about anything at all) cannot be deemed to be scientific; nevertheless, the importance assigned to the egg within mythical and psychoanalytical contexts as well as folklore is in a sense vouched for by science. Writing in 1987, for example, zoologist Robert Burton says that the egg contains “everything necessary for the creation of a new life – be it an amoeba ... or a human being.”[[91]](#footnote-91) Indeed, it is the egg’s generative potential that marked the birth of modern biology three centuries ago. In 1651, the English physician William Harvey published a book whose title copperplate shows an egg bearing the inscription *ex ovo omnia*, from which everything emerges: fish, serpents, insects, and mammals (including a human



Frontispiece of William Harvey’s *Exercitationes de generatione animalium*, by Johannes Janssonius (1651). Detail. The full image depicts Zeus holding the egg from which the living beings emerge.

being). Around the same time, in the mid-seventeenth century, another group of biologists, the *preformationists* (or *ovists*, as they were also known), took the inscription of Harvey’s egg in a more literal way, developing a “Christian-friendly” theory according to which “all future human history had [already] originally been encased inside the ovary of Eve, in the fashion of a Russian doll.”[[92]](#footnote-92)

Peter Sloterdijk examines the relationship between such egg-based biological theories and ontology. The prominence of the egg “in the hour of modern biology’s birth,” he observes, shows that “the philosophy of origin” was “the force behind ... the very thing that forced its demise.”[[93]](#footnote-93) Indeed, Sloterdijk asserts that biology universalised “the egg phenomenon” in such a way that “even the mythologists of origin had never dared to dream.”[[94]](#footnote-94) From the “biological universality” of the egg, Sloterdijk extrapolates a theory of immanent being, at the core of which is a relationship between the inside and the outside according to which “being outside” can “only ever be a continuation of being inside.”[[95]](#footnote-95) For Sloterdijk, this is the result of positing the egg as the singular and universal origin of being; an origin cannot be considered such “if what emerged from it did not free itself from it” but “it would be rendered powerless as origin” if “its products” were not bound to it.[[96]](#footnote-96) This theory of origin is, we might say, an o(o)ntology that could be envisaged as a series of concentric ovals, whereby being outside is a continuation of being inside, and where being freed from the origin entails remaining bound to it.

Examples of explicit ascription of ontological significance to the egg are also found in Jacques Derrida’s and Gilles Deleuze’s work, although the conceptions of being that each associates with the egg are entirely different. As we will see in Chapter 3, Derrida locates the egg at the core of what he calls “substantialist” philosophy because, for him, the question of the egg (“which came first”) is the question concerning the “logical, chronological, or ontological priority of the cause over the effect,” thus creating the impression that there exists a singular and immutable origin of being.[[97]](#footnote-97) For Deleuze, on the other hand, the egg is a paradoxically contemporary and multiple “origin” that appears recurrently in his oeuvre (including the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, co-authored with Félix Guattari).[[98]](#footnote-98) As early as in the 1953 essay “Desert Islands,” Deleuze says that the egg is “sufficient to re-produce everything,” and uses it to introduce his radical view of re-birth as birth, of re-production as production, of repetition as difference[[99]](#footnote-99) – the very view that Deleuze comes to explore throughout his work. As will be discussed in the third chapter, in *Difference and Repetition* (1968) Deleuze strikingly declares that “the world is an egg,” arguing that it “provides us with a model” for the “onto-genetic” process which reveals that there is no being but, rather, only becoming.[[100]](#footnote-100)

In the selection of literary texts that will be examined in this study we will discover plenty of connections between the egg and the question of being; indeed, what we will call the “o(o)ntological” will weave together our alimentary investigations in the second, third, fourth, and fifth chapters. Before turning to literature, however, we will first see how the ontological has been entangled with the alimentary in the history of Western thought.

## Chapter 1

## I Eat Therefore I Am An Alimentary Ontology

Dasein in Heidegger is never hungry.

Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

Martin Heidegger tells us that, unlike other animals, humans get bored, anxious, and know that they will die. According to Levinas, however, the most striking distinguishing characteristic Heidegger ascribes to humankind is one concerning the question of food. In Levinas’ famous interpretation, “Dasein in Heidegger is never hungry.”[[101]](#footnote-101) To characterise humanness on the basis of food might seem a surprising move, given that food is an element common to both humans and other animals. This is, however, a move made by many philosophers and is found in many strands of thought within the Western tradition. If, then, gastro-criticism considers the examination of the question of eating to be incompatible with the examination of the question of being, in this chapter I want to show that many examples in the history of Western thought suggest otherwise.

Levinas’ observation that Dasein in Heidegger never gets hungry rests precisely on a correlation between the question of being and the question of eating; indeed, for Levinas, the fundamental operation of ontology is analogous to the act of eating. Robert Eaglestone goes as far as to suggest that Levinas considers ontology to be an “omnivorous philosophy.”[[102]](#footnote-102) When I eat, Levinas says, “the real I [sink] my teeth into is assimilated, the forces that were in the other become *my* forces, become me.”[[103]](#footnote-103) In other words, through the act of eating the other is incorporated by the self, assimilated in the self, and thus ultimately *becomes* the self. In an analogous way, the theorisation of being in “classical” ontologies reduces the Other to the Self/Same, as our example of the three eggs in the introduction demonstrates; regardless of their individual differences, the three eggs are seen as instantiations of “eggness” and are, in this sense, essentially the same.

Levinas considers Heidegger’s ontology to be a classical ontology, an ontology that, despite its breakthroughs, ultimately subscribes to this principle of reducing the Other to the Same. If we were to take Levinas’ word for it, then, we would expect that Heidegger would certainly have Dasein eat. Indeed, what Levinas says is not that Dasein in Heidegger never *eats* but that it never gets *hungry*, and the reason Dasein never gets hungry is *because* it eats – or, to be precise, because of the way in which it eats. In Heidegger’s work, Levinas argues, “‘foods’ take on the signification of fuel in economic machinery” because Heidegger “does not take the relation of enjoyment into consideration.”[[104]](#footnote-104) Understood merely as a tool for sustenance, Levinas suggests, food can offer satiety; only if it is understood as something that is also enjoyable can it leave one unsatisfied, hungry.[[105]](#footnote-105) In removing enjoyment from Dasein’s eating, Levinas asserts, Heidegger gives food “the sense of a goal,” turning it into “an ontological means.”[[106]](#footnote-106) What Levinas criticises in Heidegger, then, is that food and, by extension, the realm of the “ontic” – the realm of “beings” (*Seienden*)and all their differences – is ultimately subsumed under something else, the realm of the “ontological,” of “Being” (*Sein*). Levinas, in short, rejects Heidegger’s ontology because it effectively constitutes what the former sees as a kind of reductive eating.

Ontology is not, then, incompatible with the question of eating but, on the contrary, eating encapsulates the characteristic operation of ontology as seen through a Levinasian lens. At the same time, through this Levinasian lens we arrive at the possibility of re-conceptualising the ontological: for if Dasein’s instrumental eating corresponds to what Levinas clearly considers to be a “baneful” ontology, as Casarino might have put it, then the implication is that eating *differently* (in Levinas’ proposition, for example, this would refer to eating for pleasure’s sake) would correspond to a different understanding and mode of being. In this chapter, we will see that the same implication is discernible in philosophy (from Plato to Heidegger and beyond), religion (Christianity), and psychoanalysis (from Freud to Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok).[[107]](#footnote-107)

# The Human-Animal Question

Historically, the most common way in which being has been theorised is through the human-animal question – the question of what distinguishes humans from other animals and, therefore, what makes us who we are. It is true that attempts are now being made to also include plants in such discussions,[[108]](#footnote-108) and, of course, the field of “posthumanities” has, in recent years, broadened the debate by incorporating the question of nonorganic matter as well. Nevertheless, the human-animal question is the most prominent way in which we have thought and continue to think about what makes us who we are. In what follows, then, the human-animal question will serve as the means through which we will uncover some of the ontological resonances of eating.

Derrida makes a point that is crucial in this context. In his talks at the Céricy conference on “The Autobiographical Animal” (1997), posthumously published as *The Animal* *That Therefore I Am*(2006), Derrida turns to food:

In the semantics of *trephō*, *trophē*, or *trophos* we should be able to find everything we should be speaking about in the course of these ten days devoted to the autobiographical animal: feeding, food, nursing, breeding, offspring, care and keeping of animals, ... living and allowing to live by giving to live, be fed, and grown, autobiographically. *Limitrophy* is therefore my subject. ... [I]t will concern what sprouts or grows at the limit, ... *feeds the limit*, generates it, raises it, and complicates it. ... [T]he supposed first or literal sense of *trephō* is just that: to transform by thickening, for example, in curdling milk.[[109]](#footnote-109)

The point Derrida is making here is that his task is not to deny that there is a difference between humans and other animals (which is, he says, something that “[e]verybody agrees on”)[[110]](#footnote-110) but to reveal the multiplicity of these differences: his subject, he says, is *limitrophy*, that is, what “*feeds the limit*” or border between humans and other animals, what makes it grow. Although Derrida does not go into the question of eating in this particular discussion, his suggestion that the border between humans and other animals is “fed” implies a transformative process which, in turn, implies that essence is not fixed.

Joanne Faulkner argues that a fear of such ontological indeterminacy has led to the exclusion of the question of food from philosophical attempts to define the human being. Aspects of “our bestial corporeality,” Faulkner claims, giving the function of nutrition as an example, have been “distilled and put aside” in definitions of the human because we share these aspects with other animals.[[111]](#footnote-111) The situation, however, is far more complex than a mere putting aside suggests. In many cases, the affirmation of distinctions between humans and other animals is not achieved by brushing the question of food under the carpet but by engaging with it in ways that ultimately make food function like what Deleuze calls a “differentiator.” In Deleuze’s definition, the “differentiator” is the “paradoxical element” toward which “two heterogeneous series” converge, the mutual element that simultaneously belongs to two different categories “and never ceases to circulate throughout them.”[[112]](#footnote-112) The “differentiator,” as the term suggests, is something that enables differentiation but, paradoxically, this something is *mutual* to that between which it differentiates. In this sense, the “differentiator” is akin to what Claude Lévi-Strauss terms a “scandal,” something which combines “the conflicting features of two mutually exclusive orders.”[[113]](#footnote-113) In Derrida’s words, Lévi-Strauss’ scandal “is something which escapes” the terms of the opposition that is in question each time, “and certainly precedes them ... as the condition of their possibility.”[[114]](#footnote-114) In our case here, the “opposition” is between humans and other animals and the “scandal” or “differentiator” is their mutual need for food – something which both categories share and which, as we will see, has been used to establish their ontological difference.[[115]](#footnote-115)

**Plato: The Philosopher Disdains Food**

Aristotle ascribes to food (*trophē*) both physical and metaphysical significance. *Trophē*, he argues, is that through which (*dia ti*)the life of all living beings is preserved and, for Aristotle, this is directed at the fulfilment of their ontological aim – namely, the preservation of their “essence.”[[116]](#footnote-116) It appears, then, that Aristotle does not view the nutritive faculty, which all living things have, as something that obscures their differences. On the contrary, it is what preserves those differences, both on a physical level, in the sense that it sustains the different lives of different living beings, and on a metaphysical level, in the sense that it is ultimately directed at the preservation of their “essence” which outlives the individual perishable living thing.

Plato’s engagement with food is similarly aimed at establishing distinctions between living things. Unlike Aristotle, however, Plato does not think that the nutritive faculty is directed at the preservation of the different essences of different living beings. On the contrary, he seems to think that the mutual need to eat poses a danger of ontological indistinction, and, for this reason, he prescribes certain *ways* of eating. More specifically, Plato appears to think that, although humans differ in their essence from other animals, the fact that they both need to eat challenges those differences and, therefore, humans must choose to eat in ways that will reflect and uphold those ontological differences in the realm of the here and now.[[117]](#footnote-117)

In *Phaedo* (circa 380-360 B.C.E.), Socrates declares that “the genuine philosopher disdains food” because his “concern is not for the body” but for “the soul,” which seeks to “attain the truth” through philosophy.[[118]](#footnote-118) Here, then, food is treated as a “hindrance” to philosophy because it distracts with the needs of the body.[[119]](#footnote-119) Important for our purposes is that philosophising is understood to be an exclusively human capacity, being an operation of the “rational soul” which humans alone possess. In this light, Socrates’ declaration sets up an opposition not only between food and philosophy, between the body and the rational soul, but also between food and “proper” humanness.

In the *Republic* (circa 388-360 B.C.E.), this opposition is shown to be more complex. Socrates here speaks of the “lawless appetites” which are “present in all of us” but are “held back in check” by reason.[[120]](#footnote-120) These appetites, he says,

wake up ... whenever *the rest of the soul* – the rational, gentle, and ruling element – slumbers. Then *the bestial and savage part, full of food or drink,* comes alive ... and seeks to ... gratify its own characteristic instincts ... *there is no food it refuses to eat*.[[121]](#footnote-121)

Lisa Heldke argues that Plato presents us with “a sharp separation ... between the activities of reason and those of the appetites.”[[122]](#footnote-122) On close inspection, however, the separation is not as sharp as comments like Heldke’s suggest. As in *Timaeus* (circa 355-347 B.C.E.), where “the appetitive soul” is described as “a wild beast” which is “imprisoned” *within* “the belly,”[[123]](#footnote-123) so in the extract above the alimentary “beast” is presented as *part* of the human soul: the appetites are said to control the bestial part of the soul whereas the *rest* of it is governed by rationality. Although different, the rational part and the bestial part are not isolated from one another; indeed, Socrates advocates that we should “neither starv[e] nor overfee[d]” the “appetitive element,” in other words, that our rationality must mediate it.[[124]](#footnote-124) In this sense, our “instantiation” of the Idea or Form of humanness is, in effect, presented as the result of a food-related mediation: we can better actualise our proper essence by mediating our appetite for food.

When Socrates suggests, in *Phaedo*, that eating is opposed to the human proper, then, he does not imply that we must, for this reason, avoid eating; as he explicitly says in the *Republic*,what we must do is exercise moderation in our consumption of food. And although “the genuine philosopher” is said to “disdai[n] food,” he is, in fact, highly preoccupied with it throughout Plato’s oeuvre; note that, in addition to the already mentioned texts, *Gorgias* (circa 399-388 B.C.E.), *Protagoras* (circa 399-388 B.C.E.), and the *Symposium* (circa 380-360 B.C.E.) all speak of sophistry and philosophy alongside food and drink.[[125]](#footnote-125) The most striking connection between food and philosophy, however, is found in *Timaeus*, where we are told that the lower belly retains and solidifies the consumed food so thatthis food is “prevented from passing quickly through and compelling the body to require more” of it, which would have made the “whole race an enemy to philosophy.”[[126]](#footnote-126) In other words, the production of philosophy is here basically said to depend on the production of excrement. From this vantage, philosophy appears to be what Derrida calls *la merde promise* (“the promised shit”), the “leftovers” of eating, the *restes*.[[127]](#footnote-127) In light of *Timaeus*, then, Socrates’ reference to “the *rest* of the soul” in the *Republic*, that is, the philosophising rational element which characterises the human par excellencewould appear to be the result of food, being enabled by the *restes*, the remains of eating.

But if, as argued in *Timaeus*, the body’s design – more specifically, its capacity to solidify food – is necessary for philosophy, this is clearly not the *only* condition; moderation in consumption, that is, control of how much one eats is also imperative, otherwise the whole purpose of digestion as theorised by Timaeus (namely, the freeing up of time for philosophy) would be defeated. These observations give us a hint as to what the unspoken reason behind Plato’s distrust of eating might be: eating is seen as ontologically “dangerous” because the actualisation of our essence, of the Idea of humanness, partly depends on how we manage our appetite, that is, by neither starving nor overfeeding, a dependency which leaves open the possibility that one may eat otherwise, ignoring this prescription of moderation, and thus be otherwise. Plato’s treatment of the question of eating thus discloses a kind of “counter-ontology” within ontology (as traditionally understood) according to which being is mutable, a mutability that is very much connected with the realm of the here and now as indicated by the need to eat.

**Hegel: The Philosopher Still Disdains Food**

Two thousand years after Plato, the philosopher still manifests a certain disdain for food, at least as far as we can discern from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Here, Hegel is in tacit agreement with Plato, presenting us with the idea that food-related mediations enable the birth of a philosophising human self-consciousness which characterises the human being proper.

In *Phenomenology*, food features as a symbol of the object, which, for Hegel, lacks inherent meaning: “Even the animals are not shut out from this wisdom,” he writes, for “they fall without ceremony and eat.”[[128]](#footnote-128) For Hegel, the animal’s attitude to food is instructive; when an animal “fall[s] without ceremony and eat[s],” Hegel suggests, it reveals the absence of inherent meaning in objects, in this case food. But if the object has no meaning in itself then where does the meaning we find in it actually come from? The meaning the human spirit finds in an object is, Hegel maintains, transferred to it by the human spirit itself and, once again, he finds the animal’s attitude to food instructive. When an animal finds and eats the food it seeks, writes Hegel, it “finishes up with the feeling of self” because the self’s need for it is satisfied.[[129]](#footnote-129) Similarly, when the human spirit encounters meaning in an object it finds satisfaction because it was the spirit itself that had transferred meaning to the object in the first place. In Hegel’s words, “just as the instinct of the animal seeks and consumes food, but thereby brings forth nothing other than itself, so too, the instinct of Reason in its quest finds only Reason itself.”[[130]](#footnote-130)

After these two realisations – firstly, that the object lacks inherent meaning and, secondly, that the meaning present in an object is actually transferred to it by the human spirit – comes a third realisation through which *self-consciousness* is attained, an attainment that, for Hegel, marks the constitution of the human subject. When the human spirit becomes conscious of its transference of meaning to the object, Hegel argues, it comes to understand that what it perceives as object is nothing but itself, posed as object. As he declares at the end of *Phenomenology*, “Consciousness must [come to] know the object as itself,” and such knowledge will grant to it the state of self-consciousness which characterises humanness.[[131]](#footnote-131) The constitution of humanness, then, is completed with the annulment of the object as such. And, insofar as humanness is constituted thus – through the attainment of a self-consciousness for which the object is nothing but itself – then this process resembles Timaeus’ autophagic “global animal,” which

had no ... organs by the help of which he might receive his food or get rid of what he had already digested, since there was nothing which went from him or came into him: for there was nothing beside him. Of design he was created thus, his own waste providing his own food.[[132]](#footnote-132)

When the all-encompassing Hegelian human self-consciousness “eats” the object, it is, like Timaeus’ animal, effectively eating its own waste.

Or so it might seem. For, as Hegel acknowledges, self-consciousness is not really self-sufficient; rather, it “destroys the independent object” and thereby “gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty.”[[133]](#footnote-133) This, Hegel points out, “explicitly affirms” that the “nothingness” of the object is only the impression that self-consciousness has about the object.[[134]](#footnote-134) Ultimately, however, self-consciousness knows that it is attained via the destruction of the object as such, and this knowledge necessarily “makes it aware that the object has its own independence.”[[135]](#footnote-135) Not only is the object independent of, but also prior to self-consciousness since meaning is transferred to it before the attainment of self-consciousness. And since food stands for the object in *Phenomenology*, we can therefore say that food exemplifies the constitution of self-consciousness which distinguishes the human from nonhuman animals. Indeed, in reference to *The Philosophy of Mind*, the third part of Hegel’s *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817), Michael Inwood describes the process of the constitution of self-consciousness as a kind of eating:

What “self-consciousness” does to the ... other [that is, the object] is primarily, Hegel implies, to eat it. The urge to eat is thus motivated by a desire to remove an intrusive object as much as, or more than, to satisfy hunger.[[136]](#footnote-136)

Like Inwood, Alexandre Kojève also resorts to the alimentary in his reading of Hegel. At the beginning of his book on *Phenomenology*, Kojève writes: “The very being of man, the self-conscious being,” “presupposes Desire” – “the desire to eat, for example” – and it is this “Desire” that “moves [man] into action.”[[137]](#footnote-137) Action, then, satisfies Desire and this satisfaction, Kojève stresses, is only achievable through “the ‘negation,’ the destruction ... of the desired object: to satisfy hunger, for example, the food must be destroyed” as an external self-standing object.[[138]](#footnote-138) Derrida also has recourse to the alimentary in reference to Hegel, going as far as to claim that the whole of “Hegel’s philosophy” can be envisaged as a case of “assimilation [which] acts as a kind of sublimated eating”; everything, Derrida says, is “incorporated into the great digestive system” that is the Hegelian spirit.[[139]](#footnote-139)

All these commentaries point out that food *stands for* the object in Hegel’s philosophy; that self-consciousness is constituted through a *kind of* eating; that the Hegelian system can be *metaphorically* envisaged as a digestive system; and that its assimilations constitute a *sort of* eating or *sublimated* consumption. These notions of the “standing for. . . ,” the “kind of. . . ,” the “metaphor of. . .” raise our attention to the fact that when Hegel is talking about food *as such*, this is primarily in relation to nonhuman animals. When it comes to humans, this “as such” undergoes a transformation, becoming a “standing for,” a symbol, a metaphor of a concept, the concept of the object. Theodor Adorno puts it very evocatively in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), where he writes that Hegel’s “system is the belly turned mind.”[[140]](#footnote-140) The human’s need for actual food does not seem to be amongst Hegel’s concerns in *Phenomenology* and, as Inwood says in reference to *The Philosophy of Mind*, the “urge to eat” is not so much “motivated by a desire ... to satisfy hunger” as it is “motivated by a desire to remove an intrusive object.”[[141]](#footnote-141)

In his critique of Hegel, Marx addresses precisely this issue. “*Hunger*,” Marx writes, “is a natural *need*” which “therefore needs ... an *object* outside itself to be stilled.”[[142]](#footnote-142) The fact that “man” is hungry for actual food shows that he is a “limited creature, like animals and plants.”[[143]](#footnote-143) At the same time, the fact that man is in need of things like food is, for Marx, “indispensible to the manifestation ... of his essential powers”;[[144]](#footnote-144) man’s needs, then, simultaneously associate him with other needy creatures whilst also distinguishing him from them. Because man needs to eat he must obtain food, and in his attempt to do so he constructs tools and thus puts into practice his *essential* powers, actualising his *human* essence. As Marx writes with Engels in *The German Ideology* (written 1846; published 1932), “[l]ife involves before everything else eating and drinking,” thus compelling man to the construction “of the means to satisfy” these primary needs.[[145]](#footnote-145) The construction of tools – first of all for the acquisition of food and drink – is here described as “the first historical act,” and features as the paradigm of the mutual exchanges with nature that produce the human being.[[146]](#footnote-146) There is, then, a correlation between nutrition and the actualisation of the human essence; Marx’s engagement with the need for food suggests that the human essence is not always already manifested but is, rather, actualised or brought into being through a series of interactions with nature.

Hegel’s treatment of food suggests a similar process, albeit at the conceptual level; as we have seen, he argues that self-consciousness, and thus the status of the human being proper, is attained through a series of conceptual mediations which he often explains through analogies with nonhuman animals and their attitude to food. In one of his books on Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, however, Robert Pippin elaborates on the question of mediation in relation to the question of food as food rather than as just a conceptual object. Pippin here distinguishes between the *mediation* that characterises humanness and the *immediacy* that characterises nonhuman animality on the basis of their respective treatments of food. The animal’s response to food is said to constitute a manifestation of what Pippin refers to as “proto-intentionality”; the human’s, on the other hand, is seen as a case of “real intentionality.”[[147]](#footnote-147) “The animal,” Pippin’s Hegel says, finds its food and then proceeds to “ac[t] to eat such food *when* it is hungry, when in a proto-intentional way, it takes the food as to-be-eaten *now*.”[[148]](#footnote-148) This, then, is a case of immediacy whereas humankind’s treatment of food is mediated; human beings “can take hunger or the desire for food to be much more than ... a stimulus to act” and, in doing so, can manifest “real intentionality.”[[149]](#footnote-149) While the hungry nonhuman animal seeks food, finds it, and simply eats it, the hungry human animal mediates his/her hunger through consciousness and can thus treat it as more than just a stimulus to act “automatically.” For Hegel, Pippin says, humans can “assum[e] command” in deciding whether “to act, or *not*.”[[150]](#footnote-150) As human beings, we can *choose* to eat when hungry but we can also choose to notact on our hunger, to refrain from eating or, indeed, can act without the stimulus of hunger: we can eat without beinghungry.[[151]](#footnote-151)

By bringing to the table the question of intentionality in relation to the question of eating, Pippin points us to the possibility of ontological transformation, for if humans are revealed to be essentially different from other animals on the basis of their response to food it follows that they may choose to respond to food otherwise in order to be otherwise. In this respect, food in Hegel upholds the ontological status quo but at the same time hints at its potential for transforming it.

**Christianity: Lest he Put forth his Hand and Eat**

Like Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx, the Judeo-Christian tradition[[152]](#footnote-152) also treats food as a “differentiator.” Here, however, food ensures the distinction not only between humans and other animals but also the divine. In Genesis, for example, humanness, animality, and divinity are distinguished through their different diets. We are told that, in the prelapsarian state, animals were “given every green herb for meat” (i.e., food) whereas humans could eat “every herb bearing seed” and the fruit of trees “yielding seed” (Genesis 1: 29-30). In the state of innocence, then, both humans and other animals survived on a plant diet,[[153]](#footnote-153) but the emphasis on the seed suggests that there was a distinction in the kind of plants each of the two categories consumed. Exempted from the trees available for human consumption was the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil – such knowledge was reserved for God. Also reserved for God, as we discover in the chapters following the expulsion from Eden, was meat; God alone “nourishes” on animals, through sacrifices. Indeed, as the story of Abel and Cain suggests, God prefers animal sacrifices to fruit offerings (Genesis 4: 3-5). Since God is the giver of life and life therefore belongs to Him, humans are not allowed to kill other animals except for sacrificial reasons.

There is, however, more to the distinguishing functions of food than this. What humans, animals, and the divine eat distinguishes not only *between* categories but also *within* them. In the case of humankind, we observe that the consumption of different foodstuffs marks different states of being-human. For a start, the consumption of the forbidden fruit causes a change in the ontological status quo; Adam and Eve are initially in a state of being characterised by the absence of knowledge of good and evil but with their transgressive act of eating they cross one of the dietary lines of distinction with the divine. In what seems to be an attempt to make up for this ontologically significant dietary transgression, God expels man from the Garden “lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Genesis 3: 22). Thus, whilst the postlapsarian man is like God in that he has eaten of the forbidden tree and has thus come “to know good and evil” (Genesis 3: 22), the distinction between human and divine is maintained because man is prevented from eating of the tree of life – only God remains immortal.

Another ontologico-alimentary shift occurs after the Flood. The postdiluvian state features as a re-creation of the world, with “Noah and his sons” being told to be “fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 9: 1) and being given mastery over God’s other creatures (Genesis 9: 2) – just as Adam had in the original creation. But, as Gordon Wenham observes, “[t]hough creation is thus restored” the “situation after the flood is not the same as it was before.”[[154]](#footnote-154) The crucial difference in this new state of being of humankind comes with God’s prescription of what can be eaten: whereas Adam was told that he could only eat seed-bearing herbs and fruit, Noah is told that “[e]very moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you” (Genesis 9: 3). God, then, allows humans to kill animals to eat them rather than just to sacrifice them, apparently because He has come to recognise that they have an inclination towards evil. God initiates the Flood because of “the wickedness of man” (Genesis 6: 5), and this is the very reason He also gives for allowing humans to eat animals after the Flood, thus signalling His reconciliation to the fact that “man” is now “evil” (Genesis 8: 21). After the Fall, man’s ontological state is altered, with evil now infecting his being from “his youth” (Genesis 8: 21), and the new postdiluvian dietary law seems to seal God’s acceptance of the fact that His postlapsarian offspring is also evil rather than just good. However, with this newly granted right to eat animals and thus take life inside them, the postdiluvian humans would be crossing another one of the dietary boundaries of distinction with the divine. Therefore, God introduces yet another dietary prohibition to ensure separation: this time He prohibits “eat[ing] flesh with its life, that is, with its blood” (Genesis 9: 4).

In addition to the food-based distinctions between humanness, animality, and divinity, as well as the food-based distinctions between different states of being-human, we also have food-based distinctions between different human races, with the Jews adhering to additional dietary prohibitions to ensure their “purity” as a chosen people; when it comes to the consumption of meat, for instance, they must eat only “clean” beasts.[[155]](#footnote-155) All these cases suggest that such distinctions cannot be taken as a stable ontological “given” but, rather, have to be actively preserved in the here and now through what one does and does not eat. In this sense, food not only separates but also has the potential to bring together or join, a potential that is further emphasised in the New Testament through the consumption of Jesus’ flesh and blood at the Last Supper and its ritual re-enactments. Here, it is not only man and God that are united but there is also an implied connection with animality based on the mutual “fleshliness” and “bloodliness” of the three categories. Humans, animals, and the divine all are (or become) flesh and blood: animals are such from their creation; man is “formed” from “the dust of the ground,” and when God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,” he became a living being, a creature of flesh and blood (Genesis 2: 7); and, in Christianity, the divine becomes flesh and blood with the Incarnation. Crucially, their flesh and blood renders all three categories, in one way or another, edible: animal flesh is, as we have seen, eaten both by postdiluvian humans and by God who “nourishes” on animals (through sacrifices); in instructing Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God seems to be suggesting that He might well “feed” on humans too (Genesis 22); and, finally, Jesus’ flesh is eaten and his blood drunk at the Eucharist. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, then, the distinct categories of humanness, animality, and divinity come together in their mutual consumption of food, a point of convergence where each category can also become food.

The suggestion that all three categories are potentially edible brings to mind Derrida’s claim that eating is a “metonymy of introjection” and that we must therefore “identify with the other, who is to be assimilated, interiorized.”[[156]](#footnote-156) Any ingestion of the other is thus seen as an ingestion of the self; in other words, the other’s consumable flesh and blood can be seen as the self’s consumable flesh and blood. In this sense, one really *is* what one eats and, therefore, one eats and is eaten at the same time; consumer and consumed thus become profoundly of “one flesh,” “one blood.” This mutual edibility, however, is not only a border that joins but also a border that separates – a point of convergence which also constitutes the possibility of differentiation. For if one is what one eats then the implication is that one *becomes* who one is according to what one chooses to eat; one can, therefore, eat differently from others and in this way distinguish oneself from others. As we have seen, the Jews ensure their differentiation from other races by taking care not to “contaminate” their “purity” by eating animals of unclean blood; they must not shed the blood of unclean animals because they must not eat their flesh whereas the blood of clean animals can be drained so that their flesh is consumed. Sara Guyer argues, in a different discussion, that blood-based distinctions disclose “a situation [where the construction] of subjectivity ... uses ingestion as its metonymy,”[[157]](#footnote-157) and, here, the incorporation of the clean flesh of animals of clean blood can be seen as a metonymy of the creation of a people that is “of clean blood” in that it remains separated from other peoples.

In treating eating as a “metonymy,” both Derrida and Guyer suggest a connection between food and language, signification, meaning. The Judaic tradition does, in fact, explicitly correlate the signifiable with the edible, as in the story of Ezekiel in whose mouth God puts words, the implication being that, in eating these words, Ezekiel eats the meaningful (Ezekiel 3: 1-4). Important here is also Jean Soler’s observation on the distinction between clean and unclean animals; creatures that do not stick “to the element that has ‘brought them forth’ or to the organs characteristic of life” in that element (fish/sea, birds/air, and so on), Soler argues, “are unclean because they are unthinkable.”[[158]](#footnote-158) A beast, then, is inedible when it is unthinkable, and it is unthinkable when it is un-signifiable, when the element that has brought it forth cannot be said to clearly signify its existence.[[159]](#footnote-159) Soler’s observation thus invites an association between God and the unclean beasts because God is also un-signifiable (and thus unthinkable) – hence the *tetragrammaton* (YHWH),the un-pronounceable designation of His name. In this sense, God’s un-signifiability in Judaism would render His consumption forbidden. The God of Christianity incarnated in Jesus is, on the contrary, both signifiable (Jesus’ name being pronounceable) and edible, the New Testament thus retaining the association between signifiability and edibility. There is, however, more to it than this. As Julia Kristeva argues in her reading of the two New Testament tales of food multiplication (Mark 6: 38ff and 8: 4ff), in both cases Jesus’ concern to feed the people is coupled with his insistence on “calling upon understanding to decipher the meaning of his action.”[[160]](#footnote-160) As Kristeva has it, the significance of the food-related miracles is their opening of the passage to meaning; in the Old Testament, then, food coincideswith signification and, in the New, it leadsto signification.

The association of food with signification resonates with the wider context of the food-based differentiations between the categories of humanity, animality, and divinity discussed throughout this section; in this wider context, this association might be said to imply that food enables definition – the signifiability of these differentiations. Insofar, though, as this association rests, to greater or lesser extents, on a distinction of the edible from the inedible, the allowed and the forbidden, it keeps open the possibility of transformation and re-definition through alimentary transgressions.

**Psychoanalysis: Sex is Secretly Food**

In Freudian psychoanalysis, associations between food and signification often involve a third fundamental term – namely, sexuality. According to Mark Forsyth, “Freud said that everything was secretly sexual” but “etymologists know that sex is secretly food”; *mating* with somebody was originally sharing *meat* with them, Forsyth explains, and meat is etymologically any kind of food.[[161]](#footnote-161) Though Freud does not acknowledge this etymological link, his descriptions of the constitution of human sexuality are drenched in food references.

In *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905), food is said to provide the first “pleasurable sensation” of the infant by satisfying the need for nourishment.[[162]](#footnote-162) This, in turn, activates the lips as an erotogenic zone and thus arouses the desire for sensual pleasure. In this initial stage, when “sexual activity has not yet been separated from the ingestion of food,” Freud argues that “the sexual *aim* consists in the incorporation of the object.”[[163]](#footnote-163) The nutritional and the sexual instincts are subsequently separated and directed at different objects: the nutritional at milk, and the sexual at the breast. The desire for the breast is then transferred to another sensuous object which is found on the infant’s own body (usually the thumb).[[164]](#footnote-164) This autoerotic phase ends with yet another transference, this time from the infant’s own body to an external sensuous object. In Freudian psychoanalysis, this food-initiated process of transferences marks the constitution of human sexuality. In arguing that food *activates* the sexual instinct, Freud implies that this instinct is already present in a not-yet-activated state which must, therefore, also have an object – an unattainable, fantastical one;[[165]](#footnote-165) it is this unattainable object, an object for which food is the first substitute, that characterises sexuality in the human realm.

The question of alimentary substitution has been seen, by later psychoanalysts, as related to the development of language. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, for example, argue that, when the breast-as-source-of-food withdraws from the infant’s mouth, the infant is compelled to find “ways of requesting” it, like “cries and sobs” and, finally, “language.”[[166]](#footnote-166) Language is here effectively said to be developed for the purpose of requesting food but, as Abraham and Torok stress, it then becomes satisfying in itself: “The early satisfactions of the mouth, as yet filled with the material object,” they write, “are partially and gradually replaced [substituted] by the satisfactions of a mouth now empty of that object but filled with words pertaining to the subject.”[[167]](#footnote-167)

The course of development that Abraham and Torok describe suggests a kind of determinism – that one ultimately becomes who one is *meant to be* because one needs food. Such determinism, however, does not preclude the possibility of subsequent (unconscious) alteration. As Abraham and Torok show, cases of traumatic loss lead to fantasies of incorporation when the mouth fails to be filled with words that would express (and thus consciously acknowledge) the loss; instead, the speaking mouth “reverts to being the food-craving mouth it was prior to the acquisition of speech.”[[168]](#footnote-168) In such cases, words are internalised, almost eaten, rather than being externalised through verbal expression; it is as though words become material objects. This, however, is not “a matter of reverting to the literal meaning of words”; it is, rather, a matter of robbing words of “their very capacity for figurative representation,”[[169]](#footnote-169) which amounts to their destruction – indeed, it amounts to the loss of language and, as such, to the “un-doing” of the human “proper.”

In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud – following William Robertson Smith – describes rituals of actual, rather than fantasised, incorporation. Various tribes, Freud says, ritually share meals so that a “common substance” is transferred to the members of the tribe through the food they eat, producing, in this way, their kinship.[[170]](#footnote-170) The most important meal-sharing ritual is the “sacrificial feast,” which involves the killing, dissection, and consumption of the totem animal which is said to have been “originally identical with the gods,” and with which the tribe identifies.[[171]](#footnote-171) Leaving aside the similarities with some of the Judeo-Christian rituals described above, the main point to be made here is that, through this consumption, the tribe becomes “of the same substance” as the totem animal/god, and is thereby distinguished from other tribes;[[172]](#footnote-172) in short, what is eaten is the means through which the essence of the tribe is produced and preserved.

Both in *Three Essays on Sexuality* and in *Totem and Taboo*, then,food is given ontological significance: one becomes who one is either because one needs to eat (in the first case) or depending on what and with whom one eats (in the second case). In both cases, this significance emerges in relation to the realm of sexuality; in the first instance, Freud is preoccupied with the development of the sexual instinct and, in the second, the reason he engages with the sacrificial feast is because he wants to use it as a model to create a “story” about the “originary” murder and consumption of the Father and thus reinforce his theory of the Oedipus complex.[[173]](#footnote-173) As we have already seen with Abraham and Torok, however, food also relates to the question of language, something which becomes clearer in Joseph Breuer’s well-known Anna O. case, on which Freud heavily relied to develop his understanding of hysteria and its cure.

Breuer remarks on how Anna’s condition improved when she told him stories;[[174]](#footnote-174) it is, however, only in passing that he notes that, when Anna started getting the stories “out” she also started eating, interpreting her acceptance of food merely as a sign of her gradual recovery.[[175]](#footnote-175) There is, however, a significant pattern here (and, indeed, in other case studies):[[176]](#footnote-176) so long as words are not “stuck” in the body, food is allowed in. Note that, for a period of time, Anna is said to have started speaking in languages other than German, her mother tongue, without realising it; even when given German texts to read out, she produced extempore translations. Here, it is remarked – again, in passing – that during this period Anna refused taking any nourishment.[[177]](#footnote-177) The “food in/words out” pattern helps illuminate this rather strange speech disorder; if the incorporation of food was connected to the exteriorisation of words then food may be said to have acted as a kind of mediating factor whereby its consumption pushed out, as it were, the words that had been stuck inside. Thus, when Anna unconsciously employs another form of mediation – translation – the intake of food is no longer required to perform its mediating function.

Anna’s case thus seems to suggest that the passage from food to words is not exclusive to the early formative stages of an individual’s life; as in the meal-sharing, essence-constructing, and essence-preserving rituals described in *Totem and Taboo*, food continues to play a formative role throughout an individual’s life, a role that is, in Anna’s case, closely associated with language, that essential characteristic which distinguishes the human from other animals. Ultimately, then, we can say that food in Freud has a *lasting* significance in the formation and preservation of the human essence, and from this we can extrapolate an unspoken food-related possibility of ontological deviation that can occur at any point in an individual’s life.

**Heidegger: The Animal is Simply Taken by the Food**

All of the examples discussed thus far reveal something of the ontological resonance of food

in Western thought, always suggesting that one is (or becomes) who one is (or is meant to be) depending on what, how, and/or how much one eats. The same is true of Heidegger, whose engagement with the question of eating is, as we will see, more extensive than Levinas’ observation in the epigraph suggests.

The ontological significance of Heidegger’s treatment of food is most obvious in the 1929-1930 lecture series which was subsequently published as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1983). Here, different ways of eating signify different ways of being. Heidegger’s discussion of the animal’s mode of being in the world is influenced by the work of the German biologist Jakob von Uexküll and, in particular, his identification of different *Umwelten* or environments.[[178]](#footnote-178) In Heidegger’s *Fundamental Concepts*, Uexküll’s work, which shows that different animals effectively live in different worlds, prompts a discussion not of the differences between the worlds of different animals but of different modes of being in the world.

Uexküll’s experiments show that a tick, for instance, lives in an environment that comprises only a small number of elements or “carriers of significance” to which it is instinctively drawn, something that leads Heidegger to the conclusion that nonhuman animals exist in a state of “captivation.”[[179]](#footnote-179) Heidegger reaches this conclusion through a discussion of what he refers to as a bee’s “drivenness” in its “search for food.” He begins by making the simple observation that when a bee “finds a drop of honey in a clover blossom,” it “sucks [it] up” and “flies away” when the honey runs out. This, Heidegger says, raises the question whether the bee actually recognisesthat “the honey is no longer present.”[[180]](#footnote-180) To answer the question, he resorts to an experiment in which “a bee was placed before a little bowl filled with so much honey that the bee was unable to suck” it all at once. For Heidegger, this means that when a bee flies away from the flower it is not because it recognises that there is no more honey left but because its belly is full. The hypothesis advanced after this experiment hammers the point home: if the bee’s abdomen could have been removed from its body then it would “carry on [sucking] regardless,” not realising that it is taking in more honey that its belly would have been able to contain. As far as Heidegger is concerned, “this shows conclusively” that “the bee by no means recognizes the presence of too much honey” but that it is, rather, “simply taken [*hingenommen*] by its food,” going on to say that “[t]his *being taken*” is “an *instinctual* ‘toward. . .’” which “prevents the animal from taking up a position over and against this food.”[[181]](#footnote-181) For Heidegger, the way in which animals eat reveals their mode of being in the world: the nonhuman animal’s total and helpless immersion in its food shows its total and helpless immersion in the world or, as Heidegger calls it, its “openness” which, he stresses, is in fact “a peculiar captivation.”[[182]](#footnote-182)

This illuminates Heidegger’s well-known distinction between the “worldless” stone, the “poor” animal, and the “world-forming” human.[[183]](#footnote-183) The stone, which stands for all inorganic material objects, is “worldless” in the sense that it has no relation of interaction with the world, and this lack of interaction is indicated, for example, by the fact that the stone is a non-eating thing. The existence of the nonhuman animal, on the other hand, is said to be characterised by a certain “poverty” in the world in the sense that the animal is immersed in the world in such a way that it is impossible for it to recognise the elements of its world “*as beings*.”[[184]](#footnote-184) It is this supposed inability to relate to other beings *as such* that makes Heidegger say that the animal cannot possibly take up a “position over and against [its] food” and, by extension, any other element in its world. In short, the animal’s relation to its food, its “captivation” by it, reveals the animal’s “poor” being in the world. Humans, by contrast, are said to be “world-forming” because of their capacity to do what the animal is said to be incapable of – namely, taking a position over and against the elements that populate their world, including food.

Heidegger elaborates on the point through a long discussion of what he views as a quintessentially human “mood,” that is, boredom. The experience of boredom, as Heidegger describes it, bespeaks a state of being that is very different from the state of being that is revealed by the nonhuman animal’s relation to food. It will not be possible here to go into the intricacies of what Lars Svendsen calls “the most elaborate phenomenological analysis of boredom”;[[185]](#footnote-185) what is important for our purposes is Heidegger’s general observation that, in boredom, one does not let oneself “go with whatever [possibility] offers itself,” which suggests that we, humans, can be “*elevated beyond*” the circumstances that normally envelop us, and this reveals to us who we are.[[186]](#footnote-186) As Heidegger puts it, boredom reveals “*the self* ... *to* *itself* as the self that ... has taken over the being-there of Da-sein.”[[187]](#footnote-187) This is because when I am bored I become aware that normally, when I am not bored, I am immersed in the world and go with whatever possibility presents itself; in other words, my experience of boredom reveals to me that my “normal” or “standard” way of being in the world is precisely that of being-there (*Dasein*). My “being-thereness” is suspended while I am bored and, therefore, my boredom also reveals to me that I am capable of being “elevated beyond,” as Heidegger phrases it, the circumstances that I am normally enveloped by. This contrasts starkly with the animal’s way of being in the world as Heidegger demonstrates it through the example of the bee’s “drivenness” to food. Whilst the animal is simply taken by its food, the experience of boredom suggests that humans are able to recognise the possibility of eating *as a possibility* and can, therefore, refrain from actualising it. In short, it seems that, for Heidegger, the nonhuman animal is what it is because it eats and, although human animals also eat, what distinguishes them is revealed and affirmed in their capacity to *not* eat.

**Nietzsche: Hungering for Words**

In *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are* (written 1888; published 1908), Nietzsche engages not with the question of *not* eating but of not eating *properly.*[[188]](#footnote-188)This, we recall, is also the case with Levinas’ observation in the epigraph, where he criticises Dasein’s particular *way of eating*, that is, its instrumentality. Nietzsche addresses the issue of not eating properly in a different way when he sets out to tell us, in *Ecce Homo*, “how one becomes what one is.”

*Ecce Homo* is a kind of autobiography in which Nietzsche tells us of his development as a thinker in four chapters: “Why I Am So Wise”; “Why I Am So Clever”; “Why I Write Such Good Books”; and, “Why I Am Destiny.” *Ecce Homo*,however, is not just an autobiography but can also be read as an account of the birth of the human being in general; as the title suggests, Nietzsche here invites us to “behold man” and “how he becomes what he is.” It is this relationship between the individual human being (flagged up in the titles of the book’s chapters) and the human being in general(flagged up in the book’s main title) that Nietzsche is concerned with and, as we will see, it is precisely on this that he bases his critique of the condition of being-human. As Joanne Faulkner observes, this is Nietzsche’s “account of *himself*” but “also arguably his most intimate attempt to ... recover humankind” from what he sees as the malady of humanness.[[189]](#footnote-189)

Whereas Heidegger views the state of being-human as an “elevation,” Nietzsche views it as an illness, declaring that “we suffer from ‘man’.”[[190]](#footnote-190) The recovery from the illness that is humankind, Nietzsche proposes in *Ecce Homo*, is achievable through what we eat. Indeed, one of the reasons he gives us as to “why [he is] so clever” is his interest

in a question on which the “salvation of humanity” depends more than on any curio of the theologians: the question of *nutrition.* For ease of use, one can put it in the following terms: “how do *you* personally have to nourish yourself in order to attain your maximum of strength, ... of moraline-free virtue?[[191]](#footnote-191)

In these two sentences, Nietzsche introduces three interrelated points to which he returns throughout. The first is his attack on religion, particularly Christianity and its prescriptions as to how one can “save” oneself. This is related to the second point, namely, the importance of nutrition; in Nicholas More’s words, just “[a]s Christianity has devalued the body and this life, so Nietzsche [sets out to] devalue Christianity and its super-terrestrial diet.”[[192]](#footnote-192) As far as Nietzsche is concerned, Christianity plays down the significance of eating whereas, for him, this is something that is vital for one’s “salvation.” The third point introduced in this extract is the emphasis on the individual: the question, Nietzsche says, is “how do *you* personally have to nourish yourself ...?” What is proper for *one’s* diet is not necessarily what is proper for *another’s*, and for Nietzsche this is one of the mistakes of Christian theology. In Nietzsche’s view, the idea that each of us should eat according to prescriptions of the one-size-fits-all type is responsible for making us who we are, that is, beings who “suffer from ‘man’” – from the condition of humanness as a generic category.

In *Daybreak* (1881), Nietzsche speaks of themutual origin of humans and other animals. “Formerly,” he writes, “the grandeur of man” could be established “by pointing to his divine origin” but “this has now become a forbidden way, for at the portal stands the ape, together with other gruesome beasts.”[[193]](#footnote-193) Evolution, in which Nietzsche believed, necessitates an admission of a common “earthly” origin, an admission that whatever we have come to be has emerged from a materiality that humans share with nonhuman animals.[[194]](#footnote-194) When Nietzsche engages with an aspect of this mutual “earthliness” in *Ecce Homo* – the question of eating – he accordingly admits no separation between a material body (traditionally associated with the nonhuman animal) and an immaterial spirit (traditionally associated with the human animal). Thus, we read that “the *German spirit* comes from ... distressed intestines,” that it is the result of the “indigestion” caused by the “overcooked meat, [the] greasy mealy vegetables [and the] pastries degenerating into paperweights” of the German cuisine.[[195]](#footnote-195) The “German *palate*,” we are told, finds “everything to its taste” – any combination is appetising for it, and so it “nourish[es] itself on opposites,” “gulp[ing] down ‘faith’ as well as scientificity, ‘Christian morality’ as well as anti-Semitism.”[[196]](#footnote-196) The German *spirit* and all its prejudices, Nietzsche concludes, “emanate from the bowels.”[[197]](#footnote-197)

This simultaneously and indistinguishably literal and metaphorical treatment of food has been seen as an example of Nietzsche’s “insidious habit” of “taking metaphors literally.”[[198]](#footnote-198) But it is precisely the insistence on *separating* the literal from the metaphorical that Nietzsche wants to criticise as an insidious, idealistic habit. What is, after all, his critique of the German spirit’s all-engulfing appetite if not a critique of Hegelian idealism, a critique of the spirit which devours contradictory beliefs and, leaving nothing behind, sublates everything into what Nietzsche clearly views as an unfitting synthesis? From this Nietzschean vantage, the Hegelian system appears to resemble Heidegger’s constantly-eating bee, although here this bee is not a disembowelled one whose food flows freely out of its organism but, rather, a bee whose belly is bloated, retaining everything that it has consumed. This is, in fact, what Slavoj Žižek dubs “the standard” critical reading of Hegel, according to which “the Hegelian Absolute Substance-Subject” is “*thoroughly constipated*.”[[199]](#footnote-199) Even though Žižek challenges this, offering an alternative reading which permits the Hegelian system the function of defecation, what Žižek is actually talking about is, by his own admission, “excremental *metaphorics*.”[[200]](#footnote-200) Ultimately, then, Hegel presents us with an idealistic neglect of food as food which allows for an alignment of Hegel with Plato and his declaration that “the genuine philosopher disdains food.” Nietzsche, by contrast, speaks of a philosophy that “translate[s] ... into reason” a “drive for ... meals of flesh,” for “fruit and eggs,” and for “little talking” and “cautious reading” – “in short, for all those things which taste best ... *to me*.”[[201]](#footnote-201) This, says Nietzsche, is “a philosophy which is at bottom the instinct for a personal diet.”[[202]](#footnote-202)

Nietzsche is thus to be contrasted to Plato and Hegel; in the latter two we encounter a movement *from* food *to* philosophy, from the concreteness and specificity of the here and now to the universality of the abstract: from the literal, we might say, to the metaphorical. This movement is also discernible in the New Testament, where food leads to meaning/signification, and in psychoanalysis, where the need for food enables the passage to language. Although eating and speaking both originate in the mouth, they are nevertheless presented, in all of these cases, as separate, as though human beings have *two mouths*. This is something that Deleuze also picks up in a different context, arguing that the sound of the “mouth which speaks” is seen as distinct from “the noise of a body,” or indeed a mouth, “which eats.”[[203]](#footnote-203) The speaking mouth, Deleuze implies, is separated from the eating mouth so that the human subject that expresses itself in language comes into being. The Old Testament, by contrast, conflates the signifiable and the edible – as does Derrida, who foregrounds the edibility of the signifiable and the signifiability of the edible in positing all the senses as metonymies of the eating mouth. What the mouth eats as the other, Derrida argues, is what is tasted and touched as the other, what the nose smells, the eye sees, and the ear hears as the other and, indeed, what we speak of, what we signify as the other; in short, the eating mouth is ultimately the speaking mouth.[[204]](#footnote-204) Nietzsche’s simultaneously literal and metaphorical treatment of food also suggests a connection with language, one of ontological significance. In Nietzsche’s work, as we will see, the origin of humankind as a generic category which suppresses the personal coincides with the origin of metaphor, understood as the basis of language.

Aristotle says that “the successful use of metaphor is a matter of perceiving similarities”;[[205]](#footnote-205) the implication, then, is that a metaphor brings to the fore an *essential* connection between tenor and vehicle that is already “there.” As Derrida observes, “a good metaphor,” in the Aristotelian sense, “brings us” “closer ... to [the thing’s] essential or proper truth.”[[206]](#footnote-206) For Nietzsche, on the other hand, metaphors do not *reveal* ontological characteristics but, rather, *construct* them in emphasising a similar quality (or a set of qualities) between two things at the expense of their particularities. Such stripping-off of a thing’s individuality, Nietzsche argues, creates the false impression that the similar quality emphasised by the metaphor comprises what the thing is “truly,” “properly,” in its “essence.”

He demonstrates the point in his essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (1873), where he argues that “the concept,” which is, apparently, as “bony [and] foursquare” as “a die,” is “the *residue of a metaphor*.”[[207]](#footnote-207) To decipher this claim we must first acknowledge a distinction that emerges from Nietzsche’s writings – between “metaphor” and what we might call “metaphoricity.” Nietzsche terms the latter the “primitive world of metaphor,”[[208]](#footnote-208) and it is to this that he refers above, when he says that the concept, a product of language, is “the residue of a metaphor”; the former, “metaphor,” coincides with the *literal* (etymologically: “of the letter” and thus the basis of words, of human language). For Nietzsche, a “metaphor” (thus language) *solidifies* “metaphoricity”; it is the residue of “metaphoricity,” which seems to be understood as a pre- or extra-linguistic realm characterised by fluidity. “Metaphor,” then, expresses a concreteness and restrictiveness that Nietzsche associates with language; “metaphoricity,” on the other hand, expresses a fluidity and freedom which Nietzsche opposes to language.

If, as Aristotle suggests, a metaphor foregrounds a set of similar qualities between different things and thus creates, as Derrida points out, the impression of *essence*, then, for Nietzsche, all words are metaphors; in Nietzsche’s account, a word, like a metaphor, creates the (false) impression that different things are essentially the same.[[209]](#footnote-209) The word “leaf,” for example, “fit[s] countless ... similar cases” which, strictly speaking, “are never equal”; any one leaf is never the same as any other leaf and yet the word “leaf” creates the impression that they are. Words thus give concrete generic forms to the things they designate, “arbitrarily discarding the[ir] individual differences.”[[210]](#footnote-210) It is in this sense that the concept, as a product of language, is, for Nietzsche, “foursquare” – a fixed shape, like a die.[[211]](#footnote-211) The same goes for the concept of “humanness,” which fits together countless similar cases which are never the same. Just as language is born through a kind of fixing or solidification which discards individuality so is the human being; indeed, the birth of the one coincides with the birth of the other. Nietzsche, then, does not view the “passage” to language – and, therefore, to humanness – as a passage from something material (like food) to something more abstract (like philosophy), as thinkers like Hegel would have it. For Nietzsche, this passage is not a case of an “opening up” but of a “narrowing” or “closing” down, a solidification of fluidity into something concrete, literal: the letter, words.

Nietzsche’s disapproval of this closure or solidification which discards the particular resonates with his critique of a generic diet which denies the situatedness (and thus the particular dietary needs) of an individual human being. Whilst Heidegger views humankind’s capacity for disengagement from situatedness/being-thereness as an “elevation,” Nietzsche views the passage to humanness not as liberation but as a migration from the freedom of fluidity to something solid, fixed, and confining. He elsewhere describes “man” through a parallel with “water animals” that walked on the solid ground and became “land animals”;[[212]](#footnote-212) like them, the animal that became man swam from the water towards land and inhabited it, he moved from metaphoricity to metaphor and thus began to speak.

This image of the birth of humankind and language is echoed in Sara Guyer’s suggestion that speaking creates a solid figure, the face, which, she says, articulates a confining and fundamentally anthropocentric ethics.[[213]](#footnote-213) Guyer engages with the Levinasian conception of the face as a denotation of fragility and, as such, as that which prohibits murder. Levinas insists that what the face expresses is non-linguistic, that its denotation of vulnerability is prior to language; nevertheless, he refuses a face to nonhuman animals although they too are vulnerable[[214]](#footnote-214) – hence Guyer’s claim that the face is ultimately a construction of the speaking, thus human, mouth.[[215]](#footnote-215) As analysed by Guyer and others,[[216]](#footnote-216) the face-based Levinasian ethics effects a kind of narrowing down which excludes nonhuman nonspeaking animals, something which resonates with Nietzsche’s analysis of language as a confining solidification.

Crucially, Nietzsche views this narrowing down as characteristic of man’s wants. Indeed, he sees the creation of metaphor – that is, of the literal, of letters, words – as “the fundamental human drive.”[[217]](#footnote-217) Human beings are, then, characterised by their drive to create metaphor; their hunger is a hunger for words. If Heidegger elevateshuman beings on the basis of their capacity to refrain from eating, Nietzsche implies that this is precisely what belittleshuman beings: it is their lack of hunger for food and their hunger for words instead that infects human beings with the “sickness” that is humankind. In Nietzsche, words are the food human beings desire in order to be what they are – *namely* (“by name,” in language, and thus generically) humans, members of the ontological category of “humanness.” But, as Nietzsche crucially states in *Human All Too Human* (1878), “hunger is no proof that the food that would satisfy it exists” but, rather, that “it desires the food.”[[218]](#footnote-218) By the same logic, the human hunger for words, the hunger, we might say, for the all too human face does not prove that this face exists but that it is desired and, therefore, essentially lacked.

**“Digesting”: By Way of Conclusion**

In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy centred on the question of “calculating” the subject (deciding who “counts” as a subject), Derrida turns to the question of eating. As mentioned above, Derrida argues that eating is a metonymy of all the senses: what the tongue tastes as the other is what the skin feels, the nose smells, the eye sees, the ear hears, and, ultimately, what comes to be designated as, the other. In eating, then, we constitute ourselves as subjects while (and through) positing the eaten as object. For Derrida, this raises a “moral question,” and this question, he claims, is “not, nor has it ever been: should one eat or not eat, eat this and not that, the living or the nonliving, man or animal” but “*how* ... should one *eat well*?”[[219]](#footnote-219) However, this chapter has shown that all three questions – Should one eat or not eat?; Whatshould one eat?; Howshould one eat? – have been central in the task of revealing, signifying, constructing, and/or preserving ontological distinctions.

In Plato, differences pertaining to the question of being are correlative with the question of *how* (or, better, *how much*) one should eat: in order to live in accordance with our essence (what makes us human), Socrates tells us that we must control our bestial-appetitive part. Hegel, too, engages with the question of *how* we eat. Though Hegel avoids talking about the human being’s need for actual food, turning food into a conceptual object instead, such transformation suggests a process of mediation which is precisely what characterises the Hegelian human subject. Indeed, Pippin argues that the Hegelian human subject eats in a *mediated*, rather than *immediate*, fashion. This mediation of the consumption of food – our capacity to act through “real intentionality” – suggests that the constitution of the Hegelian human subject rests on one of the questions Derrida says has never been at stake: namely, should one eat or not eat? For, here, it is the capacity for *not* acting on one’s hunger (or, as Heidegger would have it, the capacity for not actualising the possibility to eat) that is said to manifest the human essence. The question of not eating is, as we have seen, also at the core of the Anna O. case, where the correlation between food and language extends the role Freud ascribes to food in terms of the constitution of the human psyche (or essence) throughout an individual’s life rather than confining it to the early developmental stages. As for the Judeo-Christian tradition, this amply demonstrates the central ontological role of the question Derrida most controversially dismisses – namely, the question of *what* to eat;[[220]](#footnote-220) for, what one eats is here very much connected with the construction, designation, and/or preservation of different modes of being.. Nietzsche, too, is preoccupied with this question, going as far as to propose that the entire task of philosophy must focus on it; as we have seen, Nietzsche envisages a philosophy that is “the instinct for a personal diet,” that is, for *what* each individual should eat.

Far from having been “distilled and put aside,”[[221]](#footnote-221) then, food appears again and again in the history of Western thought. In these appearances, food is clearly imbued with ontological significance; in one way or another, all the material we have discussed here ultimately leads to the idea that “I eat therefore I am,” to adapt Descartes, to whom we will turn, in Chapter 3, via Beckett. All subsequent chapters will explore not only this idea but also some of the more specific correlations that have emerged from this survey. In Hegel’s work, we have identified an entanglement of the question of eating with the question concerning the mediating function of subjectivity, an entanglement which will re-emerge in Chapter 2, via Bataille and his treatment of the alimentary in *Story of the Eye.* In the same chapter, we will also glimpse something of the Heideggerian idea that human beings have the capacity to be disengaged from the circumstances they are enveloped by; it is such a vision of distancing themselves from others, from what Heidegger elsewhere calls “the ‘they’,”[[222]](#footnote-222) that Bataille’s characters present us with in their alimentary-related attempts to escape “the usual.” In Chapter 4, we will return to Plato’s recommendation of exercising control over eating; and, in Chapter 5, we will be confronted with the Nietzschean idea that essence is lacked – that one is not who one is by dint of predetermination but, rather, who one comes to be is very much connected with what one eats. Here, we will encounter a totalitarian regime that is able to create the impression of essence precisely because essence – in the traditional sense – is absent.

In addition to these, and other, specific associations, the following chapters will invariably draw on the more general entanglement of the alimentary with the ontological that has been flagged up in this chapter. The crucial point is that our survey has gestured toward the mutability of being, the possibility of ontological change, of being otherwise via eating otherwise – for example, through alimentary transgressions such as the consumption of forbidden foodstuffs; through eating in an “immediate” rather than “mediated” fashion; through overeating; or, finally, through not eating. It is, however, clear that this possibility remains only an implication in the texts we have looked at. In the following chapters, then, we shall focus precisely on this, and see how the otherwise of eating as a means to the otherwise of being has been explored in the literary imagination of the twentieth century, beginning with Bataille.

## Chapter 2

## Alimentary Ways of Being Otherwise The Case of Georges Bataille

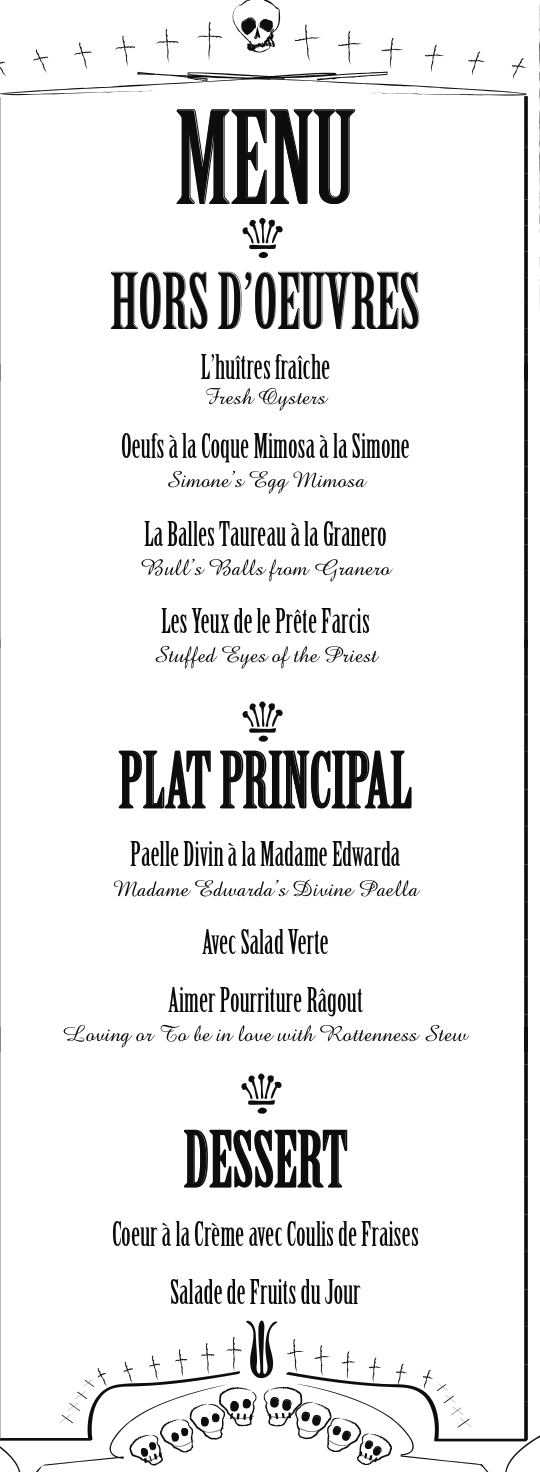
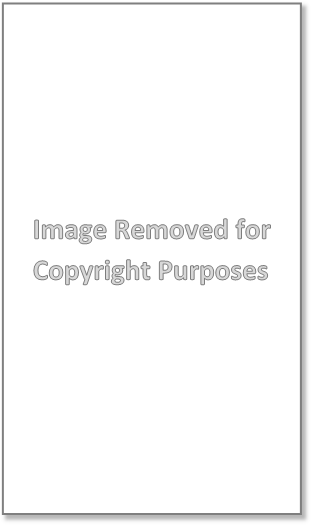
*Oeufs à la Coque Mimosa à la Simone*Simone’s Egg Mimosa

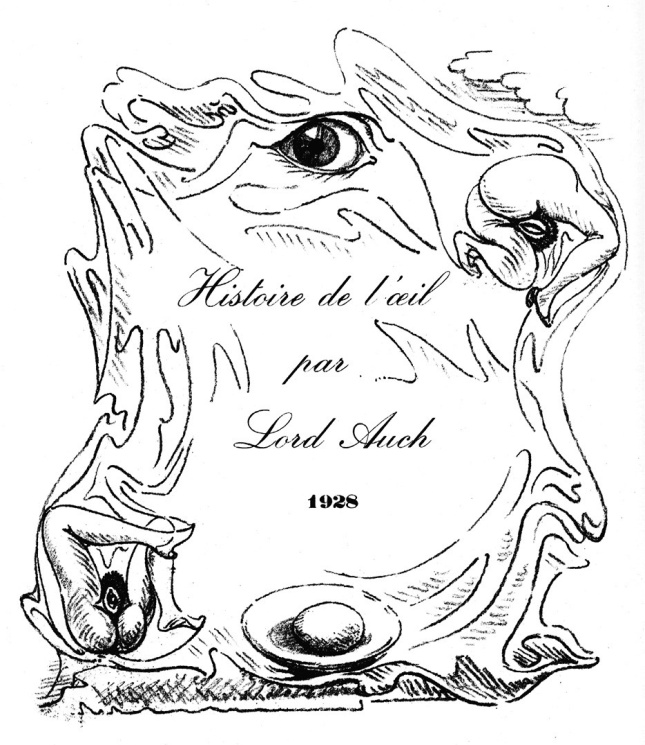
*La Balles Taureau à la Granero*Bull’s Balls from Granero

*Les Yeux de le Prête Farcis*Stuffed Eyes of the Priest

Appetising or not, these *are* appetisers – at least in the menu devised by Edia Connole and Scott Wilson for their “*soirée culinaire par Georges Bataille*.”[[223]](#footnote-223) These intriguing dishes are included in the *hors d’oeuvres* section of the menu, and fittingly so, considering that they are inspired by *Story of the Eye* (1928),[[224]](#footnote-224)a text, as Susan Suleiman observes, that is customarily read as a preamble – a *starter*, if you will – to Bataille’s “main”oeuvre,[[225]](#footnote-225) that is, his non-literary writings.[[226]](#footnote-226)

Mary Douglas assures us that any menu can be decoded by reading it as a metonymical figuration of the societal structure within which it is produced.[[227]](#footnote-227) But how are we to even begin reading this menu, let alone decoding it, when it offers human eyes as a starter? Are human eyes to read with or to eat?

To be sure, “Stuffed Eyes of the Priest” is a dish that does reflect something of the context in which the novella that inspired it was published: it expresses a distrust of the eye as the organ of sight. As the climactic scene of the slashed eye in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s surrealist film *Un chien andalou* (1929) suggests,[[228]](#footnote-228) and as Martin Jay demonstrates at length in his influential study *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993),[[229]](#footnote-229) the distrust of sight is symptomatic of the art and thought of that period. But there is more to Connole and Wilson’s dish than this. In suggesting that human eyes are not for seeing or reading but *instead* for eating, this starter points to an *exchange* of functions which is denotative of the specific system of exchanges that is in operation in *Story of the Eye*. It is the ontological implications of this system which will be discussed here; more specifically, we will see that such exchanges constitute alimentary ways of being otherwise.

All of Bataille’s fictions, including *Story of the Eye* (1928), *Blue of Noon* (written 1935; published 1957), *Madame Edwarda* (1956), *My Mother* (1966), and *The Dead Man* (1967) are categorised as pornography,[[230]](#footnote-230) and as Susan Sontag observes, pornographic narratives typically rest on an exchange economy whereby “all action is conceived as a set of sexual *exchanges*.”[[231]](#footnote-231) Bataille, Sontag argues, “achieves his effects with far more economical means” than, say, de Sade.[[232]](#footnote-232) For example, “instead of de Sade’s operatic multiplication of sexual virtuosi,” Bataille multiplies the possibilities of exchange within “a chamber ensemble” of a limited number of things and persons.[[233]](#footnote-233) The possibilities of exchange between the novella’s limited-in-number elements (which, according to Roland Barthes, include solids like the eye, the egg, the cat’s saucer and testicles, and liquids like milk, sperm, and urine) [[234]](#footnote-234) are multiplied through entering a variety of combinations. Beckett, an author whom Bataille greatly admired,[[235]](#footnote-235) presents us with something similar when he has Murphy eat his biscuits in multiple combinations of order. But Bataille takes this further in *Story of the Eye*, multiplying the possibilities of exchange by means of making one term or element “act” as another. A *Bataillean* Murphy, then, would attempt to eat his five biscuits not just in all possible combinations of order but would also eat his chocolate biscuit as if it were his ginger biscuit. More radically,Connole and Wilson’s menu suggests that a Bataillean Murphy would even turn into food what is not usually taken to be food – hence the inclusion of human eyes amongst the dishes on offer. This economy of exchange delineates what I will provisionally refer to as a passage *from* *use to utilisation*. This passage will be crucial in our task of uncovering, through an examination of alimentary exchanges, the understanding of being that Bataille’s novella presents us with. This conception of being is, as we will see, connected with the Stoic distinction between “ways of being” and “profound being,” and centres on the role of the agential and intervening subject.

# Ontological *Consommation*

Before demonstrating how the alimentary-based passage from use to utilisation materialises in *Story of the Eye*, we must first clarify what exactly is meant by “use” and “utilisation.” *Use* refers to the act of employing something for a purpose whereas *utilise*, as its definition in the OED suggests (“convert to use”), means to employ something for a purpose that it would not be normally thought to have, a purpose which is different from its “intended” purpose(s). Thus, one may *use* a soup bowl to put soup in and a spoon to eat it whereas one may *utilise* the soup bowl, say, as a drum and the spoon as a drumstick. In *Story of the Eye*, “use” and “utilisation” are correlated with the question of being.[[236]](#footnote-236) What I will refer to as the “use-value” of things is taken to denote a thing’s usual or common functions, its “intended” purpose(s), and, ultimately, its “nature” or “proper” being.[[237]](#footnote-237) What I will call “utilisation-value” is meant to denote a thing’s capacity to be employed differently, to perform functions that are different from its “intended” functions, and this will be taken to designate its capacity to be put into different “modes of being.”[[238]](#footnote-238) “Utilisation-value,” then, necessarily reaffirms “use-value”: one can only employ the utilisation-value of a thing if one first of all recognises its use-value; similarly, something can enter a different mode of being which is recognised as different inasmuch as its proper being is also recognised as such.

Bataille’s understanding of being rests on his core concepts of “continuity” and “discontinuity,” which are correlated with three types of what the French call *consommation*: sex, death, and alimentary consumption. The importance Bataille ascribes to the first two *consommations* (sex and death) has been explored at length while the importance he ascribes to the third (alimentary consumption) remains largely neglected.[[239]](#footnote-239) When it comes to *Story of the Eye*, critics have focused either on the obvious sexual aspect of the main characters’ games (with references to the ways in which this is linked to death) or on their less obvious linguistic aspect,[[240]](#footnote-240) while ignoring their alimentary aspect. Connole and Wilson’s menu, however, flags up the significance of the alimentary in the novella, pointing us toward the employment of utilisation-value, that is, the exchange of the usual functions of things (like eyes) for unusual, food-related functions.

In *Story of the Eye*, objects and body parts are indeed utilised rather than used; things that are not usually taken to be foodstuffs feature as food just as things that are usually taken to be foods do not feature as such – or, if they do, they are eaten otherwise. We are, for instance, confronted with raw animal testicles entering human mouths as food (53/56); with a human vagina dipped into an animal’s food, the vagina thus functioning as an animal’s mouth (10/13); with animal eggs inserted into human anuses (14/18), as if to be consumed through this orifice; and with animal eggs dropped intact into toilet bowls, as if the human who sits on the toilet has defecated them into birth (33/36). As we will see, through these acts of eating otherwise Bataille’s characters explore the possibility of being otherwise.

The most explicit association between food and the question of being in Bataille’s non-fictional works is found in *Theory of Religion* (1973), where he famously picks an alimentary simile to distinguish the human’s being in the world from the animal’s being in the world. “[T]he animal,” he writes, “isin the world like water in water.”[[241]](#footnote-241) Like Heidegger, who, as shown in the previous chapter, engages with the animal’s way of eating and extrapolates from this its total immersion in the world, Bataille here seeks to exemplify the “continuity” between an animal and its environment, and to distinguish it from the “discontinuity” that characterises the human mode of being in the world (although, unlike Heidegger, Bataille does not view “continuity” as “captivation”).[[242]](#footnote-242) The alimentary nature of Bataille’s simile is already clear in the text, for he reaches the conclusion that the animal is “like water in water” through an engagement with the animal’s mode of food consumption: the “continuity” or “immanence of the animal with respect to its milieu,” says Bataille, is given in “*the situation* ... *when* [*an*] *animal eats*.”[[243]](#footnote-243) In the realm of nonhuman animality, he claims, there is no distinction between subjects (who eat) and objects (that are eaten): the animal is in the world like water in water, its eating thereby constituting a kind of auto-cannibalistic consumption. The same does not apply to humans, who are primarily “discontinuous” beings; “man,” says Bataille, “does not eat anything before he has made it into an object.”[[244]](#footnote-244) In other words, the act of consumption in the human realm presupposes a distinction – and thus a discontinuity – between the eater (as subject) and the eaten (as object).[[245]](#footnote-245) As in *Theory of Religion* so too in *Story of the Eye* the question of being is in conjunction with the question of eating, albeit in a different way. The emphasis here is not on the ontological distinction between humans and other animals on the basis of “continuity” and “discontinuity” but, as we are about to see, on the ontological “status quo” which Bataille’s characters seek to challenge through their unusual acts of eating.

**Mania for Eggs**

“Food,” Maud Ellmann writes, “is the prototype of all exchanges with the other, be they verbal, financial or erotic.”[[246]](#footnote-246) Marx would have concurred; as we saw in Chapter 1, he and Engels argue that “[l]ife involves before everything else eating and drinking,” positing the production of tools for the acquisition of food and drink as the paradigm of the mutual exchanges with nature which produce the human being.[[247]](#footnote-247) In a different way, the food-related exchanges in *Story of the Eye* are also entangled with the question of being, featuring as attempts to effect ontological transformation.

Ellmann asserts that food is “the symbol of the passage,” that is to say, of all kinds of passages, and in Bataille’s novella the ontologically resonant “passage” from use to utilisation is accordingly delineated through ingestion-like acts.[[248]](#footnote-248) Simone, we learn, has a “mania for ... eggs,” albeit not for eating them – at least not through the mouth (14/18). Rather, the unnamed narrator “put[s] the egg right on the hole in her arse” while he is masturbating, his “come” finally “trickl[ing] down [Simone’s] eyes” (ibid.). This does not denote a stage prior to the differentiation of the nutritional instinct from the sexual, as laid out in the previous chapter; had it been a case of regression, sexual functions and alimentary functions would have been confused *unconsciously.* What we have is, instead, something like what René Magritte portrays in *The Rape* (1934): a conscious, designed-to-shock exchange of body parts. Like Magritte, Bataille presents us with a conscious exchange of one body part for another, although the emphasis here is not on visual resemblance (as in Magritte’s painting) but on functions: the function of eating the egg, which would usually be carried out through the orifice that goes by the name “mouth,” is here assigned to another orifice, the anus.[[249]](#footnote-249) The egg, moreover, is not only used as a foodstuffbut is also utilised as a penis, with Simone “squeez[ing]” it between her buttocks hard enough to “brea[k]” it so that its liquids are “shot out” like the narrator’s sperm, which is, by the way, “shot out” not in the anus but on Simone’s eyes, from which it “trickle[s] down,” thereby functioning like tears (14/18).

René Magritte, *The Rape* (1934).

These exchanges present us with a linguistic difficulty – one that reveals the ontological significance of this “alimentary-sexual” game.[[250]](#footnote-250) What, for example, might an anus that functions like a mouth be called? Again, what might an egg that also functions as a penis, and eyes that cry sperm, be called? If an anus that assumes the function of eating cannot be properly designated as an “anus,” and, indeed, cannot be understood to *be* such, then we arrive at a conception of being as mutable, whereby what something *is* depends on what it *does*; in this sense, these things, organs, and orifices enter different modes of being whilst they are utilised.

This is not to say, however, that Simone and the narrator have effected a profound ontological transformation. The narrator does suggest that this is their *intention*: “We ... took,” he says, “any opportunity to indulge in unusual acts [*actes inhabituels*]” (11/15). By their own admission, they seek to set themselves apart from others, from what Heidegger calls “the ‘they’” or “the *they-*self,”[[251]](#footnote-251) from “decent people” who blindly conform to the status quo (44/45); they want to escape the banality of the usual, to experience the world differently, to make the world and the things that populate it *be* differently. In labelling their acts as “unusual,” the narrator reveals not only their intentions but also their necessary recognition of the usual; indeed, Simone can only perform her act of eating otherwise because she first of all recognises the “eggness” of the egg and the “anusness” of the anus just as the human subject in Heidegger recognises the “treeness” of the tree.[[252]](#footnote-252) The subject’s necessary recognition of a thing’s use-value or proper being, however, inevitably affirms the latter; and, crucially, this affirmation is achieved not despite but through the thing’s utilisation: because Simone eats the egg otherwise she inadvertently but inevitably foregrounds the normal way of eating it in the same way that the “eggness” of the egg is upheld precisely because it enters another mode of being, that of the penis. This is akin to what Victor Shklovsky calls “defamiliarisation,” the technique which aims to make “the stone *stony*,” to restore its essence (its “stoniness”) by placing it in unfamiliar settings and thus making it appear to be otherwise.[[253]](#footnote-253) Insofar as they constitute a kind of unintentional defamiliarisation, the exchanges of functions and modes of being in *Story of the Eye* reveal that what we are dealing with is not, as it initially appears, a passage from use to utilisation but the inverse: a passage from utilisation back to use.

In Bataille’s novella, then, things have utilisation-value the employment of which results in different ways of being but these utilisations and different ways of being end up affirming, rather than challenging, the thing’s use-value or proper being. With this in mind, we can postulate “two planes of being” in *Story of the Eye*, comparable to the two planes of being that Deleuze, following Émile Bréhier, detects in Stoic thought: on the one hand, writes Deleuze, there is “real and profound being” and, on the other, “way[s] of being” that are located “at the surface of [profound] being, the nature of which [they are] not able to change.”[[254]](#footnote-254)

Generally speaking, the Stoic believes in the existence of a “plan” in the grand scheme of things, related to which is the Stoic belief that the beings and things which populate the world have intended purposes, that is, a nature which is proper to them. “Profound being” can be thought in these terms whilst “ways of being” can be thought in reference to the Stoic understanding of behaviour.[[255]](#footnote-255) Exceptional circumstances aside, Stoic thinkers maintain that one must strive to behave in accordance with one’s nature. Chrysippus makes the point most forcefully in saying that “even the foot, if it had understanding, would exert itself to get into the dirt” as this is its nature or proper being.[[256]](#footnote-256) Implicit in Chryssipus’ statement is an acknowledgement of one’s capacity to behave in ways that are not in accordance with one’s proper nature, intended purposes, or use-value; the capacity, in other words, to deviate from “profound being” and to thereby enter different modes or ways of being (the capacity I have termed “utilisation-value”). From the Stoic and Bataillean viewpoint alike,[[257]](#footnote-257) behaviour or utilisation-value and the ways of being that result from it are not capable of modifying profound being: when the egg enters different ways of being, when it behaves like a penis and its liquids like sperm, its profound being (its “eggness”) is retained.

To this extent, what happens to the egg in *Story of the Eye* is comparable to what happens to Gregor in Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” (1913). Gregor’s transformation into a monstrous cockroach puts him in a different mode of being while, at bottom, he remains Gregor. He is, for example, worried about losing his job and tries to deal with the situation sensibly and with clarity, which is not, one suspects, something a cockroach would be particularly concerned about. Further, though the humans with whom Gregor is trying to communicate think that his voice is that of an animal, we are told that “it was still without a doubt his own voice from before [*frühere*].”[[258]](#footnote-258) This is not a “before” that refers to a period that is “past” in the sense that it is no longer “present” at the time of the narration. Rather, it is a “before” that spills into the “now,” a past that is preserved in the present and constitutes part of it. Whilst he is in his “present” state of being-a-cockroach, then, Gregor still retains his “past” state of being-a-human. We could, of course, argue that Gregor was, in a sense, always a cockroach, that his existence as a clerk was no more or less meaningful than that of an insect. This reading would, nevertheless, still have to acknowledge a difference between being-cockroach and being-human; if, that is, Gregor’s life as a clerk can be paralleled to the life of an insect, then implicit within this is the idea that before Gregor became a clerk-cockroach he was a human being. Indeed, in coming to experience this transformation Gregor experiences this very difference, and precisely because he experiences this difference the implication is that his “past” or profound being – his humanness – is preserved throughout his “present,” his state of being-a-cockroach, just as the egg’s “eggness” is preserved throughout its utilisation as a penis in *Story of the Eye*. In this sense, Bataille’s novella remains faithful to the Western tradition where, in Catherine Malabou’s words, “being remains itself.” Through a brief survey of various tales of transformation (including Kafka’s), Malabou concludes that, “[p]erhaps never once” in the “Western imaginary” has change, transformation, or metamorphosis been “presented as a real and total deviation of being”; it is, rather, only “[f]orm [that] transforms” while “substance” always “remains” what it is.[[259]](#footnote-259)

In his chapter on Kafka in *Literature and Evil* (1957), Bataille says that,

Kafka wanted to entitle his entire work “Attempts to escape the paternal sphere.” Yet let there be no mistake about it: Kafka never really wanted to escape. What he really wanted was to live within the paternal sphere – *as an exile*. [[260]](#footnote-260)

If we were to substitute “status quo” – whether literary, economic, political, social, ontological, or all of these – for “paternal sphere” it would become clear that Bataille’s claim about Kafka in fact applies to a great deal of modernist literature. And, by substituting “being” for “paternal sphere” we can see that this claim resonates with Bataille’s own fiction and its quasi-Stoic ontology. Like Kafka in Bataille’s account, the Stoic does not want to deviate from his nature. While, however, the Stoics engage in a conscious struggle to remain within the “sphere” of their proper being Bataille’s characters consciously strive to do the opposite by making things function in ways that are different from their intended function(s) and thus putting them into ways of being that explicitly deviate from their profound being. To this extent, Simone and the narrator’s attempts to escape profound being are akin to the attempted escapes in Kafka’s fiction as Kafka himself describes them – that is, as *genuine* attempts to escape. And just as Kafka’s characters never really escape in the end so it is with Bataille’s characters. In this sense, the result of the otherwise of eating in *Story of the Eye* is unintentionally Stoic: the “eggness” of the egg, the “anusness” of the anus, the “mouthness” of the mouth, the “penisness” of the penis, and so on, are inadvertently affirmed.

Unlike the struggles of Kafka’s characters as seen by Bataille, then, what we have in *Story of the Eye* is not a case of the egg remaining within the sphere of its profound being “as an exile”; rather, the egg is only “an exile” within the different mode of being that it enters. It is this principle that Roland Barthes expresses when he argues that *Story of the Eye* is the story “of a migration”[[261]](#footnote-261) – the egg is an immigrant in the state of “penisness.” And, crucially, migration from one state (of being) to another suggests a certain fixity in terms of the states (of being) from and to which one migrates; so it is that the egg’s “migration” to the state of being of the penis presupposes and re-establishes the existence of a state of “eggness” and a state of “penisness,” positing the former as the being that is proper to the egg and the latter as the being that is proper to the penis. Something of this is, in a sense, detectable in the *modus operandi* of modernist literature in general. As we have seen in the introduction, Eagleton argues that the modernist text’s attempt to transcend language (because it ties it to the world that it seeks to distance itself from) makes it bulimic or anorexic, that is to say, self-destructive, and it is just such self-undoing that we encounter in *Story of the Eye* where the egg’s entrance into the mode of being of the penis ends up affirming what it means to challenge, the egg’s “eggness.”

Significant in this respect is also the fact that the egg’s alternative mode of being does not last; to borrow from Althusser’s later writings, a way of being *takes form* without *taking hold*.[[262]](#footnote-262) When the anus assumes the mode of being of the mouth in “eating” the egg this mode of being “takes form” but does not “take hold” – it does not persist after the act of eating otherwise comes to an end. Ways of being are, then, temporary and are thus distinguished from profound being, which persists. In short, *Story of the Eye* suggests that acts of eating otherwise are of ontological significance but the ontological changes they effect are superficial.

# Milk for the Pussy

Various exchanges of functions in *Story of the Eye* also raise the question of sexual difference; the egg is, after all, not only a foodstuff but, of course, also the female gamete. In another alimentary game, for example, in this instance a case of drinking otherwise, Simone appears, during one of her long climaxes, to be “virtually drinking [*en buvant*]” the narrator’s “left eye” (34/38). Here, the eye features as a source of sexual pleasure: it “was sucked,” we read, “as obstinately as a breast [*aussi qu’un sein*]” (ibid.). A body part found on a male body, then, enters the mode of being of a female body part, thus giving the male narrator an approximation of the female experience of having a breast. The verb “drinking,” moreover, alerts us to the implication that the eye is sucked like *milk* would have been sucked out of a breast. And if, as Eagleton observes, milk is what “starts off” that “construction” we call “the human body” then this incident hints at the “constructedness” of the sexed human body while also making use of the possibility of its *re*construction, of making it be otherwise.[[263]](#footnote-263) Eagleton, though, only makes this point in passing, without any further elaboration. Ros Bramwell, on the other hand, gives a better idea of how milk relates to the “constructedness” of the human body, and does so in a way that points to the ontological implications of the matter. Bramwell finds that the dual function of the breast as a source of food and of sexual pleasure often makes mothers wonder whether both of these functions are in accordance with the *nature* of the breast or whether the latter is “just” constructed and is thus “inappropriate.”[[264]](#footnote-264)

It is such issues concerning the nature or proper being of the sexed body that Judith Butler famously theorises, from a non-alimentary perspective, in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993).[[265]](#footnote-265)As has been observed,[[266]](#footnote-266) the “bodies that matter” to Butler are exclusively human; the animality she is preoccupied with is that of the human body.[[267]](#footnote-267) When she argues that we not only “do” *gender* but also *sex*, suggesting thus that even the sexed body can be reconstructed through what it is made to *do*, she confines this to the human realm. Butler argues that a human being who currently “performs” or, better, is currently “performed” as an instance of what comes to be understood (through the repetition of this performativity) as “femaleness” is capable of being re-performed, as it were, as an instance of “maleness.” In *Story of the Eye* we encounter instances of what seems to be a “re-performativity” not only in terms of sex but also in terms of *species* – as is, for example, the case with the very first game that Simone orchestrates. Noticing a saucer of milk, Simone asks: “Milk is for the pussy isn’t it?” (10/13). She then proceeds to “put the saucer on a small bench” and to sit on it so that “her ‘pink and dark’ flesh” is “dip[ped] into the cool milk,” in what seems to be yet another act of eating or, rather, drinking otherwise in which no matter is actually ingested (ibid.). Given Simone’s disdain for her mother, her assertion that milk is for “the pussy” (the vulva) seems to be a rejection of motherhood: milk is not for the nourishment of a baby and, by extension, sex is not for reproduction.

But if amongst Simone’s intentions in her striking utilisation of her vulva is a rejection of the usual association of milk with motherhood, this is nevertheless re-established as a “natural” association just as in the Queer economy the deviant “other” reaffirms the normative through challenging it. The use/being that is “proper” to something is, in *Story of the Eye*, manifested and established as such *as a result* of it being utilised in a passage from utilisation back to use. Simone’s milk-game thus ultimately suggests that by eating otherwise one does not come to be otherwise, at least not profoundly; rather, different modes of being lead to the manifestation and re-establishment of profound being.

Although it does fail to cause profound ontological change, featuring more as a performance than a performativity, Simone’s milk-game is nevertheless radical in that it is not species-specific. As Susan Suleiman observes, both the English word “pussy” (10) and the word *chat* used in the French original (13) have a dual referent: informally, they both refer to the vulva but, of course, they also refer to the cat.[[268]](#footnote-268) In being dipped into the milk, then, Simone’s vulva enters the mode of being of the *cat*’s mouth; and, in the meantime, the narrator also becomes “cat-like” for, as Sova Fisher observes, in order to see Simone’s genitals (her “‘pink and dark’ flesh”), he has to sit in a certain way: he has to “get down on the floor and sprawl at [Simone’s] feet in a feline position.”[[269]](#footnote-269) Indeed, the French original draws our attention to the significance of sitting; Neugroschal, the translator, gives us: “Milk is for the pussy isn’t it?” (10) where the French text reads: “*Les assiettes, c’est fait pour s’asseoir, n’est-ce pas?*”(13), a literal translation of which would be: “Plates are made to be sat on, aren’t they?” in the sense of setting something – making something *sit* – on a plate. This alerts us not only to the narrator’s act of sitting but also to Simone’s who, in setting herself on the saucer of milk does not utilise her vulva merely as the cat’s mouth but also as the cat’s food since what is set (or *sits*) on the plate is for consumption. This, then, is an act of eating otherwise whereby what is utilised as an organ of consumption is simultaneously utilised as that which is to be consumed; not only does the human animal here feature as a nonhuman animal but also the eater features as edible.

The idea of the edibility of the eater offers a glimpse of Bataille’s *general* understanding of being, a non-anthropocentric ontology that Eugene Thacker dubs a “general culinarism.” Drawing on Bataille’s concepts of “restricted” and “general” economy, Thacker posits, on the one hand, what we might refer to as a *restricted ontology*,an ontology that would, for example, refer to the state of being of the human animal in contradistinction to the state of being of the nonhuman animal as it emerges from the limited perspective of the here and now. On the other hand, we have an ontology that deals with being in a general sense, in the grand scheme of things. Thacker refers to this general economy of being as a “general culinarism,” describing it as a sort of “cooking without a ‘cook,’ a generic ‘eating’ without eaters and eaten.”[[270]](#footnote-270) This, Thacker argues, is “a way of thinking the world as a continual morphology of matter and energy, but indifferently to the instrumental wants and desires of ‘cooking’ in the restricted sense.”[[271]](#footnote-271) As such, it is a non-anthropocentric conception of being *as* being-eaten, a conception which admits neither hierarchy nor distinction between human and nonhuman animal life but which presents all life as edible and as always already in the process of being “eaten,” of being assimilated in an ongoing process of what Thacker calls “a kind of anonymous digestion.”[[272]](#footnote-272)

Implicit in Simone’s milk-game, however, is precisely a hierarchical distinction between the human and the nonhuman participants; the functions usually associated with the cat (the dipping of the mouth into the saucer of milk, the sprawling at its mistress’ feet) are here performed by the human body but any functions usually associated with humans are not, in turn, performed by the cat. Richard Iveson makes a very similar point in his reading of what Deleuze and Guattari call “becoming-animal,” arguing that they effectively view it as “an *essentially* human affair,” as something reserved exclusively for the human being.[[273]](#footnote-273) When a human being enters assemblages of forces that effect his/her “becoming-animal,” Iveson writes, what is actualised is “a uniquely human property” and, therefore, “becoming-animal” might well be described as “the *becoming* human of human *being*.”[[274]](#footnote-274) In a similar way, when Simone eats otherwise, making her vulva act as the cat’s mouth, she is putting into practice her human capacity to do so.[[275]](#footnote-275) As in Shklovsky’s account of defamiliarisation, where the stone is made stony once it stops *functioning* as a stone and thus appears to have stopped *being* a stone, the manifestation of profound being in *Story of the Eye* relies on, and coincides with, its *negation*: Simone and the narrator manifest their humanness when they enter a different mode of being.

Marc de Kessel identifies this same principle in Bataille’s non-literary writings. “In [Bataille’s] view,” de Kessel writes, “man coincides with the bread he eats ... and expresses his ‘essence’ when he ostentatiously destroys all the bread he lives on.”[[276]](#footnote-276) In other words, “man” *is* his bread and manifests his being when he destroys the bread that he is; in this sense, being “*is* its own negation.”[[277]](#footnote-277) Accordingly, when Simone and the narrator eat otherwise in an attempt to negate use-value/profound being, they fail not only because the employment of utilisation-value relies on a prior and continuing recognition of use-value, thereby reaffirming the latter, but also because the negation of use-value/profound beingcoincides withitsmanifestation.

**To Have Done with Shit**

The idea that the negation of profound being coincides with its manifestation sees Bataille’s ontology resonate with his economics. In the three volumes of *The Accursed Share* (1949-1976), Bataille advances the argument that, from the perspective of general economy, the true use-value of productive activity emerges through, and coincides with, the *negation* of “usefulness” (associated with necessity, production, accumulation) via unproductive consumption/expenditure. Something of Bataille’s rejection of economic models geared solely towards productivity is first of all expressed, from an alimentary perspective, in *Story of the Eye*. Contrary to bourgeois economies where consumption, including food consumption, is a means to productive ends, Bataille’s novella presents us with “useless” or non-productive consumption – consumption which is not directed at self-preservation. Note that when Simone eats otherwise this does not actually involve ingestion: neither the egg nor the milk enters her organism.[[278]](#footnote-278) The unspoken rule in *Story of the Eye*, it seems, is “no eating” and, therefore, “no defecating.”[[279]](#footnote-279)

The act of defecation provides us with a model for the process of the manifestation of being in Bataille’s novella, that is, manifestation through negation. Defecation brings the act of eating to an end and may thus be posited, in this specific sense of ending an operation, as its negation; this negation, however, is simultaneously an affirmation, for something can be negated only insofar as it exists. To put it simply, one excretes because one eats and thus defecation is ultimately the proof and affirmation of eating, and as such, of being. Antonin Artaud, whom Bataille mentions in his writings on Surrealism,[[280]](#footnote-280) puts this very evocatively in “To Have Done with the Judgment of God” (1947): “where it smells of shit,” Artaud declares, “it smells of being.”[[281]](#footnote-281)

With the above declaration, Artaud leads us to a reformulation of our reformulation of Descartes: from the “I eat therefore I am” emerging from our survey in Chapter 1 to “I have excreted therefore I have been.” In light of this, we can also reformulate Artaud’s title as “to have done with shit,”[[282]](#footnote-282) which would here amount to having done with the self as the “I” who *is* by virtue of eating, and who affirms its being by means of excreting. From the perspective of *Story of the Eye*, the eating-defecating subject is, as we will see, the subject whose existence is characterised by its incorporation and assimilation of the other for its own purposes and thus the subject that does not let the “other” be as it really is in itself. In this sense, “to have done with shit” is to have done with the filtering or assimilation of the world by and for the self which characterises that particular strand of the idealist, subject-centred tradition exemplified by the Hegelian spirit which, we recall, has been compared to a huge digestive system which assimilates everything.

Bataille does seem to associate both eating and excreting, in the sense outlined above, with Hegelianism (although, as Žižek says, the “standard” criticism levelled against the Hegelian system is that it is “*constipated*”).[[283]](#footnote-283) Indeed, as we will see in more detail shortly, Simone and the narrator reject the eating-defecating subject because of its idealist connotations of not letting the “other” be as it is. Nevertheless, the ontology of *Story of the Eye* is Hegelian in an at least one respect – namely, the importance it ascribes to *negation*.[[284]](#footnote-284) As Inwood argues, Hegelian negation is analogous to the act of eating as an incorporation and assimilation that aims to “remove” (that is, negate) the “intrusive object,” a removal upon which the establishment of the subject depends.[[285]](#footnote-285) Ultimately, then, eating is the negation that gives rise to the subject – a negation of that which gives rise to the subject and, therefore, a negation of the subject that paradoxically establishes the subject. In a structurally analogous way, Simone and the narrator’s humanness in *Story of the Eye* is, as we have seen, manifested precisely when they enter a different mode of being, that is to say, their profound being is manifested in its negation.

Although Simone and the narrator’s unusual acts end up, for this very reason, affirming their profound being, what they actually seek is the opposite: they are after profound ontological change. That they eat otherwise by *not* eating suggests as much, this betraying an aversion to the eating-defecating subject, an aversion, that is, to their intervening subjectivity which is responsible for the manifestation of profound being. It is indeed a vision of an existence free from the intervening subject, a vision of letting the world be as it is, that is at the centre of *Story of the Eye*, in an incident which features as a kind of epiphany. Whilst biking, the narrator observes that “the wind had died down” and that he was thus able to direct his gaze upward and see “part [*une partie*] of the starry sky” (30/33). The narrator’s capacity to perceive the world is, then, clearly restricted – both in that it is externally conditioned, in this case by the wind, and in that he could see only *part* of the sky. Subjective perceptions cannot grasp the world as it really is, and so the narrator is led to the conclusion that “if Simone and I were killed, then the universe of our unbearable [*insupportable*] personal visionwas certain to be replaced by the pure stars, fully unrelated to [*dépourvues de* *tout rapport avec*] external gazes” (30/33-34). Profound change, the narrator seems to realise, can only be achieved by being rid of the subject and its perceptions, by having done with “the universe” constructed through restricted and restricting “personal vision[s]” so that the actual universe is left to be as it truly is.

After this moment of epiphany, Simone and the narrator indulge in another series of alimentary games during which their intention to have done with the intervening subject as the eating-defecating subject becomes clear. In these games, Simone has the narrator “throw eggs into the toilet bowl,” “settle[s] on the toilet to view them,” and finally instructs him to “flush the bowl” (33/36). During the same period, we learn, the narrator would swallow a “raw egg from the bottom of the bidet” (ibid.). Although this is an exceptional instance of actual ingestion – the first to be described in the novella – the eggs are utilised as something other than food before they are eaten, which is why they are raw and placed in the bidet. The first actual instance of ingestion in *Story of the Eye*, then, constitutes a rejection of usual eating.

The inevitable outcome of this ingestion, the defecation of the eggs, suggests more clearly a rejection of what is actually entailed in eating – that is, assimilation in the passage through the organism, the transformation of the other by the self. The eggs that are dropped in the toilet are intact, having passed neither through Simone’s organism (who sits on the toilet) or the narrator’s (who drops them into it). As she is sitting above the eggs, Simone can also be said to feature as a mother hen, the game thus enacting not only defecation but also the act of giving birth – like Beckett’s Molloy, who equates the two in declaring that his mother “brought [him] into this world” through “the hole in her arse.”[[286]](#footnote-286) The “birth” in *Story of the Eye*, however, does not entail a passage through the body. The image of Simone sitting above the eggs calls to mind Hélène Cixous’ account of “the story of the hen who doesn’t recognize her egg.”[[287]](#footnote-287) Contrary to Cixous, who is fascinated by the idea that a mother cannot recognise her child as her own despite the fact that it has come out of her body, what thrills Simone – who despises her mother and the very idea of motherhood – is precisely the fact that the eggs are really *not* hers, that their coming into being did not in any way depend on her, in short, that this mock birth-defecation did not entail the passage of the eggs through her organism. That is why she would “sit for a long time” on the toilet “gazing at the eggs” (33/36); it is the intactness of these mock stools-babies, the fact that they have not passed through and come out of her organism, which fascinates her.

Even when, on one occasion, the passage through the organism does occur, when we are presented with a proper exception to the general “no eating, no defecating” rule, this exception communicates yet more explicitly the wish to be rid of the intervening eating-defecating subject. In this instance, an egg is eaten without being utilised as something other than a foodstuff and an act of actual defecation follows. Simone and the narrator get some “hot soft-boiled eggs ... for the toilet” (35/38), rather than raw as before; Simone then settles on the toilet and eats one of the hot eggs before the narrator drops the remaining ones “into the water one by one” (35/39). “Finally, after viewing them for a while,” immersed in the water as they were, “Simone continued the immersion with a plopping noise [*un bruit de chute*] akin to that of the soft-boiled eggs” – in other words, she passed a stool (ibid.). Crucially, when the passage through the organism occurs, when Simone eats and defecates, this series of egg-games is terminated at once: “nothing of the sort,” we read, “ever happened between us again” (ibid.).

Read literally, the production of faecal matter here features as solid proof of the involvement of Simone’s organism in the game; read figuratively, it acts as proof of the involvement of Simone’s subjectivity in all of her alimentary games. As we have seen, it is Simone and the narrator’s capacity to first of all recognise use-value that enables utilisation/different ways of being. In other words, their capacity to enter (and make things enter) different ways of being depends on a kind of passage and filtering through their perceptions as human subjects – a “passage” and “filtering” that may well be thought of as a case of figurative consumption and assimilation. In this sense, the production of faeces in this game acts as a visual proof of Simone and the narrator’s interventions as human subjects in all of their games, and the fact that this incident results in the termination of their egg-games reveals their desire to have done with their status as eating-defecating subjects. What they want, in effect, is to get rid of their intervening subjectivity so that the world is left to be as it really is, as in the narrator’s vision during his epiphany. If we were to read the novella as a menu that reflected Simone and the narrator’s ontological vision then what this menu would propose is not that the world is eaten *à la Hegel*,assimilated by a human spirit that functions as a huge digestive system, but that human perception itself is eaten first; as in Connole and Wilson’s menu, human eyes would be the appetisers. In this ontological dream, human perception, the human eye (and the “I” as subject) would not eat (*à la Hegel*) but would be eaten (*à la Connole et Wilson*).

The dream of having done with the “I” as the human subject who assimilates the world is, however, a dream doomed to remain such precisely because Simone and the narrator seek to materialise it through a rejection of excrement, a rejection that is often seen as constitutive of human subjectivity in the first place. In Dominique Laporte’s *History of Shit* (1978), for example, “the history of [managing] shit becomes the history of [human] subjectivity” in what is described as “a twist that Georges Bataille would have certainly appreciated.”[[288]](#footnote-288) This association assumes explicitly ontological dimensions in Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), where the human world is declared to be “a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist,” and where “[t]he objection to shit” is described as a “metaphysical” one.[[289]](#footnote-289) The denial of excrement might, then, be viewed as an ontological imperative for the construction of human subjectivity, and, in light of this, Simone and the narrator’s struggle to be rid of their subjectivity by means of rejecting the eating-defecating subject necessarily confirms their status as human subjects instead.

**Starvation: A Politics of Suicide**

The refusal of usual eating in *Story of the Eye* is echoed in *The Futurist Cookbook* (1932), which aims to abolish “the dishes we [that is, the Italians] have the ‘habit’ of eating” so as to effect a “fundamental change” that would not be “limited ... to the gastronomic sphere” but would extend to “all branches and all activities of ... life.”[[290]](#footnote-290) It is for this reason that Marinetti presents *The Futurist Cookbook* as being “clearly” consistent with fascism’s aim of bringing about radical change.[[291]](#footnote-291) Something of this fascistic rejection of the status quo is discernible in the characteristically modernist attempt to “make it new.” In a footnote in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935), Pound explicitly associates the “make it new” with fascism; the phrase is Pound’s 1928 translation of an ancient Chinese inscription,[[292]](#footnote-292) and in this footnote he argues that *xin* (hsin), the Chinese ideogram for the word “renew,” “shows the *fascist* axe for the clearing away of rubbish.”[[293]](#footnote-293) It is of course true that most modernists, unlike Pound, did not endorse fascism as such but critics have nevertheless identified certain fascistic undertones in many modernist authors, including, most notably, D. H. Lawrence, Jean Genet, and Georges Bataille.[[294]](#footnote-294) The Futurists did, on the other hand, openly align themselves with fascism, and the link between the fascistic and the alimentary drawn in their cookbook is even drawn by some Surrealists, despite the fact that André Breton wanted Surrealism to have the political mission of opposing fascism. In his *Unspeakable Confessions* (1973), Dalí says that “Hitler turned me on in the highest,” his “fat back ... aroused in me a delicious gustatory thrill originating in the mouth and affording me a Wagnerian ecstasy.”[[295]](#footnote-295) Sexual-alimentary associations with Nazism are also found in Bataille’s *Blue of Noon* (1935), particularly through the juxtaposition of Lazare – a character modelled on the anorexic philosopher-theologian Simone Weil – with Dorothea or “Dirty”; unlike the socialist, skinny, almost cadaverous-looking Lazare, “Dirty,” who is associated with the rise of Nazism,[[296]](#footnote-296) does not impose any regulation on her instincts. Critics tend to discuss Bataille’s troubled relation with fascism exclusively in reference to texts like *Blue of Noon*, texts written from the 1930s onwards,[[297]](#footnote-297) thus excluding *Story of the Eye*. The novella’s ontologico-alimentary vision, however, resonates with many of the political anxieties of the period and is thus deeply, if only implicitly, related to the debate on Bataille and fascism.

When discussing *Blue of Noon*, Leo Bersani, Susan Suleiman, and Jesse Goldhammer all assert that Bataille’s portrayal of sexual impotence cannot be dissociated from his portrayal of political impotence.[[298]](#footnote-298) Goldhammer adds a third term – namely, the ontological; impotence, he argues, is simultaneously “sexual, political, [and] ontological” in *Blue of Noon*,[[299]](#footnote-299) and so it seems to be in *Story of the Eye.* For a start, Simone and the narrator’s games hint at a sexual impotence of sorts; in eating the egg otherwise, by placing it in her anus, Simone clearly seeks not only a different alimentary experience but also a different sexual experience in which the penis is substituted by the egg. However, precisely because the employment of utilisation-value presupposes the human subject’s prior and continuing recognition of use-value, total immersion in this different sexual experience is impossible. In this respect, Simone is like Lawrence’s Hermione in *Women in Love* (1920) who, according to Birkin, cannot really have sex like an animal but is only able to extract a “mental,” and thus quintessentially human, “thrill” out of the “observ[ation][of her] own animal functions.”[[300]](#footnote-300) Like Hermione, Simone cannot be fully immersed in the different sexual acts that she orchestrates because they are filtered through her perceptions as a human subject. Her acts would thus qualify as exemplifications of what Lawrence called “sex in the head,” for the pleasure they offer is primarily mental, deriving from the recognition of the fact that they are, in the narrator’s words, “unusual.”

In turn, this *sexual* “impotence” metonymises an *ontological* “impotence”; the temporary and superficial modes of being that Bataille’s characters effect seem to be no more than mediocre vis-à-vis the profound, all-encompassing ontological change they actually pursue. And this desire for profound ontological change seems to echo the desire for radical *political* change which was, by the 1930s, clearly on the rise; as Tony Judt observes, French intellectuals on both the Left and the Right felt “a distaste for the lukewarm” prospects of democracy and were fascinated by “the idea of a violent relief from mediocrity,” with many on both sides turning to fascism.[[301]](#footnote-301) Amongst these many was Marinetti, whose *Futurist Cookbook* is not just about eating differently but also doubles as a manifesto for a wider rejection of the political status quo; as he declares, “it is the revolutionary spirit of [his culinary] manifesto which really counts.”[[302]](#footnote-302)

Something of this extreme political spirit may be glimpsed in the tenth chapter of *Story of the Eye*.This is the only chapter in “The Tale” part of the novella that gives us historical and geographical coordinates, that is, “May 7, 1922,” in “the arena of Madrid,” which is when the historical bullfight during which Manuel Granero died took place (49/52). It is a death that Simone and the narrator find exhilarating, and their celebration of this violence could be read in light of another celebration which was to occur a few months later in Madrid: a “distaste for the lukewarm” prospects of the political status quo in Spain would lead the Spanish Foreign Minister, and a number of other important figures in Madrid, to hail the March on Rome in October 1922 and “the formation of a strong government under Mussolini.”[[303]](#footnote-303) Although this later event is not mentioned in Bataille’s quasi-autobiographical novella,[[304]](#footnote-304) the association between Simone and the narrator’s celebration in Madrid in 1922 and the Spanish foreign office’s celebration, in the same year in the same city, of the establishment of fascism in Italy is supported by Bataille’s own growing fascination with fascism during this period of his life. This fascination becomes clearer two years after the first publication of *Story of the Eye*, in a 1930 essay where Bataille admiringly analyses the successes of fascism, contrasting them with the failures of the Left.[[305]](#footnote-305) Moreover, in a 1935 speech on what he viewed as the failures of the Popular Front, Bataille urged a release of “the direct and violent drives” which would “contribute to the surge of power” that would come to “liberate men from the absurd swindlers who lead them.”[[306]](#footnote-306)

In light of these political speeches and writings, the desire for liberation that is manifested on an ontological level in *Story of the Eye* would seem to be characterised by a fascistic bent. As we have seen, Simone and the narrator reject the eating-defecating subject, a rejection that betrays a desire to be freed from the regulatory functions of their intervening subjectivity and thus effect radical change. The link between having done with human subjectivity and fascism is perhaps most obvious in Nazi Germany, particularly with the 1933, 1934, and 1935 laws which placed limits on hunting, prohibited the use of certain traps, and regulated animal slaughter[[307]](#footnote-307) – laws that are in line with Hitler’s observation that in nature one cannot “find a fox who in his inner attitude might ... show humanitarian tendencies towards geese.”[[308]](#footnote-308) Hitler’s suggestion is that the absence of humanitarianism in nature must be admired, preserved, and imitated, with these laws coming to enforce a removal of human intervention, thus ensuring the release of the violence of animality in its full unrelenting force. As Victoria Johnson writes, these laws aimed to create a setting where “[a]nimals were free to struggle among themselves so that the fittest could survive in a nature devoid of human interference,”[[309]](#footnote-309) a setting which thus resembles the narrator’s vision in *Story of the Eye* of a world that is left to exist as it is, free from the interventions of human subjectivity. Simone and the narrator seek to materialise this vision by abstaining from eating, an abstinence that clearly and necessarily involves the intervention of their subjectivity; in other words, they employ their subjectivity in order to negate it just as the intervention of the human subject in drafting and passing the Nazi animal laws of the 1930s seeks to limit the intervention of the human subject.

As such, the laws in question manifest a self-destructive tendency, a tendency that Paul Virilio posits as inherent in fascism, labelling the fascist state “the suicidal state.”[[310]](#footnote-310) Particularly remarkable for present purposes is that Virilio exemplifies his controversial point by referring to the fact that Hitler obliterated the state’s life-supporting resources such as drinkable water, fuel, and other provisions.[[311]](#footnote-311) What we have here, then, is a striking coincidence worthy to be added to the “Coincidences” part of *Story of the Eye*, for the examples Virilio gives suggest that Nazi self-destructiveness assumed the form of a kind of *starvation* – the very form that Simone and the narrator’s suicidal ontological pursuit takes in Bataille’s novella. There is, in fact, a sense in which *The Futurist Cookbook* also presents us with what can be seen as a programme of starvation. One of Marinetti’s proposals, for instance, is that each dish should be “no bigger than a mouthful or even less than a mouthful.”[[312]](#footnote-312) But Marinetti’s vision does not stop at the consumption of different and totally aestheticised miniscule dishes; as in *Story of the Eye*, the ways of eating otherwise envisaged in the *Cookbook* may be seen as ways of *not* actually eating. The consumption of the tiny futurist dishes is said to be the beginning of a project that would result in the consumption of “future chemicals,” food assuming “the form of powder or pills” and, finally, not even that: the ultimate and “complete revolution,” we are told, will come with the realisation of the “not so extraordinary” “possibility of broadcasting nutritious radio waves.”[[313]](#footnote-313) As Michael Hollington puts it, “the total aestheticising of food” within “the futurist programme” ultimately entails “the abolition” of food. “In the longer run,” writes Hollington, “the futurist faith in the machine is such that it can envisage a time when taking nourishment through the consumption and digestion of food has become a thing of the past.”[[314]](#footnote-314)

There are, then, elements in *Story of the Eye* that hint at a certain affinity with fascism, something that Bataille’s own political views at the time would seem to support. Later, Bataille came to renounce what he referred to as “the paradoxical fascist tendency” to which he had succumbed earlier in life,[[315]](#footnote-315) a renunciation which we can in fact glimpse in the “Outline of a Sequel to *Story of the Eye*” (1967), where he envisages Simone “end[ing] up in a torture camp” – as a victim, and “by mistake.”[[316]](#footnote-316) If Simone’s ontological pursuits in “The Tale” might be interpreted as quasi-fascistic then one would have expected that if she was going to end up in a torture camp in the sequel it would have been as a perpetrator. By imagining a situation in which she ends up being a victim instead, and, crucially, “by mistake,” Bataille seems to be implicitly warning of a perilous oscillation between total liberation and the total lack thereof – an oscillation that Guattari also associates with fascism.[[317]](#footnote-317) That is to say, the state of being which Bataille’s characters pursue in “The Tale,” a state of complete liberation from subjectivity, is precariously close to a state of complete deprivation of freedom, precisely because the very idea of being liberated from subjectivity is essentially a paradox: as Friedrich Rainer puts it, “is it not the subject that the term liberation connotes?”[[318]](#footnote-318)

It is, then, telling that Simone’s pursuit of total liberation ends with her imprisonment; though, as Rainer says, any struggle for liberation is *for* the benefit of the subject, Bataille’s characters in *Story of the Eye* seek liberation *from* subjectivity, thus engaging in a suicidal struggle – a struggle that takes the form of a wilful starvation and which ends up reaffirming what it attempts to negate. In short, Bataille presents us with a process of self-negation as self-affirmation, and vice versa. This is an ontology in which profound being remains what it is but depends for its manifestation on the different ways of being that negate it. Here, one’s eating ultimately makes one who one already is, but the manifestation of who one already is depends on one choosing *not* to eat precisely because being is manifested in its negation. Simone and the narrator, then, explore the idea of being as mutable, and although this mutability is ultimately shown not to be profound, their acts do affirm a dependency of being on the materiality of the here and now as metonymised in the act of eating. As we will go on to see in the next chapter, such ontological resonances in the treatment of food and the act of eating are found throughout Beckett’s oeuvre.

## Chapter 3

## The Egg that Therefore I Am Samuel Beckett’s O(o)ntologemes

*Oeuf fecondé à la Descartes*Descartes’ fertilised egg  
(ripened under the hen for 8-10 days)

*Luxuriant omelette Joycienne*Decadent Joycean omelette  
(with whipped ovaries and prostisciutto)

*Divine pain et vin*Divinely tasting bread and wine  
(cubes of Hovis immersed in red Burgundy)

Had Edia Connole and Scott Wilson followed their “*soirée culinaire par Georges Bataille*” with a “*soirée culinaire par Samuel Beckett*,” the dishes above might have featured in the *hors d’oeuvres* section of the menu. For, just as Connole and Wilson’s unappetising appetisers are inspired by *Story of the Eye* (1928), a text that is often treated as a “starter” to Bataille’s “main” oeuvre, so these unappetising dishes are inspired by the text that Beckett’s literary oeuvre starts off with: the poem “Whoroscope” (1930).[[319]](#footnote-319) This Beckettian menu is constructed on the model of Connole and Wilson’s Bataillean menu explored in the previous chapter to hint at a similarity between Bataille’s and Beckett’s inaugural literary works[[320]](#footnote-320) – namely, their association of food with ontology and their exploration of the possibility of being otherwise through eating otherwise.

At stake in this chapter is a discussion of Beckett’s treatment of the alimentary, which will lead us to the identification of certain *ontologemes* in his oeuvre. The task, then, is not to posit a “complete” Beckettian theory of being, thus producing the kind of criticism that Simon Critchley condemns.[[321]](#footnote-321) However, that Beckett’s work resists, perhaps uniquely, the extrapolation from it (or, as Critchley would have it, the superimposition upon it) of totalising systems of thought need not mean that one has no other option but to indulge in what David Cunningham describes as the “self-reflexive platitude[s]” that characterise so much of the Beckett scholarship.[[322]](#footnote-322) My own approach lies between these poles of treating Beckett’s work either as a coherent system of thought or as an anti-system that forbids that anything is said about it except “very little – almost nothing,” to borrow the title of Critchley’s book. Through readings that are consciously selective and speculative (and thus acknowledge Beckett’s resistance to totalising systems of thought and the importance he ascribes to the imagination), I want to suggest that food in “Whoroscope” and other works is ontologically resonant; more specifically, that alimentary-related imagery conjures up questions of subjectivity, causality, the relationship between becoming and being, and divine immanence.

Anthony Cronin tells us that, later in life, Beckett “deplored the poems of this [early] period,” referring to his “display of erudition” as “showing off,”[[323]](#footnote-323) which perhaps partly accounts for the fact that “Whoroscope” has been somewhat neglected in Beckett studies.[[324]](#footnote-324) However, in this poem are sown the seeds or, as it were, are laid the *eggs* of many Beckettian tropes. Note how, in his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (written 1932; published 1992), Beckett has Belacqua state that “[t]here is a long poem ... waiting to be written about hens and eggs. There is a great subject there, waiting to be written.”[[325]](#footnote-325) But just such a poem about hens and eggs had already been written, published, and won an award two years earlier – “Whoroscope,” of course. That this “great subject” is said to be still “waiting to be written” after “Whoroscope” suggests a lasting interest in the egg, an interest which later resurfaces in *The* *Unnamable* (1953). Here, the unnameable creature declares, “I would gladly give myself the shape, if not the consistency, of an egg.”[[326]](#footnote-326) Later still, more than fifty years after “Whoroscope,” the narrator of *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981) asks:

Was it ever over and done with questions? Dead the whole brood no sooner hatched. Long before. In the egg. Over and done with answering. With not being able. With not being able not to want to know. ... No. Never. .... Question answered.[[327]](#footnote-327)

Answered or unanswered, Beckett’s egg-related questions, and his treatment of the alimentary more generally, are, as we will see, related to the question of being.

**Toward an Alimentary Ontology**

Speaking of questions, there are fifteen in “Whoroscope”; in fact, the poem opens with a couple: “What’s that? / An egg?” (1-2). These opening questions already point to an implicit association between the alimentary and the ontological. For a start, questions of the “what is. . . ?” type are explicitly or implicitly ontological; as Deleuze observes, “the *what is* question” is the philosophical way of (for him, wrongly) attempting to “discove[r] the essence” of things.[[328]](#footnote-328) Indeed, as we have seen in the first chapter, being has been traditionally theorised through the human-animal question, the question, that is, of *what* the human animal *is*, *what* the nonhuman animal *is*, and *what* it *is* that distinguishes them. The first line in “Whoroscope” – a “what is. . . ?” type of question – might be situated within this philosophical context,[[329]](#footnote-329) especially since it is posed by none other than René Descartes, who features as the speaker of Beckett’s dramatic monologue.[[330]](#footnote-330)

The Descartes of *Discourse on the Method* (1637) famously defines the essence of the human being on the basis of reflexive thinking: I think therefore I am.[[331]](#footnote-331) Or, as the Descartes of *Meditations* (1641) puts it, “I am” for “as long as I am thinking” (that I am thinking).[[332]](#footnote-332) The Descartes of “Whoroscope,” as we will see, seems to offer an alimentary-based redefinition; the answer given to the essence-oriented “what is. . . ?” question is, after all, a foodstuff. This answer, however, is in fact a question (“An egg?”), thus suggesting a reflexivity in terms of questioning – something of which Heidegger would have surely approved. It is not, however, in view of Heidegger’s ontological project that I want to read these lines, that is, by suggesting that the questioning of Being (the treatment of Being as a question) is the answer to what defines the human being.[[333]](#footnote-333) What is at stake in the present reading is something different, something that pertains to the alimentary – namely, the implied positing of being (*on*) as egg (*oon*). For, if the first, the *what is*?, question is directed at “discovering the essence” then the second question-answer seems to posit essence or being as egg, a positing that has a quasi-Deleuzian ring to it.

Many have, of course, engaged with the question of being in Beckett’s work. Peter Poiana, for instance, attends not to *on* as *oon* but to *on* in the sense of “*going* on,” of persisting, and suggests that Beckett’s ontology be designated as “on-tology.”[[334]](#footnote-334) Deleuze, too, has engaged with the matter, identifying in Beckett an ontology of “exhaustion.”[[335]](#footnote-335) However, despite the importance of the egg in Deleuze’s own work, to which we will return later in this chapter, he does not make reference to Beckett’s recurrent use of eggs and egg-related imagery. Before turning to the egg, though, we must first engage with the wider entanglement of food with ontology that Beckett points toward, an entanglement that is at the core of his reconfiguration of the *cogito*.

If, as I suggest, the Descartes of “Whoroscope” implicitly defines essence in reference to the question of eating then what we have here is a continuation of the conceptual tradition outlined in the first chapter, the title of which is, after all, a reformulation of the Cartesian *cogito*: “I eat therefore I am.” Another reformulation of the *cogito*, which also implies a continuation of this conceptual tradition, was attempted in the second chapter, via Artaud and in reference to *Story of the Eye* – namely, “I have excreted therefore I have been.” Such alimentary-based reformulations of the *cogito*, it might be objected, are unfitting because they disregard the foundation of Descartes’ understanding of the human being – that is, the emphasis on the mind and its separation from the body. As we will see, however, Beckett’s Descartes in “Whoroscope” suggests otherwise. In fact, without reference to Beckett, Woody Allen credits Descartes with devising a great diet – not despite but because of his privileging of the mind and its separation from the body. In “Thus Ate Zarathustra” (2006), a humorous, speculative piece imagining the discovery of *Friedrich Nietzsche’s Diet Book*, Allen says that “Descartes divided body and mind in two, so that the body could gorge itself while the mind thought, Who cares, it’s not me.”[[336]](#footnote-336) This argument, one suspects, might just as well have been advanced by a Beckettian character, for Beckett’s characters often engage with Cartesian principles to such comic ends.[[337]](#footnote-337)

It is, however, true that most of Beckett’s characters are not endowed with appetites that might have led them to an argument like Allen’s. Though they are often hungry, or even starving, they are typically neither able to gorge themselves nor do they particularly want to gorge themselves. That is why many of the critics who engage with the subject of food in Beckett focus not on eating but on not eating. As Alys Moody observes, “[t]he language of starvation” has become “a commonplace in discussions of Samuel Beckett’s writing.”[[338]](#footnote-338) In a similar vein but without going into the subject of starvation as such, Michel Delville identifies a dissociation of food from nutrition in Beckett; for Delville, this betrays a fear of assimilation which he associates with modernism and the avant-garde, an argument we will return to in more detail in the conclusion.[[339]](#footnote-339) For his part, Eagleton engages with the “meagreness” of Beckett’s “reality,” his “depleted figures,” his linguistic “parsimony” and “ascetic cast of mind” not only within the general context of modernist artistic production but also with particular emphasis on the question of “Irishness.”[[340]](#footnote-340) For Eagleton, Beckettian starvation is inextricably linked to Beckett’s Irish heritage and, as the title of Eagleton’s book suggests, particularly “The Great Hunger.” Likewise, Moody elsewhere argues that “it is almost impossible to read an Irish writer writing on starvation without immediately locating him in the context of Ireland’s painful experiences with hunger,” from the “Irish Famine of 1845-52” to the series of “hunger strikes” which were first “held in 1917” and “continued sporadically throughout the twentieth-century.”[[341]](#footnote-341) But Moody acknowledges that there are also other contexts within which “Beckett’s hunger” can be situated: “if Ireland provided Beckett with a cultural and political tradition of hunger,” she writes, “it was France that allowed him to become intimately acquainted with the everyday realities of deprivation and malnutrition.”[[342]](#footnote-342) This acquaintance comes not only through the “food shortages” and “serious rationing” that France suffered “[a]lmost from the beginning of World War II”[[343]](#footnote-343) but also arguably through the Bohemians in Paris, who tended to be penniless and, as a result, starving, thus creating a connection between art and hunger. From a different perspective, Laura Salisbury argues that both Beckett’s and Bion’s (Beckett’s psychoanalyst) works can be seen as instantiations of figurative bulimia.[[344]](#footnote-344) In short, when critics engage with the question of food in Beckett what is at stake, more often than not, is the question of non-ingestion. As Moody summarises, Beckett’s “language, characters, plots, settings, form, content, bodies, structure, syntax, and contextual reference are all open to charges of being starved, deprived, or wasted,” his texts thus being customarily described as “emaciated and skeletal, as famished and anorexic.”[[345]](#footnote-345)

But this characterisation of Beckett’s works as “anorexic” (or, less often, as “bulimic”) comes with an important implication: if they are “anorexic” (or “bulimic”) then, like anorexics (and bulimics), they are preoccupied with food; indeed, whether literal or metaphorical, appetising or unappetising, digestible or indigestible, present or absent, consumed or not, retained or “evacuated,” food is a recurrent preoccupation in Beckett’s work – and one that resonates ontologically. To return to our example from the introduction, that Murphy does not much care for food as such, his meals being “vitiated by no base thoughts of nutrition,” reflects his apparent prioritisation of the mind over the body;[[346]](#footnote-346) what Murphy *is*, or would like to *be*,is reflected through how he *eats*.

Likewise, in “Whoroscope,” Descartes’ unconventional (at least from a Western perspective) taste for fertilised eggs assumes ontological significance. This taste is one amongst several details from Descartes’ biography that Beckett makes use of in the poem. Like Malone after him, Descartes is here supposed to be on his deathbed, sharing snapshots of his life such as the early death of his “illegitimate” daughter Francine, his reaction to Galileo, his irrational belief in astrology, and, indeed, his little-known taste for fertilised eggs. This last detail, taken from Adrien Baillet’s *La Vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes* (1691), is the one that features most prominently in “Whoroscope.”[[347]](#footnote-347) As Beckett informs us in his explanatory notes to the poem, Descartes liked his eggs “ripened” “from eight to ten days; shorter or longer under the hen and the result, [Descartes] says, is disgusting.”[[348]](#footnote-348) Despite Matthew Feldman’s insistence that “Whoroscope” is about Descartes’ life and not his philosophy,[[349]](#footnote-349) it in fact points, I will argue, to a reformulation of the Cartesian *cogito* on the basis of food.

**I Am (Cooked) Therefore I Think**

Particularly important in this respect is another detail from Descartes’ biography mentioned in “Whoroscope.” Beckett has Descartes remember sitting in a “hot-cupboard” (26), a reference to the tiny stove-heated or oven-like room, the *poêle*, in which Descartes used to closet himself as he developed his vision of a philosophical system that would overthrow Aristotelianism.[[350]](#footnote-350) Descartes took to so closeting himself – for “days,” as Beckett has it (26) – apparently in order to think more, and better. And if, according to Descartes, thinking is what defines the human being then his conviction that this oven-like room intensified his thinking invites a preliminary association of two quintessentially human activities, cooking and thinking – an association on the basis of which we can move toward Beckett’s alimentary reconfiguration of the *cogito*.

Given the poem’s emphasis on biographical details that reveal some of Descartes’ eccentricities as well as contradictions in his thought (for instance, his belief in astrology despite being a proponent of modern rationalism), it is unsurprising that Beckett would be drawn to Descartes’ curious belief that his philosophising depended on his enclosure in an oven-like room, as if there were a conjunction between thinking and concentrated heat, or cooking. As well as being humorous, this implicit association of cooking and thinking is a serious one with scientific value, as Richard Wrangham shows in an anthropological essay suggestively entitled “Reason in the Roasting of Eggs” (2011). Beginning with James Boswell’s “definition of Man [as] a ‘Cooking Animal’,” Wrangham elaborates on the association between the evolution of humankind and the practice of cookery.[[351]](#footnote-351) When humans began eating cooked food, Wrangham argues, the energy required for digestion was reduced, which led to a reduction of the size of the gut. This, Wrangham observes, coincides with a manifest increase in the size of the brain, which leads him to postulate that a significant part of the energy saved from the now less-demanding digestive process in human beings was used for the operations of the human brain. There is, then, “reason in the roasting of eggs” in more than one sense: it is not just that there are some (yet-to-be-discovered) benefits in this method of cooking eggs or, more generally, that humans cook “for a reason” but, more importantly, that there might be a correlation between cooking and the development of reason – the faculty which is, of course, at the core of Descartes’ philosophical project. Wrangham thus concludes by rewriting the Cartesian “*cogito*, *ergo sum*” as “*coquo*, *ergo cogito*”: I cook therefore I think.[[352]](#footnote-352)

Still more intriguingly, Beckett’s description of Descartes’ oven-like room in “Whoroscope” invites a reformulation of Wrangham’s reformulation as “*coquo*r, *ergo cogito*” – I *am cooked* therefore I think. For, in referring to this room as a “cupboard,” Beckett almost renders Descartes, who sits in it, a foodstuff; and, with the qualification of this thought-intensifying “cupboard” as “hot,” Descartes’ thinking self – which, for him, constitutes the human *essence* – comes to feature as a foodstuff whose flavour is intensified through heat, that is, through a process of cooking. In this alimentary redefinition of the human being “man is a cooking animal” not just in the sense that he cooks (as per Boswell) but also in the sense that he is “cooked”; that he, like Descartes, figuratively cooks himself. We might, then, venture that “Whoroscope” bases the reflexive thinking (thinking whose subject is thinking) of the *cogito* on a kind of “reflexive cooking” whereby the cook is also the cooked.

Although this seems to echo what Eugene Thacker describes as “a general culinarism” in reference to Bataille’s ontology, it is in fact fundamentally different.[[353]](#footnote-353) As we saw in the previous chapter, Thacker defines “general culinarism” as an impersonal, metabolic-like process of matter modification that allows no ultimate distinction between cook and cooked, subject and object; in short, it destroys the very notion of subjectivity – a destruction, we recall, which Bataille’s characters in *Story of the Eye* aim to achieve. By contrast, it is the affirmation and not the destruction of subjectivity that is at the core of the concept of “reflexive cooking”; to reiterate, if the thinking “I” is what defines the human subject then Descartes’ belief in the intensification of this thinking “I” through concentrated heat suggests that the essence of the “I” emerges from, and is affirmed through, a process of figurative “reflexive cooking.” The radical turn “within” – the turn to the self – that the Cartesian *cogito* instantiates in order to prove the existence of the “I” is here reconfigured in material terms; “Whoroscope” suggests that the Cartesian “within,” the mind that imagines dissociating itself from the materiality of the world, actually relies on material circumstances: the “hot-cupboard,” for instance.

The figurative process of “reflexive cooking” whereby the cook is also the cooked leads us, once again, to the “you are what you eat” adage and one of its hitherto unexplored implications – that of “reflexive eating,” or figurative auto-cannibalismwherebythe eater is also the eaten: if one is what one eats then one is, in effect, eating oneself. Or, to return to the introduction and Elspeth Probyn’s way of putting this, “are we what we eat” or “[d]o we eat what we are?” In short, “do we eat or are we eaten?”[[354]](#footnote-354) We thus depart from the mind of the *cogito* that turns to its own thinking, dissociating itself from the material world in order to define its being, and arrive at the idea of a mouth that is not disembodied – as the mouth of Mouth in Beckett’s *Not I* (1973) seemingly is[[355]](#footnote-355) – but which is deeply embedded in the material world, with one’s eating thus coming to define one’s being.

As many of the examples of Western thought surveyed in the first chapter suggest, this conception of being as dependent on the material world comes with the implication that it is mutable: if our eating defines who we are then we may eat otherwise in order to be otherwise. There is, moreover, an additional implication, or a different way of looking at the same implication, which we will explore here – namely, if what we *do eat* constructs and/or preserves who we are, then does what we *want to eat* reveal who we *want to be*? And, therefore, could a taste for eating otherwise metonymise a taste for being otherwise in Beckett’s “Whoroscope” as it does in Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*?

**The Chicken or the Egg?**

We can move toward addressing these questions via an examination of the treatment of causality in “Whoroscope,” causality being another element of the *cogito* that the poem reconfigures. That causality should be one of the poem’s central ontologemes is unsurprising since the prominence of the egg and egg-related imagery conjures up the old and, according to Derrida, “at once trivial and philosophical” question of which came first, “the chicken or the egg.”[[356]](#footnote-356) As Derrida says, at the core of this question lies the issue of causality, the “logical, chronological, or ontological priority of the cause over the effect.”[[357]](#footnote-357) This is, in fact, the very reason why Derrida dismisses this question; as he says, causality underlies ontology or, in his terms, “substantialist” philosophy from which he dissociates his own work.[[358]](#footnote-358) But what makes Derrida dismiss this question is perhaps what one might have expected him to focus on and, through it, to “deconstruct” the very premise of classical ontology; for the unanswerability of the chicken-or-the-egg question clearly helps to problematise the myth of origin, of an originary cause, revealing it to be exactly that – a myth.[[359]](#footnote-359)

One of the most striking images in “Whoroscope,” that of the egg which contains “white and yolk and feathers” (89), foregrounds precisely the impossibility of determining which came first, the chicken or the egg. On the one hand, the feathers refer to the “fledgling” (87) that would hatch out of the egg whilst, on the other, feather imagery is used in reference to the hen that laid the egg – as in “How long did she womb it, the feathery one?” (14). In designating the chicken that hatches out of the egg, the feathers suggest that the chicken can be posited as effect and the egg as origin or cause; but, in also designating the chicken that lays the egg, the feathers suggest, alternatively, that the chicken can be posited as cause and the egg as effect. Further, whilst Descartes clearly views this fertilised egg as a foodstuff, he nevertheless describes it as a “turd” (85), thus confusing food with excrement and, therefore, the effect of defecation with its cause: eating.

Confusions of causes and effects are found throughout Beckett’s work, with the parent-and-offspring example recurring. The Descartes of “Whoroscope,” for instance, confuses not only the hen and the fledgling but also Galileo Sr and Galileo Jr by referring to “Galileo ... and his consecutive thirds” whilst characterising him as a “Copernican ... son of a sutler” (5-7). This Copernican son is, of course, Galileo Jr who discovered the movement of the earth around the sun but, as Beckett writes in his explanatory notes, it was his father, Galileo Sr, who was “more musical,”[[360]](#footnote-360) and whose books, as Lawrence Rainey observes, included terms like “consecutive thirds.”[[361]](#footnote-361) In another confusion of the sort, Molloy tells us that if he had “a son” he “would be ... nearly as old as” himself, and that he himself has come to “resemble [his mother] more and more,” now “shit[ting] in her pot,” the pot, that is, of the one “who [shat him] into the world, through the hole in her arse.”[[362]](#footnote-362)

In *Molloy* (1951), then, these parent-offspring confusions have an alimentary dimension, a dimension that is also discernible in “Whoroscope.” In his brief engagement with the poem, for example, Daniel Katz argues that Descartes’ taste for the fertilised egg points to a “cannibalisation” of “the younger generation” by “its parents.”[[363]](#footnote-363) Katz is thus effectively suggesting, albeit without elaborating, that the poem anthropomorphises food and, indeed, renders the *anthropos* edible. But in arguing that Descartes’ consumption of “this abortion of a fledgling” (87) would signal a kind of cannibalism, Katz bypasses the parent-offspring confusions which would suggest not cannibalistic but auto-cannibalistic consumption.

The suggestion of cannibalism also bypasses Beckett’s treatment of the subject of time, the very subject of the poetry competition for which “Whoroscope” was written.[[364]](#footnote-364) In confusing fledgling and hen, the poem introduces us to a state of being that is indistinguishably both parental and filial, thus rendering past and present simultaneous. It is just such a state of being that Malone later describes when he characterises himself as an “old foetus,”[[365]](#footnote-365) an oxymoron also echoed in *Texts for Nothing* (1955) with its “old tot.”[[366]](#footnote-366) Malone and this “old tot” are at once both old and young (foetuses, toddlers) just as the egg in “Whoroscope” “stinks fresh” (3), thus blending the old and the rotted with the young and the fresh, and dismantling any simple linear chronology in which the past precedes, and gives way to, the present.

We can better grasp the ontological implications of this via a brief return to the previous chapter and the alimentary-sexual games in Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*, where, to take one example, the egg’s “past”state of “eggness” is preserved in, rather than giving way to, its “present” state of “penisness.” The “past” is thus included in, and constitutes part of, the “present” but, crucially, the latter is not included in the former, thereby enabling a distinction between the two which points to yet another distinction: between “profound being,” which persists, and “ways of being,” which do not. Thus, the egg’s “penisness” is a “way of being” that lasts only for as long as the egg is utilised as a penis whereas its “eggness” emerges as its “profound being” which persists throughout, and in contradistinction to, its temporary entry into the mode of “penisness.” In Beckett, by contrast, the state of being-old/stinky/rotted cannot be simply identified as “a way of being” that only characterises “the now” or, alternatively, as “profound being” which persists in contradistinction tothe state of being-young/fresh. Malone and the speaker of the third “text for nothing” are at once both old *and* young, thus functioning almost as avatars of Descartes’ egg in “Whoroscope,” which points to a state of being whereby past and present, young and old, parent and offspring, cause and effect, are confused, co-extensive, and simultaneous.

Simultaneity between cause and effect is one of the fundamental conditions of the *cogito*: I cannot be certain that I exist (effect) unless I am, at this very moment, thinking that I am thinking (cause) – hence Ian Maclean’s translation of the *cogito* not as “I think therefore I am” but as “*I am thinking* therefore I exist.”[[367]](#footnote-367) Descartes’ theorisation of time explains why this is so. “A lifespan,” he writes in *Meditations*, “can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others”; therefore, it “does not follow from the fact that I existed a little while ago that I must exist now, unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afreshat this moment.”[[368]](#footnote-368) A cause, then, must re-emerge at every segment of time so that its effect is preserved; and, as this passage suggests, Descartes treats these re-emergences as cases of *creation*. Yet more explicitly, he says that “anyone who attentively considers the nature of time” realises that “the distinction between preservation and creation is ... conceptual” rather than substantial; what is “needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration” is “the same” as what “would be required to create that thing anew.”[[369]](#footnote-369) Crucially, this leaves open the possibility that a thing’s essence may fluctuate, which challenges Descartes’ belief in philosophy’s ability to discover the essences of things: if the preservation of a thing is not inherent within itself but is, rather, contingent upon “some cause” which basically “creates [the thing] afresh” then this contingency suggests that, in the next segment of time, the thing may not re-emerge or may re-emerge otherwise.

Although Descartes does not accept that essence may not be immutable,[[370]](#footnote-370) this is certainly an implication arising from his theorisation of time and causality,[[371]](#footnote-371) one that “Whoroscope” explores in reference to the alimentary. Beckett’s Descartes associates the question of time with the question of eating when he asks, “How long did she womb it, the feathery one?” (14), seeking to determine whether the egg is “ripe” enough to eat (84). Such ripening – the foetus’ growth – occurs while the egg is under “the feathery one”; for this reason, when the hen as the cause of growth is removed, the growing process is interrupted (ideally, for Descartes, this removal should occur at some point between the eighth and tenth day), the egg thus ceasing to be the potential offspring of a hen and re-emerging otherwise: as Descartes’ food.

The alimentary-directed question quoted above is Descartes’ *sixth* one in “Whoroscope,” and thus invites an association with the sixth of his *Meditations*, where he makes reference to the subject of eating. “[W]hen I am hungry or thirsty,” he declares, my nature “teaches me” that “the body needs food and drink.”[[372]](#footnote-372) This self-evident assertion would seem unimportant except that, in positing the senses of hunger and thirst as causes of knowledge it challenges the impression that Descartes is not interested in the question of the alimentary. As we saw in the first chapter, the impression that the functions of “our bestial corporeality” (such as nutrition) have been “distilled and put aside”[[373]](#footnote-373) in the history of philosophy is inaccurate, and this passage from *Meditations* suggests that this is not true even of Descartes, who is customarily represented as a philosopher who disdains the body and, therefore, food, as do, apparently, all “genuine philosopher[s]” – at least according to the Socrates of *Phaedo*.[[374]](#footnote-374) Along with this, the seemingly unimportant assertion of the sixth meditation implies a lack of ontological determinacy; Descartes’ entire philosophical project rests, to a significant extent, on the premise that bodily senses are deceiving yet what we have here is a suggestion that this deceptiveness is not intrinsic to them: the senses *may* cause false impressions but they *may* also cause knowledge.

It is precisely this issue that Beckett’s Descartes raises in “Whoroscope” when he exclaims, rather cryptically, “That’s not moving, that’s *moving*!” (10). Ever since Aristotle, the observation of the movement of a body was one way in which the essence of the body could be determined – until, that is, Galileo’s discovery of the movement of the earth around the sun came to scientifically prove the insufficiency of the senses as a means via which knowledge can be obtained, since the senses erroneously perceive the movement of the sun and not the earth. Descartes’ vortex theory, however, to which the declaration “[t]hat’s not moving, that’s *moving*” refers, suggests that the senses may be deceiving but may also not be deceiving. According to this theory, the earth is situated within a vortex or large circular band of matter which carries it around the sun; therefore, the earth *is moving* insofar as it is situated within a moving vortex but it is also *not moving* since it remains static inside the vortex.[[375]](#footnote-375) Thus, the Descartes of “Whoroscope” is able to declare “[t]hat’s not moving, that’s *moving*” – in this way implying that our senses are both deceiving and not deceiving in not perceiving the movement of the earth – just as the Descartes of *Meditations* maintains that the senses of hunger and thirst are a cause of knowledge whilst also maintaining that the senses are deceiving.

Beckett’s engagement with Descartes’ unconventional taste for fertilised eggs in “Whoroscope” thus alerts us to the rarely acknowledged significance of food in the latter’s philosophy and its implicit challenge to ontological determinacy: if hunger is a cause of knowledge but, as a bodily sense, is also potentially deceiving then the implication is that its essence is neither predetermined nor immutable. In light of Beckett’s poem, then, Descartes can be situated within the conceptual tradition identified in our survey in the first chapter, the tradition which entangles the alimentary with the ontological in ways that imply the possibility of being otherwise.

**Becoming-in-Ovo**

Like the thinkers we have looked at in the first chapter, Descartes does not explore the implication that being might be mutable and, indeed, explicitly rejects it; in his reply to one of the objections to *Meditations*, he clearly states that, for him, the “essence[s] of things ... are immutable.”[[376]](#footnote-376) Beckett’s poem, by contrast, raises our attention to the possibility of a Cartersian ontology which implies that essences might not be fixed, a possibility that is partly supported by Descartes’ theory of continuous creation. In asserting that a thing must be effectively “create[d] afresh” at each segment of time, Descartes points toward a process of continuous creation that might be viewed as a quasi-Deleuzian situation whereby one keeps on *becoming.*[[377]](#footnote-377)This is, in a sense, the case with the identity of the speaker of

 “Whoroscope,” the formation of which suggests a process of becoming that is linked to the egg, the foodstuff that is also a gamete and thus most clearly evokes creation. The “I” of “Whoroscope” is in the process of becoming-formed for ninety-five out of the ninety-eight lines of the original poem,[[378]](#footnote-378) as though Descartes remains, for most of the poem, within the egg; in Dan Mellamphy’s words, Descartes is “the *exemple par excellence* of larval being: an egg.”[[379]](#footnote-379) This “egg” appears to hatch three lines before the poem ends, at which point Beckett’s “larval being” assumes a form, or name: “(René du Perron . . . !)” (96). But even here the speaker’s identity is not exactly clearly determined; it is, rather, outside the poem “proper,” in Beckett’s explanatory notes, where we are reminded that René Descartes was “Seigneur du Perron.”[[380]](#footnote-380) Indeed, the not-so-revelatory revelation of the ninety-sixth line occurs within brackets – round or, in fact, *oval* brackets, as if to suggest that Descartes is still inside an “egg” which has not yet hatched, and, therefore, that the process of becoming is still in progress, that the disclosure of his identity does not constitute closure.

Portrait by Frans Hals (1649) – the “Hals” mentioned in “Whoroscope” (27) – with line engraving by Gérard Edenlick. The person depicted in the oval portrait is identified as “Chevalier, Seigneur du Perron, René Des-Cartes.” Hals’ portrait is the frontispiece of Baillet’s *La Vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes*, one of Beckett’s sources for “Whoroscope.”

The end of the poem suggests that closure is still anticipated in yet another sense; here, Descartes reveals that he is waiting for his “second ... hour” to be “grant[ed]” (97-98). The clue as to what this anticipated “second hour” might refer is in the title of the poem and its reference to horoscopes, in which Descartes apparently believed. As Beckett explains in his notes to the poem, the casting of horoscopes involved the prediction of one’s “second” hour, that is, the hour of one’s death, based on one’s “first” hour, the hour of birth.[[381]](#footnote-381) It is this anticipated “second” hour, it seems, that would finally grant a sort of closure, thus almost featuring as the hour when the metaphorical ovum in which Descartes is enclosed would ultimately “hatch.”

This state of “becoming-in-ovo,” as we might call it, brings to mind Deleuze’s account of the onto-genetic process but is nevertheless different in that it envisages an end. In *Difference and Repetition* (1968), Deleuze declares that “the world is an egg,” arguing that “the egg provides us with a model” for the process of continuous becoming that underpins the entire world.[[382]](#footnote-382) As we will see in more detail later, according to the Deleuzian egg and the onto-genetic process it encapsulates, there is no *being*, properly speaking, but only *becoming*. In effect, Deleuze presents us with an o(o)ntology at the core of which is the egg (*oon*) that never hatches and thus gives us becoming that never, as it were, becomes. In a similar way, the “metric feet” of Beckett’s poem do not “stretch out into metric lines,” as Lawrence Harvey observes; reading the poem “attentive to its cadence,” Harvey says, we become “aware again and again of beginnings that never develop.”[[383]](#footnote-383) In this way, he goes on to suggest, Beckett “expresses being that remains *in ovo*.”[[384]](#footnote-384) But, of course, this idea of being that *remains* “in ovo” implies being that is *not-yet* and, as such, the anticipation of hatching. Insofar as it seems to envisage an end, “Whoroscope” is not underpinned by the Deleuzian principle of the forever-creating egg. And neither is the world of “Whoroscope” one that has hatched out of the egg, as William Harvey’s *ex ovo omnia* doctrine would suggest, despite the fact that Descartes mentions Harvey affectionately in the poem (37, 39). As the frontispiece of his book *Exercitationes de generatione animalium* (1651) suggests, Harvey’s egg has hatched; the Deleuzian egg, by contrast, precludes even the possibility of hatching as an end, or final formation. Distinct from both of these, the egg in “Whoroscope” is in *anticipation* of hatching; in other words, it is in-view-of the possibility of birth which is, paradoxically, tied to the anticipation of death – the “second” hour.

Numerous Beckett critics have referred to the 1935 lecture in which Carl Jung mentioned the case of a patient who “had never been born entirely.”[[385]](#footnote-385) Beckett, who attended the lecture and was deeply impressed by this description, later worked it into the radio play *All That Fall* (1957), where the suggestively named Mrs Maddy Rooney remembers “attending a lecture by one of these new mind doctors” in which he told “the story of a little girl” who, “as far as he could see,” had nothing “wrong with her” except “that she was dying.”[[386]](#footnote-386) During his telling of this story, Mrs Rooney says that the “mind doctor” exclaimed, “as if he had had a revelation,” that “[t]he trouble with [the little girl] was that she had never really been born.”[[387]](#footnote-387) “Whoroscope” suggests that Beckett had been toying with the idea of the not-yet-properly-born even before attending Jung’s lecture. In *All That Fall*, the “mind doctor’s” second diagnosis, that the girl “had never really been born,” is described as a “revelation” that seems to replace the first diagnosis according to which the “only thing wrong with her was that she was dying.”[[388]](#footnote-388) “Whoroscope,” however, would seem to suggest that the first diagnosis is the “cure” of the problem identified in the second diagnosis: here, the state of not having been properly born – what Lawrence Harvey calls “being that remains *in ovo*” – implies an anticipation of birth or hatching which, as the poem’s final lines suggest, paradoxically coincides with the anticipation of death, thus presenting us with what seems to be a vision of a birth via death.

This is also the case in *The Unnamable*, where the unnameable creature declares, “I would gladly give myself the shape, if not the consistency, of an egg” – but cannot quite do so because of the “distant testimony” of its (or his or her) “palms” and “soles.”[[389]](#footnote-389) This, then, is an egg-like creature with limbs, limbs that suggest that the egg is hatching, that Beckett’s peculiar character is in the process of being born. And as in “Whoroscope,” where the vision of birth is the promise of death, what we have here is in fact a process of *de*creation. At one moment, Beckett’s unnameable being emerges as someone with eyes, eyes from which “tears ... flow” but, at the next moment, emerges as someone whose tears flow not from the eyes but from the sockets, for “only the sockets remain.”[[390]](#footnote-390) At yet another moment, these socket-released tears “gather in [the] beard” whilst, at the very next moment, the previously socket- and beard-possessing creature re-emerges simply as “a great smooth ball.”[[391]](#footnote-391) This is a process whereby “all ... things ... are falling” and everything is being shed, until such a point, it seems, as this character would finally turn into an “egg.”[[392]](#footnote-392) As such, this anticipated end is an

end that carries the promise of a beginning, the hatching of the egg – decreation as the promise of creation.

The same process is at work in *Happy Days* (1961), where Winnie is, as per Beckett’s stage directions, “[*e*]*mbedded up to above her waist*” in a low “*mound*,” as though she is hatching out of it.[[393]](#footnote-393) In the second act, however, she is further embedded in the mound, now “*up to* [her] *neck*,” which implies that she is not so much hatching outof it but, as it were, *in* it. [[394]](#footnote-394) If Winnie’s gradual burial in the ground suggests a process of dying then it also carries the promise of birth, for we assume that when (or if) she is fully embedded in her egg-like tomb she may finally hatch out of it, the tomb thus coming to function as a womb; this egg-like mound is, to borrow a term that appears again and again in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, a “womb-tomb.” In a similar vein, Malone, who is, like the Descartes of “Whoroscope,” on his deathbed, says that he is “being given ... birth into death.”[[395]](#footnote-395) The ceiling of the room in which Malone is dying, we read, “rises and falls, rhythmically,”[[396]](#footnote-396) as though it were a womb, with Malone as an “old foetus” thus re-incarnating the dying “larval” being-to-be of “Whoroscope” and his room the “womb-tomb” of *Dream* whilst alsoanticipating the womb-tomb of Winnie’s egg-like mound. Notable here is the specifically alimentary perspective through which Malone describes this oval or cycle of his existence, that is, in terms of the succession of the “dish” by the “pot” by the “dish” by the “pot” – of eating by excreting by eating by excreting.[[397]](#footnote-397) In this way, Malone makes excrement signal, if not coincide with, food; and in making the end of the digestive process signal its beginning he gives us the alimentary equivalent of the theologically resonant idea that death signals birth, that decreation carries the promise of creation.[[398]](#footnote-398)

Photograph of Fiona Shaw (by Neil Libbert), acting as Winnie in Beckett’s *Happy Days* (National Theatre, London, 2007).

**The Divinely Immanent Egg**

In “Whoroscope,” the question of creation emerges via the poem’s engagement with reproduction and birth, which the egg (as gamete) evokes – and does so in a way that brings something of the divine into the earthly realm of the “here and below.” Note, for example, that the “feathery one” which “womb[ed]” the egg not only designates the mother hen but also functions as an implicit reference to the divine feathery One, that is, God, and more specifically the Holy Spirit who characteristically assumes the form of a feathery creature in the Bible, namely, a dove (Matthew 3: 16). And, of course, it is God-the-Holy-Spirit who, as the *feathery* Gabriel announces,[[399]](#footnote-399) “shall come upon” and fertilise, if not quite womb, the Virgin Mary (Luke 1: 35), to whose pregnancy Descartes does, in fact, allude in “Whoroscope” (8). The poem, then, seems to deal with the question of birth on two levels: the secular or physical, through the references to the hen, and the divine or metaphysical, through the evocations of the Virgin Mary. And insofar as both of these are tied together in the image of the egg – the hen’s physically fertilised egg and Mary’s metaphysically fertilised ovary – each realm resonates within the other.

Crucially, these two realms are not separated from one another in “Whoroscope,” and the use of the word “feathery” is further illuminating in this respect. As William Stein informs us in his essay on the poem, the Indo-European cognate of “feather” is *pter* (“wing”) or *petra*. This, Stein says, is also where the word “peter” comes from and “peter,” he reminds us, is “slang for phallus.”[[400]](#footnote-400) Stein’s observation thus implies that, when the feathery Gabriel announced that Mary’s ovum was to be fertilised via her “overshadow[ing]” by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1: 35), the means of the delivery of this news was, at least etymologically, the penis. In this respect, the poem appears to challenge any strict separation between divine or metaphysical reproduction on the one hand and secular or physical reproduction on the other. Indeed, Beckett’s Descartes refers to the Virgin Mary as “Porca Madonna” (8), which is Italian slang for “slut Madonna,” thus mixing the divine mode of reproduction – that is, Mary’s “overshadow[ing]” by the feathery Holy Spirit – with the physical mode of reproduction, that is, sex.

*Porco/a*, moreover, is literally “pig” or “pork,” a signification that further extends these associations, suggesting an intermingling of the divine not only with the human but also the animal, and the human/animal as food. Note how the senses of *porca* as “slut” and “pork” are both encompassed in the compound “prostisciutto” (13); this is the ingredient which, combined with “two lashed ovaries,” makes an omelette with a Joycean ring to it (13), “prostisciutto” being, according to John Fletcher, a “lame” pun through which Beckett “attempt[s] to imitate Joyce.”[[401]](#footnote-401) But the significance of “prostisciutto” in the poem clearly suggests that this neologism does not merely constitute such an attempt; indeed, this third component of Descartes’ omelette appears in the line immediately preceding his reference to “the feathery one,” as if to correlate the one that “womb[ed]” the edible animal egg with the One that fertilised Mary’s human-divine egg, the Holy Spirit – the third “component” of the Trinity.

*Malone Dies* (1951) also brings together the realm of the “here and below” and the realm of a divine or transcendent “above”; and, once again, this is within an alimentary context. Here, Malone finds himself all alone in a room, effectively immobilised on a bed and thus unable to provide for himself. He does not starve to death, though, as one might have expected. Rather, he often wakes up to find that food has been provided for him, prompting us to think that the indefinite “they” who mysteriously bring this food constitute some kind of divine providence. “There is,” Malone says, a “providence for impotent old men”[[402]](#footnote-402) – a providence perhaps most famously exemplified by the ravens that feed Elijah (1 Kings 17: 4-6). Malone’s food, however, is not the work of divine providence but rather of Moll, the old woman who brings it. As it turns out, then, Malone is not fed in the same way as Elijah is fed by the featherycreatures of the air or, indeed, the “widow woman” who subsequently replaces them (1 Kings 17: 9-14). And yet, just as the woman who provides for Elijah is acting at God’s command, and just as the feathery egg of “Whoroscope” has something “otherworldly,” something of the divine about it so, in a sense, does Moll who, we learn, has “Christ ... in [her] mouth” in the form of her crucifix tongue-ring.[[403]](#footnote-403)

Beckett thus presents us with what is, in effect, a version of divine immanence – the very idea to which Descartes appeals in order to reconcile his Christian belief in the omnipotence of God (and, therefore, His power to change essences) with his philosophical belief in the immutability of essences. According to Descartes, “God so willed it and brought it to pass” that the essences of things remain “immutable,” and His presence (or immanence) in the world is evidenced in His preservation or re-creation of things at every segment of time.[[404]](#footnote-404) Beckett’s Descartes, however, reconfigures this relationship between the “above” and the “below” so that the latter is not only *in*fusedby but also *con*fused with the former. Witness, for example, Descartes’ confusion of the egg or ovary of a hen (or a prostitute) with Mary’s divine ovary and, therefore, the confusion of physical with metaphysical reproduction. The physical is, though, clearly highlighted in the poem, as in expressions like “Porca Madonna,” neologisms like “prostisciutto,” and references to the female gamete (“ovaries”). Through such foregrounding Beckett does not so much seek to ridicule belief in the existence of a transcendent realm but to reconfigure this realm in material terms;[[405]](#footnote-405) the cause of reproduction – and, by extension, of being – is not an immaterial “above” that transcends the “below” that it infuses but, rather, a paradoxically self-exceeding materiality.

Here, we might turn to Beckett’s widely-cited letter to Axel Kaun, where he expresses his determination to “bore one hole after another” in language so as to discover “what lurks behind” it or, indeed, *beneath* it.[[406]](#footnote-406) What drives Beckett, then, the means through which he pursues, we might say, the “beyond” is precisely the “beneath,” and this “beneath” is, in Beckett’s work, material. We have, for example, seen that “Whoroscope” suggests that the mind of the *cogito*,which dissociates itself from the material world in turning to its own thinking, depends on material circumstances such as the “hot-cupboard.” And if, as Descartes has it, self-reflexive thinking constitutes the human essence then this materialist reconfiguration of the *cogito* suggests that the condition of the possibility for this essence lies in material circumstances, circumstances that thus bespeak a materiality which exceeds its current form rather than an immaterial “above” that enables the material “below.”

It is such a model of self-exceeding materiality that characterises Deleuze’s account of onto-genesis, a process which, he says, constitutes a “movement” from “differen*t*iation” to “differen*c*iation.”[[407]](#footnote-407) The former characterises the realm of “the virtual” which entails a multiplicity of non spatio-temporal becomings whereas the latter characterises the realm of “the actual,” in which this multiplicity of becomings assumes spatio-temporal forms. Deleuze’s theorisation of a multiplicity of differen*t*iated but undifferen*c*iated becomings (the virtual) is effectively a reconfiguration of the “Being” or metaphysical realm of classical ontology; and, what in classical ontology is the realm of the physical is what Deleuze reconfigures as the actual, that is, the realm where the virtual becomings assume spatio-temporal forms. Classical ontology, however, typically separates the two realms: “Being” or what “Plato calls the Idea,” Deleuze writes, is generally theorised “as though there were an ‘opening’ [or] a ‘gap’” between “it” and “this” world.[[408]](#footnote-408) Deleuze, on the other hand, treats the two realms as parts of “this” world; although “the virtual can be *distinguished* from the actual ... there is no ‘gap’ between the two.”[[409]](#footnote-409)

All this brings us to what we might view as the (anti-foundational) foundation of Deleuze’s theory of becoming, that is, the egg. For Deleuze, the egg encapsulates the onto-genetic process: as “bands of intensity, potentials, thresholds, [and] gradients,” the egg exemplifies differen*t*iated becomings (the virtual);[[410]](#footnote-410) and as that within which organs are produced in *actuality*, it also exemplifies differen*c*iated becomings (the actual). Thus, the egg closes the gap between the immaterial “above” and the material “below” of classical ontology, pointing to an o(o)ntology in which the transcendent “above” becomes a material “beneath,” as it were – a materiality that exceeds itself (with the idea of “exceeding” replacing the idea of “transcending”), in that the spatio-temporal forms of the actual do not resemble their virtual “counterparts.” As Deleuze and Guattari say, a “zone in the egg” – that is, a certain band of potentials – in no way “resembles the organ” that is produced within it.[[411]](#footnote-411) In other words, the virtual exceeds itself in the actual, and the actual exceeds its virtual “counterparts” in its becoming. In intermingling the physical or secular with the metaphysical or divine in the figure of the feathery one/One, “Whoroscope” points toward such self-exceeding materiality, with the egg’s containment of feathers suggesting that the principle of reproducibility is contained “within” rather than being determined by a transcendent “without.”

**The Edible O(o)n**

The idea that the principle of reproducibility is entailed “within” is also explored in *Watt* (1953), where it is, again, framed within an alimentary context. Here, we are told that,

The ordinary person eats a meal, then rests from eating for a space, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, and in this way, now eating, and now resting from eating, he deals with the difficult problem of hunger, and indeed I think I may add thirst.[[412]](#footnote-412)

As Steven Connor observes, the “openness” of such passages constitutes a kind of “closedness” in that we are “locked” in a repetitive sequence that is theoretically extendable *ad infinitum*. We are thus confronted with “a curious relationship between movement and stasis.”[[413]](#footnote-413) Descartes’ exclamation “[t]hat’s not moving, that’s *moving*” (10) in “Whoroscope” also points to such a relationship, as do, in fact, many of Beckett’s works. Rodney Sharkey’s claim that the pub is very much associated with the womb in Beckett’s early fictions demonstrates the point. In *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934), for instance, Belacqua is, at one point, shown to be sitting on a stool inside an Irish public house in what closely resembles the foetal position. He then exits the pub and is, as Beckett puts it, “issued forth” into “the unintelligible world,”[[414]](#footnote-414) with Sharkey reading this as a case of figurative “birth.”[[415]](#footnote-415) But, of course, it is not just this one time that Belacqua is shown to enter and exit a pub; rather, he is constantly in and out of them in what seems to be a repetitive sequence of drinking, then resting from drinking, then drinking again, and so on. And if, as Sharkey contends, the pub features as the womb and the exit from the pub as birth then the conclusion to be drawn is that Belacqua is born again and again. As metaphorical births, these exits must imply some kind of new beginning but they also imply the preservation of sameness since the process is repetitive – a case of being “locked” in a theoretically absolute “openness,” as in *Watt*.

This takes us back to the doctrine of continuous creation which, according to Descartes, does not imply the possibility ofchange. For just as Descartes argues that the re-creation of the world at every point in time amounts to its preservation so Belacqua’s constant “births” paradoxically suggest the preservation of the same. With this we arrive at the curious idea of a *postmodern* Descartes, with continuous creation almost featuring as an ontological version of the world of postmodernity where, as Fredric Jameson famously argues, change is the norm and, therefore, no change actually takes place, properly speaking.[[416]](#footnote-416) In an analogous way, Descartes’ claim that acts of creation occur continuously suggests that no creation, properly speaking, actually takes place; rather, essence remains as it is.

The paradox that Connor identifies in *Watt*’s repetitive sequences does not, though, merely lie in their evocation of what Jameson calls “the antinomies of postmodernity”: these sequences are not simply cases of repeating the same, of remaining static or locked in a theoretically absolute movement or infinite openness, but also give rise to the possibility of difference. Elsewhere, in an essay that is particularly attentive to the alimentary and, more specifically, the question of assimilation, Connor reiterates the point. Sartre, Connor writes, “insists on the primal horror of being sucked [in] or swallowed up” by what he calls “the slimy,” a kind of undifferentiated or homogeneous indistinctness – a fear that Connor also identifies in Beckett.[[417]](#footnote-417) But Connor also finds in Beckett “a kind of appetite” for such assimilation;[[418]](#footnote-418) this, he says, is related to the

two opposite conditions in *How It Is*, which alternate in what seem like peristaltic spasms. On the one hand, there is the slow oozing together of things – the body sinking into the mud, alimentation and excretion becoming simply phases of each other, everything slowly subsiding into everything else. On the other hand, there are the sudden “existings” ... [a second condition which] scoops out a state of exception from all the otherwise undifferentiated slurping and oozing ... an upsurge of existence out of the mud.[[419]](#footnote-419)

In other words, out of the “horrific” assimilation which eating seems to necessitate, and thus out of sameness, emerges change, or at least the possibility of change. The theoretically absolute repetitive sequence of eating and resting from eating in *Watt* is haunted precisely by an anticipation of change; as we are reading, we inevitably anticipate the end of the sequence and the beginning of something different, and when the sequence does come to an end it is indeed through an “opening” onto something different – the subject of thirst. In this sense, reproducibility connotes, and gives rise to, the possibility of change, and thus reconfigures the Cartesian doctrine of continuous creation. For, *contra* Descartes, Beckett does not confine himself to the question of preservation – the reproducibility of the same – but also hints at the possibility of alteration, suggesting that this rises from “within.”

What seals this comparison with the Cartesian doctrine of continuous creation is that *Watt*’s repetitive “eating-and-resting-from-eating” sequence resonates ontologically. The sequence effectively universalises the relationship of the alimentary with the ontological that is glimpsed in *Malone Dies*, for instance, where the repetitive dish-pot or eating-excreting succession is what characterises Malone’s existence. *Watt* informs us not of the specific circumstances of one particular character but of the circumstances of the “ordinary person,” part of the joke being the use of the word “ordinary.” Indeed, as Arsene goes on to say, let the person in question be “a small eater,” “a moderate eater,” “a vegetarian,” “a cannibal,” “a coprophage”; “or let him on the other hand be none of these, but something quite different as would be the case for example if he were ... in a catatonic stupor” – “the fact remains, and can hardly be denied, that he proceeds by what we call meals, whether taken voluntarily or involuntarily,” “through the mouth” or “the feedtube.”[[420]](#footnote-420) In short, eating sustains and reflects one’s existence, whether ordinary or not. Or, to put this another way, one is what one eats.

The implication that “you are what you eat” becomes clearer through various anthropomorphisations of food and “ediblisations” of the *anthropos*, as in the peculiar omelette recipe of “Whoroscope” made with “two lashed ovaries and prostisciutto” (13). As Rainey observes, these ingredients evoke a prostitute’s “lashing” or “tying” of her ovaries to avoid reproduction;[[421]](#footnote-421) this omelette, then, renders the human edible as does, indeed, that British staple of bacon and eggs which Beckett’s Descartes conjures up when he asks, “In the name of Bacon will you chicken me up that egg. / Shall I swallow cave-phantoms?” (66-67). Descartes’ bacon is here given the human form of Francis Bacon, the great empiricist, who is juxtaposed to Plato. The anthropomorphised dish thus effectively implies that one’s existence is defined not by “cave-phantoms” such as those of Plato’s allegory, but by food.[[422]](#footnote-422)

In his book on the use of food in avant-garde literature, Delville briefly refers to “the fantasies of being eaten” in Beckett’s work,[[423]](#footnote-423) and the Bacon-bacon association can be seen as just such a fantasy. Indeed, to a contemporary reader, Descartes’ Bacon-as-bacon may suggest not only Francis Bacon the philosopher (1561-1626) but also Francis Bacon the artist (1909-1992), whose work, according to Deleuze, forces us into realising that “[e]very man ... is a piece of meat.”[[424]](#footnote-424) The egg that Descartes wants to eat in “Whoroscope,” for instance, is described in ways that clearly suggest its containment of a “foetus” but when this word is actually used it is in reference to a *human* foetus, namely, Francine, Descartes’ daughter (31). In its association with edibility, the “meatiness” of the human here connotes figurative auto-cannibalisation; for, given the poem’s confusion of parents with their offspring, in consuming the foetus-containing egg Descartes would be figuratively consuming himself.

Self-consumption is again on the menu when Molloy is given “a mug full of a greyish concoction” to eat.[[425]](#footnote-425) Although Molloy says that the mug “rocked with a noise of chattering teeth, *not mine*,” he describes this mug-mouth as part of “a pile of tottering disparates,” which is exactly the impression we have of Molloy’s own body throughout the novel.[[426]](#footnote-426) One could of course assert, with Raymond Williams, that many a Beckett character, not just Molloy, is effectively “a set of failing physical functions”[[427]](#footnote-427) – a pile of tottering disparates. Nevertheless, Molloy’s “greyish concoction” corresponds precisely to his characteristic colour: grey. When observing another character, for example, Molloy says that he concealed himself by leaning “against a rock the same colour as myself, that is, grey.”[[428]](#footnote-428) In his greyness, Molloy resembles the food he is offered, which, incidentally, he refuses. Soon, however, he remembers this refused food and begins sucking a little “pebble” as a substitute,[[429]](#footnote-429) a little pebble that reminds us of the “big pebble,” or rock whose greyness Molloy identifies with. And, of course, amidst this alimentary greyness there is that other “greyish concoction,” Molloy’s mother, whom he has “come to resemble” and whose “little grey wizened pear” of a cheek he touches with his mouth.[[430]](#footnote-430)

The correspondence between Molloy’s greyness and the greyness of his food and food-substitutes gives a literal, alimentary force to what Alain Badiou describes as the “grey black [*noir gris*]” of being in Beckett’s work.[[431]](#footnote-431) In Badiou’s reading, the grey blackness of being – the split of a singular blackness, as it were, into the “grey black” – signals the possibility of the *event*. This possibility is apparently associated with the *Two* (the “Two of Love,” for example) that comes to split, in later Beckett works, the *One* – the solipsism of the *cogito* – that defines the earlier Beckett.[[432]](#footnote-432) In associating the grey-blackness of being with the realm of mathematics, Badiou has no time for its “baser,” alimentary aspect. But Beckett does engage with the alimentary, and this engagement relates to the possibility of what Badiou calls “the event.” In the context of the repetitive alimentary sequences discussed above, “the event” would refer to the cessation or end of the reproduction of the same and the opening onto something different. It is by turning to the alimentary “event” with which Badiou is unconcerned, the food-related opening up of the possibility of being otherwise, that this chapter will conclude.

**Being Otherwise**

In “Whoroscope,” the possibility of alimentary-related ontological transformations emerges from Descartes’ engagement with the Eucharist. Addressing a certain “Antonio,” Descartes says that when we drink “the watery Beaune” (a Burgundy wine) and eat “the stale cubes of Hovis” (a brand of bread) we actually “drink Him and eat Him,” and this is “because He can jig” (65, 60-62). The “Antonio” whom Descartes addresses here is Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694), who objected that “M. Descartes” does not leave “intact” the “teachings of the Church” about the Eucharist because he (Descartes) argues that the “sensible qualities” of a thing (like texture, taste, etc.) cannot “exist apart” from its substance.[[433]](#footnote-433) In his reply, Descartes explains that each body, and each of its particles, is surrounded by a surfacewhich naturally joins it with other bodies/particles that are not identical with it. Therefore, a body’s/particle’s surface is not part of its substance but surrounds it and gives it its sensible and perceivable qualities, and it is in this sense that the substance of a thing cannot exist apart from its sensible qualities.[[434]](#footnote-434) Thus it is that Descartes seeks to scientifically explain why the substance of the bread and the wine changes in transubstantiation whilst their perceivable qualities remain unchanged. And thus it is that Beckett’s Descartes offers us a version of the Christian God in whom even Nietzsche could believe; for what we have here is a God who “know[s] how to dance,”[[435]](#footnote-435) who “jig[s]” into the “stale cubes of Hovis” and the “watery Beaune,” infusing them with His divine essence and transforming them into His edible flesh and blood.

Whilst the real or non-fictional Descartes argues that God’s alimentary “jigging” transforms only the essence of the sacraments, Beckett’s Descartes suggests also a transformation of their perceivable qualities. For if we allow him a French accent, we can hear him pronounce “Hovis” in such a way as to suggest *eau vie* (“water of life”) and “Beaune” in such a way as to suggest “bone,”[[436]](#footnote-436) in an aural “jigging” that turns the solid sacrament into liquid and the liquid into solid. This food-related, transformative jigging is part of a whole series that runs throughout the poem, with God-the-Holy-Spirit jigging into the form of an edible feathery creature, divinity thus jigging into animality, and with the God-the-Son, the edible Jesus, jigging into the form of a human ovary, divinity thus jigging into humanity.

“Whoroscope” thus entangles the question of essence modification – of being otherwise – with the alimentary, an entanglement which leads us back to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: If one’s food reflects one’s being then does what one wants to eat reveal who one wants to be? It is in this context that Descartes’ unconventional taste for the fertilised egg assumes its full significance, for what the poem tells us is not that he eats this egg but that he wants to do so. With this in mind, let us turn to the final stanza, where Descartes says,

Are you ripe at last,  
my slim pale double-breasted turd?  
How rich she smells,  
this abortion of a fledgling!  
I will eat it with a fish fork.  
White and yolk and feathers.  
Then I will rise and move ... (84-90).

Descartes’ prospective consumption of the egg is here associated with his “rising,” the latter following the former: “I will eat it .... Then I will rise.” This “rising” almost renders Descartes a kind of Lazarus, implying that his anticipated “second ... hour” entails a beginning (97), as if to suggest a form of birth after death. At this point in the poem death is indeed imminent, with the last line of the extract (“I will ... move”) referring, as it turns out, to Descartes’ relocation to Sweden, which is where he actually died.[[437]](#footnote-437) In the poem, however, this is a death that carries the promise of a new beginning, a “rising” that signals a hatching out of the egg-like womb-tomb in which the “larval being” of “Whoroscope” is figuratively enclosed. Such hatching would, of course, involve the cracking of the egg, an act that this stanza associates with the “fork” and, therefore, the consumption of the egg. In this sense, Descartes’ taste for the egg signals a taste for being otherwise, for a “rising,” or, as Badiou might put it, an “event.” And if, as Lawrence Harvey suggests, “Whoroscope” “expresses being that remains *in ovo*,” that is, being that is not-yet and, as such, becoming rather than being, then the cracking of the egg and its consumption seem to signal the “abortion” of the process of becoming and the birth of a *being*. The title of the poem does, in a sense, suggest as much: the “first” *hōra* of a *horo*scope – the hour of birth – is “observed” (*skopos* being Greek for “observer”) in anticipation of the “second” *hōra*, that of death; and insofar as, in the poem, the anticipated hour of death carries within it the promise of birth – the hatching of the egg – then the title can also be read as “*Who*-roscope,” expressing an anticipation for the birth of a *who*, a subject: the death or cessation of becoming (and thus the end of the state of remaining “*in ovo*”) and the birth of a *being*. What Descartes wants to eat in the poem reveals, then, not who he wants to be but that he wants to be a *who*, a subject.

Just as in Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* acts of eating otherwise bespeak a taste for being otherwise, so in “Whoroscope” does Descartes’ taste for unconventional dishes like aborted fledglings. Moreover, in both Bataille and Beckett the pursuit of ontological change betrays suicidal tendencies, with Bataille’s characters seeking abstinence from eating – a case of starvation – and Beckett’s characters consuming, being asked to consume, or seeking the consumption of food that reflects their existence: a case of figurative auto-cannibalism. Although self-destructive, the Beckettianauto-cannibalism(as the biological definition of “autophagy” in fact suggests) is actually for the self’s benefit, for the attainment of a “stronger” self,[[438]](#footnote-438) in this instance, a subject “proper.” To this extent, then, Bataille’s and Beckett’s interpretations of the idea that one is what one eats are different. The alimentary games in Bataille’s novella suggest an understanding according to which eating *preserves* one’s current state of being; the act of consumption is understood to be nourishing and thus sustaining, which is why it is the abstinence from eating that seems to give rise to the possibility of being otherwise. In “Whoroscope,” on the other hand, there is an understanding of eating as destructive, coinciding as it does with “abortion”; the idea that one is what one eats suggests that, by eating oneself, one may abort one’s current state of being. This is a case of destructive assimilation whereby what is destroyed is not the “other” but the self since what is assimilated, and thus destroyed, is the self (in its current form); in other words, eating opens up the possibility of being otherwise.

Just as there is a difference in terms of how the otherwise of eating is thought to be realisable in Bataille and Beckett so there is a difference in terms of what the sought-for otherwise of being is in each case; whilst in Bataille we encounter subjects that dream of being rid of subjectivity in order to experience the fullness of being, in Beckett we encounter not-yet-subjects that dream of achieving the status of the subject. Both Bataille and Beckett, however, seem to associate the state of being-a-subject with the end of the digestive process, with excrement and the stench thereof, and are thus both in agreement with Artaud, who declares that, “Where it smells of shit / it smells of being.”[[439]](#footnote-439) But whilst Bataille’s characters in *Story of the Eye* want “to have done with shit,” with eating and excreting, that is, with the processes that establish them as subjects who *are* through assimilating the external world, the Descartes of “Whoroscope” seems to be suggesting that he wants to *eat* his own excrement: “Are you ripe at last, / myslim pale double-breasted turd?”(84). A taste for the stinky, if not quite the excremental, reappears in *More Pricks than Kicks*, where Belacqua is infuriated by the thought of eating a “rotten lump of Gorgonzola cheese” that has but a mere “fragrance of corruption”; mere fragrance, we understand, will simply not do, for Belacqua “wasn’t a bloody gourmet,” “he did not want [just] fragrance” – “he wanted a good stench.”[[440]](#footnote-440) Likewise, the “turd” of “Whoroscope” might not be “ripe” enough for Descartes to eat, being but “slim” and “pale” – not stinky enough to allow Descartes to experience the fullness of being in all its “stenchiness.” Materiality, in its “rottedness,” its “stenchiness,” and its “excrementality,” is what reconfigures the *cogito* in Beckett, re-instantiating its radical turn “within,” with the “within” no longer referring to a mind that imagines dissociating itself from the body and which practices reflexive thinking in order to fully experience the certainty of being. This is, rather, a “within” that is both material and mutable, and refers to what Bataille might have described as the body’s “base matter,”[[441]](#footnote-441) a rotted, stinky, and excremental “within” that Beckett has Descartes embrace, thus situating him in, and making him outdo, the conceptual tradition we have identified in the first chapter, a tradition that, in one way or another, collapses the “superiority” of being into the “baseness” of eating.

In both Bataille’s and Beckett’s work, entanglements of the ontological with the alimentary explore, in different ways, the possibility of radical transformation, thus providing us with alimentary ways in which the modernist injunction to “make it new” is pursued. In the two following chapters, we will turn to literary texts from the second half of the twentieth century, the half that is considered to have gone “past” the modernist project but where we will nevertheless encounter similar explorations of the ontologically resonant transformative potential of food.

## Chapter 4

## Of Eggs and Men Paul Auster on the Potentiality of Food

Between branch and spire – the word  
Belittles its nest, and the seed, rocked  
By simpler confines, will not confess.  
Only the egg gravitates.

...

The egg limits renunciation ....

Lifted into speech, it carries its  
Own birth, and if it shatters   
Acclaim its fall and contradiction.  
   
 Paul Auster, “Spokes”

Like Bataille and Beckett, Paul Auster began his literary oeuvre with a text in which he gave ontological gravitas to the egg. His first poem, “Spokes”(1970), seems to be a meditation on being, and as the above extracts from the first and last stanzas of the poem indicate, one that begins and ends with reference to the egg.[[442]](#footnote-442) The egg is here associated with language and religion, and this association is retained and elaborated on in *City of Glass* (1985), the first novel of *The New York Trilogy* (1985-1987) and Auster’s most well-known text.[[443]](#footnote-443)Sylvia Söderlind goes as far as to argue that from this poem emerges a “picture ... that appears very much as a *mise-en-abyme* of *The New York Trilogy*”; the *Trilogy*’s exploration of “fragility” – of falling and shattering – and of the related issue of “unrealized potential,” Söderlind says, are both “hidden in [the] perennially gravitating egg” of Auster’s first poem.[[444]](#footnote-444) It is what Söderlind calls, albeit without elaborating, the “unrealized potential” of the egg that will be focused on in this chapter. In the literary imagination of the twentieth century, as seen via Bataille and Beckett, food is imbued with ontologically transformative potential, and here we will investigate the question of food-related potentiality more closely.

In *City of Glass*, the philosopher-theologian Stillman Sr develops a theory of being which posits the essence of humankind as “eggness,” designating potentiality. In Stillman’s “o(o)ntology” being *is* potentiality, with the centrality of the egg already suggesting that this is yet another instance in which the ontological is entangled with the alimentary; and, as in the previous chapters, what is at stake in this entanglement is the possibility of being otherwise. Whilst the texts we have looked at so far seem to largely treat this possibility of change as a positive one, the texts we will look at in this and the next chapter reveal its sinister aspect, as does, indeed, Bataille, who nearly four decades after the first publication of *Story of the Eye*, in his 1967 “Outline of a Sequel,” comes to discredit his earlier vision of radical change by hinting at its fascistic undertones. To this extent, the literature of the second half of the twentieth century as represented in this study offers a critique of the first, along the lines of a wider narrative according to which postmodernism criticises or complicates modernism.

From Bataille’s literary pornography and Beckett’s experimental writings, both of which present us with materialisations of the modernist injunction to “make it new,” we will now turn to a different genre, the genre that Auster rewrites from a postmodernist perspective in *City of Glass* – namely, detective fiction.[[445]](#footnote-445) Mirroring Beckett, the author whom Auster admits to having idolised,[[446]](#footnote-446) and the Beckettian egg as a symbol of a “being-to-be,” Auster presents us with an egg that symbolises a “*non* being-to-be,” whereby potentiality does not remain “unrealized,” as Söderlind suggests, but is, rather, rendered non-existent.

*City of Glass* explores the pursuit of potential-less being via two alimentary-related scenarios: Stillman’s egg-based theory of being and his attempt to bring forth the destiny of humankind (which will be investigated in the first part of this chapter), and what I will read as Quinn’s food-based attempt to bring forth the destiny of the detective figure (which will be investigated in the second part of the chapter). Both Stillman’s and Quinn’s stories are concerned with the mouth: the first with the speaking mouth and the second with the eating mouth. And as in many of the examples of Western thought surveyed in Chapter 1, where the connection between speaking and eating is of ontological significance, the two scenarios of *City of Glass* will be shown to form a crucial analogy that brings to the fore the ontological significance of food in Auster.

PART I

**All Men are Eggs: Thesis, Antithesis, Sublation**

The two stories which will concern us here come together at the beginning of *City of Glass*, where we are informed of the mistaken phone call “that started it” all by involving Quinn in the Stillman case (3). Stillman Jr rings Quinn, whom he mistakes for Paul Auster of the Paul Auster Detective Agency, seeking to employ him as a private eye, a job Quinn finds himself accepting. We learn that Stillman Jr fears that his father, who has just been released from prison, will attempt to harm him. Nine years earlier, it emerges, Stillman (the father) had locked his then three-year-old son in a room for nine years, cutting him off from any contact with human beings and their “fallen” language, thinking that the boy would eventually speak the Adamic or prelapsarian language and thus recover the originary essence of man.

Written in the 1980s and set sometime earlier in the U.S., Auster’s novel calls to mind a “feral child” case, that of a girl known as “Genie,” who was discovered in California in the 1970s.[[447]](#footnote-447) Like Stillman Jr, “Genie” was forced to spend a number of years in a room all on her own, deprived of contact with language and punished whenever she made any noise. Although “Genie” was not confined because of any onto-theologico-linguistic aspirations on her father’s part, she did become, after her discovery, the subject of a series of experiments that sought to resolve the mystery of the development of language and, therefore, answer the question of what makes ushuman.[[448]](#footnote-448) Referring to older feral child cases, some of which are in fact listed in *City of Glass* (33-35), Giorgio Agamben suggests that the fascination with them boils down to the question concerning the human essence. “[T]he *enfants sauvages*,” Agamben writes, reveal “the precariousness of the human,” being “the witnesses” to the “fragile identity” of the human being.[[449]](#footnote-449) “[T]he passion with which the men of the *Ancien Régime*” tried to “humanize” these animal-like nonspeaking beings, Agamben argues, “shows how aware” they were of the “precariousness” of humanness.[[450]](#footnote-450)

Herein we find the main elements that underlie Stillman’s o(o)ntology: the precariousness or fragility of “man”; his current brokenness; and the possibility of amending it, thus effecting “our salvation” (85). Illuminating in this respect is Stillman’s thesis for his doctorate in religion and philosophy, where he supposedly relies on a 1690 pamphlet written by a certain Henry Dark, whom he presents as John Milton’s secretary. Speaking to Quinn, Stillman later reveals that Henry Dark is actually a fiction, the initials H. D. referring to Humpty Dumpty who, Stillman claims, is “the purest embodiment of the human condition”:

What is an egg? It is that which has not yet been born. ... [A]ll men are eggs, in a manner of speaking. We exist, but have not yet achieved the form that is our destiny. We are pure potential, an example of the not-yet-arrived. For man is a fallen creature – we know that from Genesis. Humpty Dumpty is also a fallen creature. He falls from his wall, and no one can put him back together again .... But that is what we must all ... do. It is our duty as human beings: to put the egg back together again. For each of us ... is Humpty Dumpty. And to help him is to help ourselves (81-82).

The ontological condition of humankind is here envisaged in three “phases,” each encapsulated by the egg: the prelapsarian, designated by the “whole and unbroken” egg (47); the postlapsarian, designated by the egg that has fallen and broken; and the paradisiacal, pointed toward by the put-back-together egg. It will be remembered from the first chapter that food in the Judeo-Christian tradition reflects and preserves ontological differences, and so when Adam and Eve disobey God and eat the forbidden foodstuff the essence of humankind changes. It seems, then, only appropriate that Stillman would turn to a foodstuff to distinguish between humankind’s past and present states of being, and to theorise the bringing forth of a future one. The connection between the question of food and the question of being is, then, approached from a different angle here, whereby a specific foodstuff, the egg, is used as a symbol of being, its different states symbolising different states of being.

Each of the states of the egg, and the phases in the ontological condition of humankind that they signify, correspond to different types of potentiality. That we all are, like Humpty Dumpty, “fallen creature[s]” means, for Stillman, that our state of being is that of “pure potential.” And if “pure potentiality” is potentiality that refers to itself then this is a kind of *potential potentiality*:the potential to be/have potential.“We are,” Stillman says, “pure potential” *because* we are fallen creatures, broken eggs that can be put “back together again”; the postlapsarian broken egg, then, designates a state of potential potentiality, which, in turn, suggests that the prelapsarian whole egg designates potentiality. Ridiculous as this may sound – Stillman was, after all, “judged insane” by the court (27) – it does in fact find some theological backing in Pico della Mirandola’s seminal *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (delivered 1487; published 1496).[[451]](#footnote-451) Here, Pico argues that when God came to create man “there remained no archetype according to which He might fashion a new offspring,” everything having already been used for the rest of the creatures that inhabit the world.[[452]](#footnote-452) Therefore, Pico argues, God did not give man a “visage proper” so that he might partake in the “endowment of every other creature.”[[453]](#footnote-453) Whilst all other creatures were “fixed in the mode of being which would be theirs through measureless eternities,” God “bestowed” upon “man ... seeds pregnant with all possibilities.”[[454]](#footnote-454) This image of the seed pregnant with possibilities becomes, in Stillman’s theory, the image of the prelapsarian egg, “that which has not yet been born” (81) and thus signals the potential to be born.

The postlapsarian state, on the other hand, is envisaged as the egg that has fallen and broken before hatching; and since, as Stillman asserts, this broken egg *can* be put back together again, the condition it designates is *potentially the potential* to be born. In other words, humankind’s current condition of brokenness entails the possibility of “un-breaking,” of returning to the originary whole egg and recovering the prelapsarian potentiality. In this sense, the edenic potentiality enables action in the present since it remains “in the here and now” as potential potentiality (47). As Stillman writes in his doctoral thesis, Paradise is “immanent within man himself” (46-47), and it is the actualisation of this potential to bring forth Paradise from “within” that Stillman posits as the result of doing “our duty,” of putting “the egg back together again” (82).

This o(o)ntology, then, theorises being as mutable and as dependent on action taken in the here and now for its fulfilment, that is, the attainment of Paradise. This attainment, Stillman suggests, requires a return to Eden: to put the postlapsarian Humpty Dumpty “back together again” is to restore his former, prelapsarian condition. Although the return to Eden is not the end (it is a requirement for the end – Paradise – rather than the end itself), this attempt to effectively turn the future into the past constitutes a crucial element of Stillman’s theory of being and, as we will see in the second part of the chapter, of the detective genre.[[455]](#footnote-455) Whilst Stillman explicitly says that the Humpty Dumpty he is talking about is the Humpty Dumpty of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (81), the Humpty Dumpty of the nursery rhyme is particularly illuminating in this respect. As Söderlind reminds us, “[t]hose who first chanted” the “apparently innocuous ditty” were well aware that it “was in fact a story of regime change, in which Humpty Dumpty figured Charles I.”[[456]](#footnote-456) In light of this, to put Humpty Dumpty back together again would be to restore the previous status quo and, in this context, Stillman’s mission of putting the egg back together again features as just such an attempt, only on a much grander scale: it is an attempt to restore humankind’s originary condition, effecting a return to God’s “kingdom” of Eden.

Whilst the fall of Humpty-as-Charles I was a contingent event, Stillman considers the fall of Humpty-as-humankind to have been necessary, as his endorsement of the *felix culpa* or “happy fall” theory suggests (47). Like the fall and shattering of the egg in Auster’s early poem “Spokes,” Stillman implies that the Fall of man is to be “acclaim[ed]” because it is a necessary step toward the attainment of Paradise.[[457]](#footnote-457) In this sense, Stillman’s argument works in an analogous way to the Hegelian dialectic; it effectively posits the prelapsarian condition as “thesis,” the postlapsarian condition as “antithesis,” and the paradisiacal condition as a “synthesis” which will *sublate* the two, constituting their *fulfilment*. Among different interpretations of the Hegelian dialectic, most pertinent here is that of Michael Inwood, who reads it in reference to what he describes as Hegel’s “fairly free reading of the myth of the fall – the only part of the Old Testament to which [Hegel] attaches much importance.”[[458]](#footnote-458) According to Inwood, Hegel “see[s] the departure from Eden” and the “fall into disunion” as “necessary” for the “ascent towards divinity.”[[459]](#footnote-459) Eden thus constitutes “[t]he first stage” of the dialectic, that of “natural unity”; the postlapsarian state constitutes “[t]he second,” that “of separation”; and the paradisiacal state will mark the “third,” “that of reconciliation,” where the “separation” will be “repaired,” bringing forth “harmony on a higher level.”[[460]](#footnote-460)

Notably, Inwood here focuses on the example of the seed to which Hegel often has recourse, showing how these three stages are linked to the question of potentiality. The first stage, that of “natural unity,” is a state of “undeveloped potentiality” encapsulated in the image of a “seed” that has not developed into a plant;[[461]](#footnote-461) or, as Stillman might put it, the not-yet-hatched egg. In the second stage one is taken further away, as it were, from this “undeveloped potentiality,” being “separated” from it and thus becoming aware of it. This consciousness – the awareness of separation, of the brokenness of the postlapsarian egg – is viewed as a condition for the “actualization” of the “undeveloped potentiality”: “anything which is aware that it is potentially F” is able to become “actually F and, conversely, anything which becomes actually F does so by being ... aware” of having been “potentially F.”[[462]](#footnote-462) Similarly, Stillman’s theory states that the first stage (the prelapsarian, the state of the whole egg, of “undeveloped potentiality”) is a condition for the second stage (the postlapsarian, the state of the broken egg), and that the second stage is a condition for the actualisation or fulfilment of the first stage: it is necessary for the egg to hatch. As in the Hegelian thesis and antithesis, the prelapsarian and the postlapsarian states are in a dialectical relationship which enables their sublation rather than a mere restoration of Eden – a sublation that Stillman views as the fulfilment of destiny, a final *Aufhebung*.

**The Ovary of Eve**

This model is also reflected in Stillman’s theory of language. When Adam named God’s creatures in Eden, Stillman says, his words expressed the essences of these creatures: “a thing and its name,” he asserts, were “interchangeable” (43). In “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (written 1916; published 1955), Walter Benjamin focuses on the Genesis pattern “God spoke – and there was,” similarly suggesting that the word and the thing were interchangeable; God’s word, Benjamin asserts, *is* (the creation of) the thing.[[463]](#footnote-463) The originary language of man, Benjamin goes on to argue, reflects God’s creative word, thus expressing His creative power. In Benjamin’s view, man’s prelapsarian language expresses God’s creativity; it communicates the “*capacity*” or potential “for communication,”[[464]](#footnote-464) just as in Stillman’s theory the prelapsarian condition of man expresses potentiality.

Like Benjamin, Stillman argues that the Fall changed language.[[465]](#footnote-465) Appealing to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, he claims that after the essence-transforming consumption of the forbidden fruit words were “informed by a knowledge of evil” and thus became “shaded, ambiguous” (43). This ambiguity suggests that the former unity between a thing and its name is replaced by separation and, for Stillman, this means that words cannot express the essences of things. As in Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*, this linguistic issue reveals an understanding according to which what a thing *is* depends on what it *does*. Suppose, Stillman says, that “you rip the cloth off [an] umbrella,” “open the spokes, put them over your head” and “walk out into the rain .... Is it possible to go on calling this object an umbrella?” (77). His answer is “no”: the umbrella, he claims, “has changed into something else” (ibid.) just as in Bataille’s novella the egg that performs the function of the penis enters a different mode of being. In *Story of the Eye*, however, changes such as these do not constitute a transformation of profound being but are, rather, temporary ways of being which are possible because things can be made to function in different ways. Stillman’s understanding, by contrast, is that the profound being of things really has mutated and language, having become ambiguous, cannot designate precisely the new essences they have assumed.

Significantly, though, Stillman is able to embark on the project of “inventing a new language” (76), giving different names to things, precisely because of the postlapsarian ambiguity that separates things from their names; had a thing been fixed to its name a new name could not have been invented for it.[[466]](#footnote-466) The same pattern as above, then, also applies here: the postlapsarian language enables, because of its ambiguity, the creation of a language that would recover the principle of the prelapsarian language (of words capable of expressing the essences of things), a recovery which, for Stillman, will lead to the fulfilment of man’s destiny.

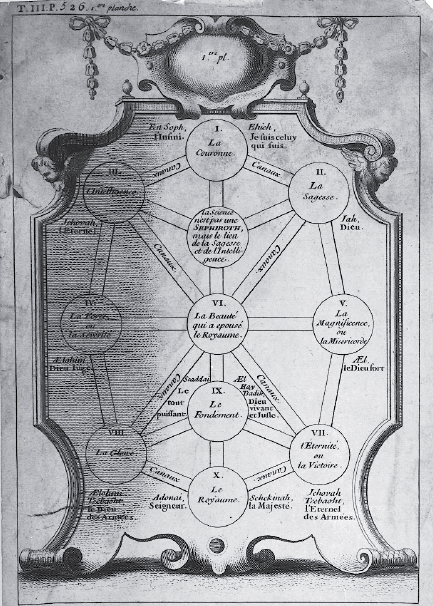
What we have here is essentially a theory of predetermination according to which changes in the ontological condition of humankind that have happened, as well as actions taken now to cause future changes, are part of a teleological movement toward the closure of the circle – or, as Stillman would prefer, oval – that is the story of humankind. In this respect, Stillman’s egg is akin to the “Christian-friendly” egg of preformation, the mid-seventeenth-century biological theory which basically maintained that “all future human history had originally been encased inside the ovary of Eve, in the fashion of a Russian doll.”[[467]](#footnote-467) Preformationism was deemed to affirm Christianity not least because the idea that every generation to come was already encased inside Eve’s ovary provided “scientific proof” of the transmission of the Original Sin to future generations. Stillman’s o(o)ntology supports and extends this, for it effectively suggests that, within the edenic egg were entailed both the fallen egg and the paradisiacal egg. In other words, the Fall was meant to happen just as Paradise is meant to come and actualise the edenic potentiality by causing the originary egg to hatch.

**The Egg of the Kabbalah**

Such predetermination, however, clashes with Stillman’s belief that Paradise can be brought forth “in the here and now” and that man himself must “buil[d] it with his own two hands” (47): if, as the preformationists maintained, the future is already preformed within Eve’s egg then any action taken in the here and now cannot have any impact upon shaping it. On this question of action, Stillman’s o(o)ntology appears to be in greater agreement with a Judaic “egg” – that of the Kabbalah. The similarities between Stillman’s and Benjamin’s theories of language further support this association with Judaism,[[468]](#footnote-468) as does Auster’s own heritage as an

American Jew.[[469]](#footnote-469)

Some Kabbalists, as Leonora Leet points out, “speak ... of the egg” in relation to “spiral involution,” a concept that designates “a *forward* impulse which *turns back* on itself,”

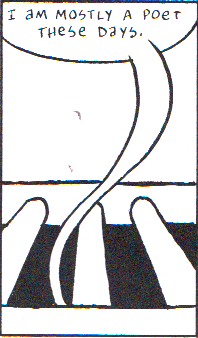
thus suggesting that the “way to [get to] the *beginning* is by *going on*.”[[470]](#footnote-470) Stillman similarly prescribes a turn backto the edenic beginningas the way forwardto the paradisiacal future: the broken egg of the postlapsarian present must be put back together again and thus assume the form of the whole egg of the prelapsarian past, enabling the fulfilment of its potential of hatching. In implying that the beginning is in need of fulfilment, Stillman’s theory expresses another belief that is at the core of most versions of the Jewish Kabbalah – namely, that “Creation is not something completed.”[[471]](#footnote-471) The fulfilment of destiny will only come with such completion, and this completion, the Kabbalah teaches, must be pursued in the here and now. In other words, the Kabbalah does not preclude action, as seems to be the case with the Christian egg of preformation, but, on the contrary, demands it.

The system of the *sefirot* (or “divine emanations”), represented in a schema whose shape is sometimes described as *ovoid*,[[472]](#footnote-472) expresses just this idea. The ten *sefirot* are considered to be responsible for the existence and maintenance of life. Some scholars distinguish between certain *sefirot*,which they designate as potentialities (usually the *sefirot* numbered ii and iii in the schema), and *sefirot* which they designate as actual emanated entities (for example the *sefirot* numbered iv and v in the schema) but the general understanding is that all the *sefirot* “always already exist in potentiality before they are manifest as substantiated forms in the world.”[[473]](#footnote-473) Crucially, a *sefirah* is considered to contain within it the pattern of the whole schema representing all the *sefirot*. On the one hand, this suggests predetermination and, on the other, it simultaneously affirms the creative capacity of each *sefirah* in the unfolding and enfolding of creation. As Kerry Gordon puts it, each *sefirah* “contains within it the pattern of divine intelligence,” which means that it is able and, indeed, “requir[ed]” to “participate in the continuing process of emanation.”[[474]](#footnote-474) The completion of creation is, then, dependent on the here and now. Likewise, Stillman maintains that it is “our duty” to take action “in the here and now” (47) so as to bring forth Paradise from *within* in what can be seen as a Kabbalah-like process of *un*folding that is simultaneously a process of *en*folding, a movement forward that is simultaneously a turn back.

A Latin schematic drawing of the ten *sefirot* – a common characteristic across various versions of the Jewish Kabbalah. The oval shape has been superimposed to indicate why this schema is sometimes referred to as “ovoid.”

**The Final Hatching**

Stillman’s proposed turn back to Eden for the attainment of Paradise suggests that what he is after is not a mere restoration of the originary potentiality but its actualisation, which amounts to its *negation*. Both of Stillman’s attempts to implement his theory suggest as much. In the first instance, he tries to get his son to speak the originary language of Adam and, by extension, to recover the state of potentiality that characterised the condition of humankind in the prelapsarian state. Despite the fact that Stillman considers the project to have been a failure, if the goal was really to recover such a state of potentiality then the clues suggest that he was, in fact, successful. Stillman Jr says, for example, that he thinks that one day he “will at last ... become real” (22), as though he is currently in the state of the not-yet-born – the very state of being his father describes as the prelapsarian condition of humankind. Similarly, the visual representations of Stillman Jr in the authorised adaptation of the novel into graphic form (2004) call to mind Pico’s description of originary man’s potentiality, his lack of a “visage proper” which enables him to partake in the endowment of every other creature. Stillman Jr is here shown to be partaking in different forms: human and animal, real and mythical, natural and man-made, organic and inorganic.[[475]](#footnote-475) He is, for example, depicted as, variously, a plughole; a bird; a pile of excrement; a drain; a loosely-sketched young man; and the interior of a dislocated throat which may be human, animal, or may not be the interior of a throat at all but, rather, a whirlpool. In a total of sixty-five pictures, Stillman Jr assumes a



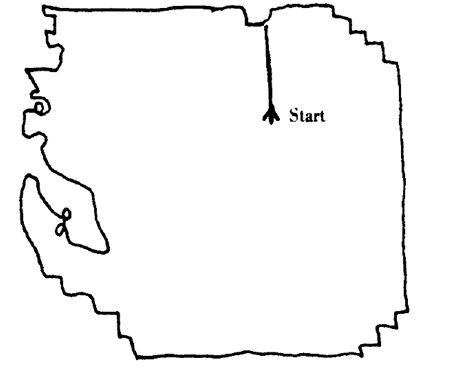
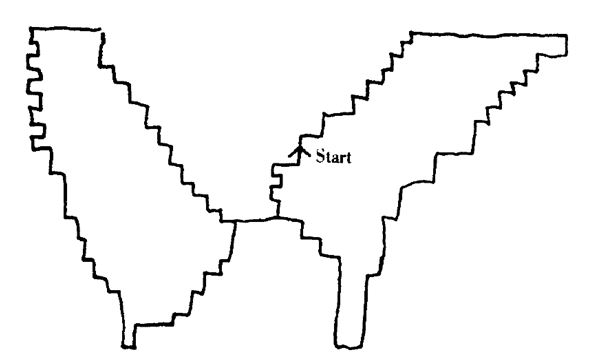
variety of forms, the last of which is accompanied by a speech bubble that reads: “I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name,”[[476]](#footnote-476) as if to hammer home the point that he “is not yet.”

The prominent form of the egg is conspicuously absent here, featuring as a glaringly presentabsence that invites an association between Stillman Jr and Lacan’s “hommelette,” a compound of *homme* and “omelette.” According to Lacan’s myth,

Whenever the membranes of the egg in which the foetus emerges on its way to becoming a new-born are broken, imagine for a moment that something flies off, and that one can do it with an egg as easily as with a man, namely the hommelette.[[477]](#footnote-477)

In what seems to be a variation of Stillman Sr’s interpretation of the Fall – the fall of man-as-egg – the “hommelette” myth posits the birth of the human being as the result of the breakage of the originary egg.[[478]](#footnote-478) The part that “flies off” when this breakage occurs (the “hommelette”), Lacan suggests, *is* at the core of human existence in the mode of *not* being; as the “most profound lost object,” it is a *present* absence which generates and sustains desire precisely by being its non-attainable object.[[479]](#footnote-479) The “hommelette” thus bespeaks a lost originary wholeness – a state of “natural unity,” as Inwood puts it in his interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic –and does so by virtue of *not* being or, better, by *being* not. Similarly, Stillman Jr is described as someone “you could see” in front of you but who is nevertheless “not there” (15), a mode of existence which Agamben associates with potentiality, describing it as not simply a case of “non-Being” but as “the *existence* of non-Being, the presence of an absence.”[[480]](#footnote-480) That Stillman Jr’s state of being thus seems to be that of potentiality would suggest that Stillman Sr’s project was actually successful. But as he later tells Quinn, the egg is “that which has not yet been born” (81) and “not to have been born is a curse” (85); the egg, in other words, must be put back together again *so that* it can hatch, the originary potentiality must be recovered so that it is actualised and, therefore, negated as such: as potentiality.

Stillman’s second project, the above-mentioned attempt to create “a new language” (77), makes this all the more explicit. Stillman wants to replace the language which allows for a gap between “a thing and its name” (43), the very language that Lacan presents as a consequence of the breaking of the originary egg in the “hommelette” myth. As the unattainable object of desire, the lost egg-part undergoes substitutions – substitutions which mark the entrance into what Lacan calls “the Symbolic,” the realm of human language. Elsewhere, Lacan describes this as the language of the “symbol,” explaining that the symbol is detachable from the meaning it communicates and can thus be retransmitted differently, communicating different meanings.[[481]](#footnote-481) Like the Lacanian “symbol,” Stillman argues that language in its current, “fallen” state operates on the basis of ambiguity, and it is precisely this ambiguity, the potential for communication of different contents, that he wants to eliminate.

Telling is also the fact that Stillman creates his new language by walking around Manhattan and collecting objects which he then names. Quinn, who tails Stillman, draws maps to represent these walks (67-69) and finds that each day’s map looks like a letter of the alphabet. More strikingly, the sequence of these letters seems to spell “THE TOWER OF BABEL” (70). As Pascale-Anne Brault

The map representing Stillman’s walk on the fifth day.

observes, Stillman’s method renders this crucial phrase “untranslatable” because he inscribes it “in a particular city, along specific streets.”[[482]](#footnote-482) Since each letter is formed because of the specific routes Stillman follows, a translation would require that these routes change so that, say, for the French “LA TOUR DE BABEL” Stillman’s route on the sixth day spells “R” rather than “W,” and so on. The story of *la tour de Babel*, Derrida argues, shows that language operates on the basis of “twists and turns” (*tour* meaning both “tower” and “turn”), “tropes,” and “metaphors”; in short, that a word’s communicated content is always already a translation in that it twists and turns, slipping from one signified to another.[[483]](#footnote-483) That it is this, of all phrases, that Stillman fixes along specific streets and makes untranslatable is yet another indication that his aim is to negate the potentiality of language, and this is pertinent to our investigation of the detective genre in what follows, a genre at the core of which is the negation of potentiality *per se*.

PART II

**Food in the Detective Genre**

Philosophically inflected studies of the detective genre tend to focus on its epistemological concerns or its ontological concerns. For example, whilst Brian McHale describes the detective story as “the epistemological genre *par excellence*,”[[484]](#footnote-484) Jeanne C. Ewert argues that McHale’s description applies only to *traditional* detective stories. What are known as *metaphysical* or *anti-detective* detective stories,[[485]](#footnote-485) Ewert claims, are underpinned by an ontological dominant.[[486]](#footnote-486) Despite her reaction against McHale’s classification, then, Ewert clearly upholds the former’s wider distinction between epistemological and ontological dominants and proposes a rather sharp divide between traditional and anti-detective detective stories on this basis. As Steven Connor observes, however, McHale’s distinction is not to be conceived of as a “clean break,”[[487]](#footnote-487) and the treatment of food in the detective genre supports this claim, pointing to a more nuanced approach that brings to light an interrelation between epistemology and ontology through the concept of potentiality. Indeed, the prominent use of a foodstuff in Stillman’s theory of being, a theory which appears in a detective novel, prompts a wider consideration of the representations of food in the genre; and just as the ontological resonances of Stillman’s egg are tied with the concept of potentiality so is food in many detective fictions.

The subgenre of the “culinary whodunit” is a good starting point here, for it raises the question of what kind of general affinity food might have with the detective genre. Take, for example, Joanne Pence’s best-selling *Angie Amalfi Mysteries* series, which includes titles like *Too Many Cooks* (1994), *Cooking Up Trouble* (1995), *Cooking Most Deadly* (1996), and so on, with a similarly entitled book published almost every year for a decade.[[488]](#footnote-488) Although the existence of the culinary whodunit can be easily explained on the basis of marketability, there is also an important thematic link between eating and killing.[[489]](#footnote-489) This is a link that John Lanchester explores in *The Debt to Pleasure* (1996), where the protagonist commits a number of murders by feeding his victims with poisonous food.[[490]](#footnote-490) As Derrida suggests, though, it is not just *poisonous* food that is associated with killing but *all* food.[[491]](#footnote-491) This, he stresses, does not mean that to eat is to be a murderer; indeed, his elaboration is particularly relevant here because it poses the question of distinguishing between criminal acts of killing, with which the culinary whodunit is preoccupied, and acts of killing that are considered to be noncriminal.

It is, of course, true that the culinary whodunit does not typically manifest a preoccupation with the difficult questions Derrida poses. There is, however, an apparent agreement in that the onus in both cases is on “the subject.” For Derrida, the question whether an act of killing, including killing to eat, is criminal or not rests on the question of what “counts” as a living being, and the answers, he suggests, are not ontologically predetermined but must instead be “calculated” by the subject.[[492]](#footnote-492) In an apparently similar way, the detective story puts the emphasis on the subject – the detective – who sifts through available evidence and detects the answers. What Derrida suggests, however, is that it is only through a difficult calculation that one might be able to *devise*, rather than detect, some answers – answers that will necessarily remain uncertain and inconclusive because there is no ontological predetermination. The detective genre, on the other hand, does not suggest an absence of ontological predetermination but an interrelation between ontology and epistemology: the detective-as-epistemological-subject discovers answers that are ultimately verified and are thus conclusive; the presupposition, then, is that “the truth” exists and *can*, therefore, be discovered. We thus arrive at the concept of potentiality as the link between epistemology and ontology: the ontological certainty of the existence of “the truth” means that it ispossible for the epistemological subject to discover and affirm it; as in Stillman’s o(o)ntology, the premise here is that the realm of action must affirm the ontological realm.

In regard to this point, Pierre Verdaguer’s survey of the treatment of food in American and French detective fictions is worth engaging with at some length. Verdaguer finds that traditional detectives are typically endowed with a hearty appetite, which, he says, indicates a belief in an ordered and meaningful world whereas post-1970s detectives usually lack appetite, something that is said to indicate a belief in the lack of order and meaning in the world. In Verdaguer’s own words, more recent manifestations of the genre are “dominated by a sense of failure, disillusionment ... and existential ... *nausée*”; “[s]ymbolically, nausea precludes anything that might bring satisfaction, including food.”[[493]](#footnote-493) What emerges from this survey, then, albeit unwittingly, is that the role of food in the genre is oversimplified: it functions as a signifier that is unambiguously fixed to a signified or, as Stillman might have put it, as a prelapsarian language.

Beckett’s detective figure in *Molloy*, one of *City of Glass*’ intertexts,[[494]](#footnote-494) displays both of the opposing attitudes toward food that Verdaguer identifies. In the beginning, when Moran is a believer in rationality and causality, he describes himself as“a rather heavy eater.”[[495]](#footnote-495) By the end of his pursuit of Molloy, however, Moran abandons his belief in rationality and causality, coming to merge with Molloy, who does not eat much at all. Similarly, toward the end of Auster’s *City of Glass*, Quinn dramatically reduces his intake of food, and this gradual decrease of eating coincides with the gradual increase of his sense that the world lacks order and meaning. Notably, when Quinn reflects back to the beginning of the story – a period during which he still ate normally – he remembers that he used to think that detective stories affirm the “order” of the world and the “coherence” beneath seemingly random and unrelated occurrences (67). These examples confirm the oversimplified function of food emerging from Verdaguer’s survey, a function which suggests a fixed sign-referent relationship and, in doing so, reveals the ontological assumptions of the genre. Indeed, Verdaguer’s claim that lack of appetite corresponds to a world that lacks inherent order is ultimately a contradiction: whilst the world of the story is presented as lacking in order, the fact that this is communicated through such fixed correspondences implies the existence of a more fundamental order. It is, then, up to the detective to take appropriate action and uncover this order; if it is not uncovered, it is simply because the detective fails to act appropriately. In short, the existence of order and meaning is an ontological certainty and *can* therefore be discovered; what is not certain is whether the epistemological subject will finally actualise the possibility of discovering it.

**Thesis: The Traditional Detective Story**

At the beginning of *City of Glass*, Quinn gives us a description of the detective genre that rests on a specific type ofpotentiality:

Everything seen or said [in a detective story] *can* bear a correlation to [its] outcome .... Everything becomes essence, the centre of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The centre, then, is everywhere; and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end (8, emphasis added).

The “can” here refers to the story’s elements, not its centre: it is not that the story can potentially prove to have a centre but that each of its elements can potentially prove to be related to its centre, that is, the crime under investigation. This is a kind of potentiality which essentially bespeaks certainty – the story makes sense and it is up to the detective to prove it by discovering which elements are significant and how they relate to the story’s centre. As Stillman might have put it, the detective’s task is to find the pieces of the criminal egg and put it back together again.

This is, at least, the state of affairs in traditional detective stories, and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), arguably the first such story,[[496]](#footnote-496) suggests as much. As Dupin says, the task of the detective is “to prove that apparent ‘impossibilities’ are, in reality, not such.”[[497]](#footnote-497) The traditional detective is presented with possibilities none of which must be dismissed outright because any of these could potentially, within the present of the narrative, turn out to have been actualised in the past. As in Stillman’s theory, the detective moves *on* by going *back*, a temporal structure within which the outcome– what “comes out” as the story moves ahead in time – must be identified as the origin of the story.

It is this potentiality that Aristotle theorises in *Metaphysics* and, like Stillman, he does so with recourse to the egg. “The semen,” Aristotle says, is “potentially a man” when it “fall[s] into a particular foreign material,” the ovum.[[498]](#footnote-498) This is a teleological potentiality: once sperm and ovum come into contact, the fertilised egg will certainly hatch, potentiality thus passing into actuality. “[M]atter,” Aristotle writes, “exists potentially inasmuch as it *may* attain its form” whereas “when it exists actually, it is *in* the form”;[[499]](#footnote-499) in other words, once a zygote is actually turned into a man it is no longer potentially a man. To say that the potential has been actualised is, therefore, to say that it is no longer a potential, which is to say that actualisation amounts to negation. This is the teleological line of progression that the traditional detective follows, typically in reverse: traditional detectives are confronted with effects or actualisations that are traced back to the causes or possibilities from which they sprang.

This teleological, Aristotelian-like potentiality implies not only that the traditional detective can follow it in reverse and thus discover what has happened but also that the potential can be identified before it is actualised and thus its effects can be anticipated and prevented, which is precisely the case in stories of crime prevention like Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Red-Headed League” (1891).[[500]](#footnote-500) As in stories of crime prevention so in stories of crime investigation, the detective’s objective is to close off the possible: in the former, the hatching of the criminal egg must be interrupted whereas in the latter, where the egg has already hatched, its pieces must be put back together again so as to discover the cause (the criminal) and thus prevent the possibility of reoccurrence. In both cases, then, the negation of potentiality is the basis on which the story unfolds and the end toward which it is moving.

This principle is rendered explicit in Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” (1844) and in Conan Doyle’s “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891).[[501]](#footnote-501) In the former, the figure of the criminal is in possession of an important letter and, in the latter, of an important photograph, with the interested parties seeking to prevent the disclosure of these items’ content. In neither case, however, do the criminals aim to reveal the content, for this would take away the power that the mere possession of the item gives them over the interested parties. Whilst the criminal seeks to preserve the potential of the item, the detective seeks to annihilate it by retrieving the item and thus eliminating the possibility that its content might be disclosed. In this way, Poe’s and Conan Doyle’s stories thematise the fundamental task of any detective – namely, to close off the possible, a principle on the basis of which Stillman can also be seen as a detective figure of sorts for he too undertakes the task to negate potentiality in order to bring a story to a fulfilling end: the story of humankind.[[502]](#footnote-502)

**Antithesis: The Anti-Detective Story**

*City of Glass* also encompasses another kind of potentiality, a non-teleological potentiality which cannot be negated once and for all and which underpins the ontology of the anti-detective story. If, as Quinn says, “[e]verything seen or said canbear a correlation to the outcome” (8), this is so also in the alternative sense that the detective *can* *make* anything bear a correlation to the case under examination. Here, the realm of action does not confirm the ontological realm, as in traditional detective stories, but constructs it. Note, for instance, that when Quinn goes to the train station to track down Stillman, the individual he ends up following is a pretty much random choice between two people that look very much like each other. Quinn is here presented with two viable possibilities, and in choosing the one over the other reveals the detective’s capacity to *make* something bear a correlation to the story’s outcome. This is a situation that resonates with Stillman’s theorisation of the postlapsarian condition, for just as postlapsarian words can communicate potentially different contents Quinn’s experience at the train station reveals the possibility of potentially different outcomes. Indeed, even though Quinn does actualise one of the two possibilities by picking the first Stillman, the second Stillman is not forgotten; at the end of the novel, we learn that Quinn still wonders “what would have happened if he had followed the second Stillman” (129).

Contrary to traditional detective stories where non-actualised possibilities ultimately disappear from the scene, the fact that Quinn conjures up the non-actualised possibility of the second Stillman suggests its lasting presence. This is a different ontological condition to the one outlined above, a condition underpinned by a lasting potentiality which characterises anti-detective stories and which roughly corresponds to the second type of potentiality that Aristotle explores in *Metaphysics*.[[503]](#footnote-503) To demonstrate it, Aristotle uses the example of a builder. The “Megaric school” of thought, he explains, holds that “a man [cannot] be ... a builder unless he is building” which means that at “the moment he stops building he has lost his art” and at the moment he “resumes building” he somehow immediately recovers it.[[504]](#footnote-504) Aristotle, by contrast, theorises potentiality as both *dynamis energein* (“potential in operation”) and *dynamis mē energein* (“potential in non-operation”), the former being manifested when the builder is building whilst the latter applies when the builder is not building. What is most important here is that the one entails the other: building that is carried out now presupposes that, sooner or later, the builder will stop and when he does the potential is held in reserve for future (re)actualisation. The relationship between the two aspects of this potentiality is structurally analogous to the relationship that Stillman posits between the prelapsarian and the postlapsarian phases of humankind’s ontological condition: the wholeness of the prelapsarian egg is necessary for the brokenness of the postlapsarian egg and the brokenness of the latter is necessary for the recovery of the former and its actualisation, the fulfilment of the destiny of humankind.

It is, however, precisely a sense of destiny that is absent from anti-detective stories. In *City of Glass*, for example, the possible outcome that is actualised as a result of Quinn’s decision to follow the first Stillman is compromised by the recognition that another outcome could have just as well been actualised instead. In anti-detective stories, the ontological certainty of the *one* outcome that characterises the traditional manifestations of the genre is replaced by an ontology which encompasses, and retains, a multiplicity of possible outcomes. The traditional detective puts the pieces of the criminal egg back together again by moving toward the past; thus, the outcome of the story (future) finally comes to coincide with the its origin (past). Whilst Quinn’s recollections about his decision at the train station also present us with a movement toward the past, this is not a movement like that of the traditional detective who puts the egg back together again so as to explain how it hatched and thus solve the mystery. Rather, this is a movement that stresses the detective’s part in causing the egg to hatch in a specific way: it is not a case of discovering “the” outcome-origin of the story but of bringing forthone outcome-origin amongst others.

The emerging analogy between these two types of detective story and the two stages within humankind’s ontological history as theorised by Stillman leads to the supposition that the third stage of the latter, the fulfilment of the destiny of humankind, might be analogous to a third stage in the history of the detective genre, a stage that marks the fulfilment of the destiny of the detective figure. *City of Glass*, as we will see,gestures toward such a third stage – a third, hitherto unidentified type of detective story, which we will term “the ~~detective~~ story.”

**Sublation: The ~~Detective~~ Story**

In “The Philosophy of Crime Novels” (1966), Deleuze distinguishes between detective novels – in which detectives employ either deduction or induction – and novels that “mark the death of the detective novel, properly speaking.”[[505]](#footnote-505) The reliable methods of deduction and induction, Deleuze suggests, pretty much guarantee the solution of the crime; the detective novel “proper,” then, is a fiction where the detective successfully discovers which possibilities have been (or will be) actualised. Ultimately, and although Deleuze does not make the point explicitly, these are fictions where the detective succeeds in negating the possible; fictions that “mark the death” of the genre, by contrast, are those where the detective fails to do so.

There is, however, a sense in which it is not really these failed detections that mark the death of the genre but “the ~~detective~~ story,” where “death” does not designate the failureof the genre but its ultimate fulfilment, thus marking its end. The traditional detective either prevents a crime or discovers how one happened and thus prevents the possibility of reoccurrence, which means that, by the end, there is no potentiality to deal with and the detective becomes unnecessary. The non-teleological potentiality of the anti-detective story, on the other hand, cannot be definitively tackled, which means that the detective is useless. To say, however, that these latter stories mark the death of the genre and are thus opposed to the former is to ignore that the end they both point toward is, in one crucial respect, essentially the same: in both cases, the end is marked by the removal of detectives, either because they are no longer necessary or because they prove to be useless. This common end suggests that traditional and anti-detective stories can be seen as two sides of a dialectic, a thesis and an antithesis that envision a sublation whereby the detective figure would be a priori *redundant.*

The ~~detective~~ story functions as just such an *Aufhebung*, presenting us with a potential-less status quo like that envisaged in Stillman’s o(o)ntology. The appropriately named *Still*manarticulates a vision of thestatus quo par excellence, a world in which everything is static or *still*; Stillman’s paradisiacal world is a world in which nothing can possibly change, the potentiality of the edenic egg having been negated in hatching. As we will see in the following and final section of this chapter, it is just such a vision that detective Quinn also seeks to materialise through his dietary struggles, gesturing toward a world in which there canbe no possible change in the order of things. The task of the potential criminal (Stillman) and of the detective (Quinn) thus end up being somewhat conflated, a conflation that is also explored in Beckett’s *Molloy* as well as in Auster’s *Ghosts* (1987) and *The Locked Room* (1987), the second and third volumes of *The New York Trilogy*. In *City of Glass*, the world that Stillman and Quinn point toward in their different ways is not one in which the detective would fail to employ reliable methods like deduction or induction to successfully identify and negate the possible (as Deleuze would have it) but a world in which there would be no possible for the detective to identify and negate.

This, then, is not a scenario in which the objective would be to interrupt the process of the “hatching” of a criminal “egg,” as is, for example, the case in “The Red-Headed League,” where Holmes prevents the successful completion of an attempted crime. Neither, however, would this be a matter of interrupting the hatching of a criminal egg before it begins, as is, for example, the case in Philip K. Dick’s “The Minority Report”(1956), where the Precrime police prevent the actualisation of crimes before they are even attempted. As with the first, teleological potentiality of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* where the zygote’s potential to become a man will certainly pass into actuality (unless prevented), the assumption in Dick’s story is that the “culpable” individuals identified by the “precogs” will certainly commit the crime of which they are found to be pre-guilty (unless they are captured beforehand).[[506]](#footnote-506) Encompassing such scenarios whilst being distinct from them, the ~~detective~~ story introduces the idea that not even the *possibility* of a crime arises.

Returning, again, to the Aristotelian example of the zygote, we might envisage the fundamental principle of the ~~detective~~ story in terms of contraception or masturbation, whereby the egg is not prevented from hatching but from being fertilised in the first place. In James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) we find a useful term for this; Stephen Dedalus, who explicitly mentions Aristotle’s theorisation of the possible,[[507]](#footnote-507) reflects on all those potentially fertilised eggs, all those potential human beings that could have been born but are, as he puts it, “nightly *impossibilise[d]*,” for example through masturbation, contraception, or nocturnal emission.[[508]](#footnote-508) Borrowing Joyce’s term, then, we can say that the ~~detective~~ story is characterised by an attempt to effect *impossibilisation*.[[509]](#footnote-509)

Fichte’s identity card (or passport) in *Foundations of Natural Right* (1797) helps us grasp the implications of the pursuit of “impossibilisation” in the ~~detective~~ story. Fichte argues that in order to prevent the possibility of committing a crime, “*every citizen must be readily identifiable* ... *as this or that particular person*” and, to this effect, “[e]veryone must always carry an identity card with him.”[[510]](#footnote-510) The “verbal descriptions of a person” that were customarily used as a means of identification, Fichte observes, “always remain ambiguous.”[[511]](#footnote-511) The aim of the identity card is to do away with ambiguity, which is, we recall, also Stillman’s aim in creating a language in which “a thing and its name” are “interchangeable” (43). Indeed, in his recent essay on Fichte’s proposal, Grégoire Chamayou says that the identity card would establish a system underpinned by the principle “Given a name, find its body. Given a body, find its name.”[[512]](#footnote-512) Here, as in “The Minority Report” and in *City of Glass*, the objective is to prevent crime. In Dick’s short story, however, there still exist criminals since the law treats would-be-crimes as crimes. But, as Anderton’s case suggests, if would-be-criminals *knew* that they will commit a crime and that they will certainly be captured then they may prevent themselves from doing so. Fichte’s proposal provides the prior knowledge which would not just prevent a crime from being committed but would in fact prevent, a priori, the emergence of the very possibility of committing a crime. This is because the identity card is, in Chamayou’s words, “the itinerary of one’s travels”; it creates a record of one’s movements within the present that provides the authorities with “the future capability of rereading the past”:[[513]](#footnote-513) even if one does not get caught in the act one knows that the record of their movements will be accessed retrospectively, and they will eventually be tracked down.

Whilst the vulnerability expressed by the Levinasian face, to which Chamayou alludes,[[514]](#footnote-514) prevents crime, the vulnerability established by the face on the identity card prevents even the emergence of the possibility of crime. And, as in our interpretation of Nietzsche in Chapter 1, where the face subsumes all human beings under what Nietzsche sees as the confining category of humanness, so the face on the identity card or passport subsumes everybody under the category of the potential criminal. The detective plot of *City of Glass* thus ceases to appear as an isolated and quite extraordinary fictional case and begins to resonate with our everyday world. The novel’s detective, who becomes such by accident (due to a mistaken phone call), tails a potential criminal to prevent him from committing a crime; in Fichte’s vision – today’s reality – *everybody* is treated as a potential criminal whose movements are recorded accidentally in the sense that the produced record is random; it is not a record of a targeted individual relating to a specific suspicion but a record of everybody which relates to no concrete suspicion. The idea is that, because everybody knows that there exists a record of their movements nobody will even conceive of deviating from the law since the existing record ensures that one is always traceable. As Chamayou says, this is not simply a way of dealing with a crime before it occurs but “before it even could be”; it is a system that aims to “limi[t] the possible.”[[515]](#footnote-515) Like the detective genre, then, the contemporary State is opposed to potentiality. As I have suggested, detective stories envision an end from which the detective is absent and, in this sense, point to an “ideal” situation where there is no potentiality to begin with – the very ambition behind Fichte’s proposal. In such a situation, the figure of the detective is a prioriredundant because once “impossibilisation” has been realised no form of deviation from the order of things (which the detective might be called to re-establish) could possiblyoccur.

It is, however, important to observe that when Stephen Dedalus uses the word “impossibilisation,” when he is thinking about all those potentially fertilised eggs that are “nightly impossibilise[d],” he does so whilst waiting for the birth of the Purefoy baby that was clearly *not* impossibilised. Similarly, when discussing Fichte’s proposal, Chamayou says that total “impossibilization,” as he also refers to it, is “unrealizable.”[[516]](#footnote-516) Attempts to prevent the very possibility of crime, Chamayou explains, entail the possibility of failure, a possibility that the authorities try to negate by taking more and more measures. For example, because the verbal and written descriptions initially used for the identification of individuals were ambiguous they left open the possibility of false identification. The authorities sought to address this by introducing identity cards (passports), including both the name and a picture of the individual. It was, though, still possible to counterfeit an identity card and so, to prevent this, “a special paper over which the authorities have a monopoly” is used but, again, the paper itself can be imitated – and so on.[[517]](#footnote-517) As Chamayou puts it, quoting Adolfo Kaminsky, “whatever one person has made, someone else can always remake it.”[[518]](#footnote-518)

Chamayou, however, also quotes Kaminsky’s references to today’s “digital technologies, electronic chips, biometrics, genetic fingerprints and card filing”; with these technologies, Kaminsky suggests, it has perhaps become possible to achieve “impossibilization.”[[519]](#footnote-519) Kaminsky thus seems to give us a duo of correlations: on the one hand, we have a correlation between human life and potentiality (“whatever one person has made, someone else can always remake it”) and, on the other, a correlation between modern technology and the annihilation of potentiality. It is this set of correlations that *City of Glass* explores through Quinn’s food-based attempts to negate potentiality. And, indeed, as will be shown in what follows, these attempts offer a glimpse of the ~~detective~~ story whilst also drawing out some of its implications.

**Alimentary Ontology in the ~~Detective~~ Story**

In asserting that anything someone makes can always be imitated by someone else, Kaminsky effectively associates potentiality with human imperfection, which is, in his examples, what allows for the potential to copy. In *City of Glass*, human imperfection is explored at the most fundamental of levels, that of necessity and, more specifically, the need to eat. To be in need is to be imperfect, lacking; it is to not be whole. And if, as Stillman has it, the condition of wholeness – of the unbroken egg – is the prelapsarian condition then the need for food would seem to be associated exclusively with the lacking, imperfect state of the postlapsarian condition. This is yet another implication arising from Stillman’s o(o)ntology which finds some biblical backing. Adam’s forbidden act of eating, we learn in Genesis, results in an alimentary punishment: “cursed is the soil for thy sake,” God tells Adam; “in sorrow shalt thou eat ofit all the days of thy life” (Genesis 3: 17). In the postlapsarian condition, Adam can no longer take food as a given but must instead toil for it; food becomes, in other words, a *need*, revealing man’s lack, his non-wholeness.

Quinn comes to experience man’s imperfection precisely through the problem of food. To satisfy his hunger, he must abandon his post outside Stillman Jr’s flat, where he ends up after losing track of Stillman Sr, but realises that these intervals could prove to be fatal: whilst he is away buying food from the shop, Stillman Sr could get in and harm Stillman Jr. It is only during this period that Quinn seems to become aware of the problem of food as a constant problem – something that the postlapsarian man has to deal with, to quote God again, “all the days of [his] life.” Or, as Quinn puts it, “[f]ood ... never answer[s] the question of food” but “only delay[s] the moment when the question [will] have to be asked again” (114). Food, in other words, reveals a fundamental lack that cannot be forever filled, and for the detective in particular this poses a major problem: the constant need to eat means that Quinn cannot have sufficient control over the circumstances.

This concern reappears in Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), where Anna resolves to “eat as little as [she] can” because “the less you need the better off you are.”[[520]](#footnote-520) Recognising her inability to control the satisfaction of her need for food under the circumstances in which she finds herself, Anna focuses on her ability to limit this need. To this extent, her situation, like Quinn’s, echoes one of Auster’s favourite novels, Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger* (1890), one of the most disturbing aspects of which is that the satisfaction of the unnamed protagonist’s hunger is outside of his control.[[521]](#footnote-521) That is perhaps why whenever Hamsun’s hero receives some money he promptly spends it or gives it away rather than trying to make it last, as one might have expected. Though he cannot control the satisfaction of his hunger in a sustained way, Hamsun’s protagonist does have some control over limiting the amount he needs to eat to simply survive. In his essay on the novel, Auster argues that Hamsun’s hero only wants to “stay alive” “to the extent that” he is brought “face to face with death.”[[522]](#footnote-522) It is his ability to noteat more than the bare minimum that brings him to this sought-for suspension between life and death, a suspension that signifies nothing if not control. Hamsun’s *Hunger* thus frames the question of control as control over eating, and does so at the end of the nineteenth century, at the time, that is, when the Sherlock Holmes stories were establishing the detective genre,[[523]](#footnote-523) a genre at the core of which is the question of control: the control of the possible. In Auster’s rewriting of the genre nearly a century later, the fundamental question of controlling the possible – which comes down to annihilating it – is manifested through Quinn’s attempt to exert control over eating.

From Quinn’s dietary struggle we can extrapolate a struggle to be otherwise, more specifically, to alter his essence as a lacking, needy human being. And this is clearly linked to his attempt to negate potentiality in his role as a detective – the attempt to prevent a possible crime. He does not, however, know what this crime might be and is therefore unable to filter information, so he ends up recording all of Stillman’s actions: the streets along which he walks, the turns he takes, every stop he makes, and so on. Since everything could prove to be significant, Quinn produces a detailed record he can access later if necessary and, in doing so, effectively constructs what Chamayou describes, in reference to Fichte’s passport, as an “itinerary of one’s travels.” For Fichte, the aim of the passport is to limit the possible and, as Chamayou implies in quoting Kaminsky, this is more feasible with modern technologies. Quinn seems to concur, for whilst tailing Stillman he is, in effect, trying to operate like a camera: he “rest[s] the notebook on his left hip” so that he can write on it with his right hand while keeping his eyes fixed on Stillman (63). Quinn is thus “seeing the thing and writing about it” simultaneously, as though he were a mobile CCTV camera, creating a record which can be accessed in the future and which might or might not turn out to be useful (ibid.).

The familiar analogy between the private eye and the camera eye[[524]](#footnote-524) assumes ontological significance here.Quinn’s role as a private *eye* allows him to transform his private *I*, to assume a different name, a different identity. But more striking than the transformation of Quinn’s *personal* being is, as the scene above suggests, the transformation of, to borrow Marx’s phrase, his *species*-being – his human condition as a sensual, needy, and thus hungrycreature.[[525]](#footnote-525) Kaminsky is certainly right in suggesting that modern technologies are more efficient in possibilising “impossibilisation,” and given that Quinn’s task is precisely to limit the possible it is no wonder that he strives to act like a modern technological device, to become a kind of camera which has no need for food, and to thus negate his imperfect status as a living organism. He “aspire[s],” we learn, to “an ideal” of not eating, “total fast” being, for him, a “state of perfection” (114), for in order to eat he must leave his post and, in doing so, leaves open the possibility that the crime he is supposed to prevent might materialise; to eat, then, is to demonstrate one’s inability to control and negate the possible.

Like Kafka’s hunger artist in the eponymous story, however, Quinn does not seek to “starve himself to death” (ibid.). And whilst the former says that he could not eat because he could not find “any food [he] liked,”[[526]](#footnote-526) Quinn’s reason is wholly pragmatic: he limits his eating because he “want[s] to leave himself free” to do his job (ibid.). In this sense, Quinn effectively affirms the underlying Platonism of the detective genre; as we saw in the first chapter, to succumb to the body’s bestial need for food is, for Socrates, to interrupt the rational operations of the mind – the very operations on which detectives rely.

In a radical challenge to the detective’s typical reliance on rationality, Charles S. Peirce’s (non)method of abduction privileges instinct over reason or, as he refers to the latter, “the self-flatteries of personal desire.”[[527]](#footnote-527) In an exploration of abduction in reference to the detective genre, Thomas Sebeok quotes from Peirce’s manuscripts, observing that he demonstrates the reliability of abduction through recourse to the instinct to eat. “[T]he ability of a newly hatched chick to pick up food,” Peirce writes, is not a case of “reasoning, because it is not done deliberately”; yet, what the chick instinctively picks up to eat amidst everything else in its presence is correct and, for Peirce, this instinctive judgement is “just like abductive inference.”[[528]](#footnote-528) Peirce even characterises abduction as a “salad” in that its “chief elements are its groundlessness, its ubiquity, and its trustworthiness.”[[529]](#footnote-529) Peirce, then, sees abduction as a kind of food and its employment as a kind of eating.

Peirce’s bodily-instinctive (non)method clearly contrasts with the non-eating rationality that Plato advocates. Quinn’s aspiration to the unrealisable ideal of “total fast” (114) betrays an allegiance to Plato and thus seems to set him apart from detectives like Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot, who, according to Nieves Pascual Soler, employs Peirce’s abduction. Asserting that Peirce makes abduction “equivalent to eating,” Soler argues that “it is not surprising that one of Poirot’s most significant attributes is his passion for food.”[[530]](#footnote-530) Soler does, however, stress that this is a passion that Poirot “intellectualises”: “he moves eating to the field of the mind,” she observes, concluding that eating in “the [detective] genre ... reinforces,” rather than opposes, “the Platonic logic subtending it.”[[531]](#footnote-531) In the detective genre, then, Plato is in the end the winner, for what it ultimately affirms is the superiority of the non-instinctive and the non-bodily, the implication therefore being that the role of the detective and food (as such) clash. As we saw with Verdaguer, food in the detective story is not important in itself but only insofar as it signifies – indeed, only insofar as it signifies *exactly*; and inasmuch as it does so, food affirms the ontological presuppositions of the genre, that is, the belief in an inherently ordered and meaningful world.

In *City of Glass*, though, the alimentary is not merely demonstrative of the ontological, as in Verdaguer’s model, but also helps to shape it. Quinn’s need for food reveals to him that he is a dependent, needy creature which leads him to embark on an attempt to change his being by controlling this very need; this, then, is yet another case of eating otherwise in order to be otherwise. This being-otherwise does point to a Platonic distinction between a superior rational soul and an inferior bestial/eating body but, ultimately, it rests on a distinction between two types of body, thus revealing a conception of being as material: the organic body, which is taken to be inferior because it needs to be fed, and the nonorganic – the non-feeding camera – which is viewed as superior in terms of achieving the detective’s objective, namely, the negation of the possible.

This takes us back to Aristotle, who argues that *trophē* (“food”) is what satisfies the need for nutrition and thus preserves life.[[532]](#footnote-532) Eating is obviously necessary for keeping one alive but, for Aristotle, this is not an end in itself. As we saw in Chapter 1, what is most important for Aristotle is that the intake of food enables the fulfilment of the ontological aim of “all living things,” that is, the preservation of their “essence.”[[533]](#footnote-533) To eat, in this sense, is to carry on being what one is, which suggests that to not eat is to negate one’s state of being. Read in light of Aristotle and the ontological significance he ascribes to *trophē*, Émile Benveniste’s definition of the Greek verb *tréphō* is particularly pertinent here. Benveniste argues that the word is best “define[d] as: ‘to encourage ... the development of that which is subject to growth ..., let[ting] it attain the state toward which it is tending’.”[[534]](#footnote-534) By limiting his intake of food in pursuit of “an ideal ... state of perfection” of “total fast,” then, Quinn engages in an attempt to interrupt the process through which a living thing comes to attain the state toward which it is tending, an attempt, that is, to effect an ontological change. In Quinn’s case, however, this interruption is not a diversion from “destiny”; on the contrary, it brings him closer to the fulfilment of the destiny of the detective figure or, in Benveniste’s terms, closer to the “attain[ment] of the state toward which” the detective figure “is tending.” For Quinn’s limitation of his eating springs, as we have seen, from his attempt to annihilate the possible, and the annihilation of potentiality is the detective’s ultimate aim – an annihilation which renders the detective redundant.

As in the Stillman scenario, where the ontological condition of humankind is theorised as consisting of two different phases that, together, construct a vision of an end that fulfils or sublates the two, the Quinn scenario provides us with an analogous situation in terms of the detective genre. In what seems to be a re-enactment of Malone’s feeding in Beckett’s *Malone Dies*, Quinn, at the end of *City of Glass*, finds himself all alone in a room, inside the now completely deserted Stillman flat, where food is mysteriously provided for him. Unlike Malone, however, Quinn is served hearty dishes rather than meagre bowls of soup – things like “roast beef dinner[s]” (128). Further, the source of food here remains mysterious, as if it were truly a manifestation of divine providence. On the one hand, the divine-like provision of food signals a return to the traditional form of the genre that is underpinned by a belief in a guaranteed inherent order, with G. K. Chesterton’s Father Brown stories rendering explicit the religious side of this belief.[[535]](#footnote-535) That the food provided is hearty further reinforces the implication of a return to the traditional detective story since, as Verdaguer says, traditional detectives and hearty food go together. On the other hand, this scene also encompasses elements characteristic of the anti-detective story because Quinn is not only unable to explain the source of food, whether divine or not, but he is also unable to consume more than a bite or two, thus reminding us of those post-1970s detectives who, according to Verdaguer, lack the hearty appetite of the traditional detective.

The scene thus encompasses both types of detective fiction identified by scholars of the genre, with Quinn’s dietary struggle pointing to a third – namely, the ~~detective~~ story, which will sublate the two. As we have seen, both the traditional and the anti-detective detective story envision an end from which detectives are absent: either because they are unnecessary or because they are proved to be useless. In this sense, the genre has always implicitly presented the detective as a “*non* being-to-be,” and Quinn’s dietary struggle to move toward a state of total fast encapsulates precisely this idea of a non being-to-be. This gives us a glimpse of the ~~detective~~ story as the *Aufhebung* of the traditional and the anti-detective detective story – the “death” of the genre through the fulfilment of its objective: the final negation of potentiality. Indeed,at the end of *City of Glass* there is neither a potential criminal, Stillman Sr having committed suicide, nor, by extension, a potential victim. Quinn, then, is now unnecessary as there is no longer any potentiality to deal with, and is in fact proved to have been useless all along since his actions do not seem to have played any role in the negation of potentiality. Thus, Quinn encompasses both the figure of the traditional and the anti-detective detective, with his alimentary-based aspiration to transform his being so that he functions more like a non-eating body, a technological device more efficient in annihilating the possible, gesturing toward the figure of the a priori redundant detective which sublates the two.

Five years after the publication of *City of Glass*, Deleuze outlines a similar scenario in his “Postscript on Control Societies” (1990), societies which, he suggests (using as an example the “new medicine” that targets “potential[ly]” sick people), are characterised by their attempt to negate the possible.[[536]](#footnote-536) There is, then, a clear link between the ~~detective~~ story and the control society in that they both aim to annihilate the possible. On the other hand, there is also a significant difference. In Deleuze’s model, the control society is said to *abolish* a previous type of society (the disciplinary society) which had itself abolished a previous type of society (the sovereign society).[[537]](#footnote-537) *City of Glass*, however, suggests a different trajectory: the ~~detective~~ story envisaged therein would not simply *abolish* the “previous” types of detective story. And neither would the ~~detective~~ story simply *preserve* and, as it were, *lift up* those “previous” types – as would, for example, be the case if we were to follow Chamayou’s model of the development of identification methods, where one method of identification preserves and “improves” upon the previous method. The ~~detective~~ story would, rather, do *all three*, as if in a Hegelian *Aufhebung*: it would simultaneously “abolish,” “preserve,” and “lift up” the traditional and the anti-detective phases of the detective genre. In this interpretation, the two “phases” of the detective story are in a dialectical relationship that “progresses” in a movement toward a final “sublation.”

In *City of Glass*, however, this final “sublation”lacks the positive connotations of the Hegelian *Aufhebung.* Evidence of the dire aspect of this *Aufhebung* can be found in the two food-related scenarios that have directed our reading of the novel. To reiterate, at stake in the first of these scenarios – Stillman’s egg-based theory of being – is the destiny of humankind; at stake in the second – Quinn’s dietary struggles – is the destiny of the detective figure. In inviting an analogy between these two scenarios, *City of Glass* effectively suggests that the destiny of the detective figure reveals and reflects the destiny of humankind as theorised by someone who was “judged insane” (27). Indeed, what we have here is a “crazy, absolutely insane” (26) theory of being within a detective novel, a genre whose fundamental characteristic is the limitation of the possible and thus a genre which gestures toward the control society. In light of the analogy between the two, then, *City of Glass* can be said to expose an apparent “insanity” relating to the destiny toward which humankind is moving within today’s control societies.

The two scenarios also present us with a more sinister vision than the ones we have encountered in the previous chapters in terms of the question of subjectivity. Both Stillman’s o(o)ntology and Quinn’s dietetics repeat the paradox of food as something that is firmly located in the “here and now” but also of ontological significance. As in Bataille and Beckett, food is here ascribed essence-transforming potential, the implication being that, through it, one can change one’s current state of being. Being, then, is mutable but in Auster’s novel this mutability is presented as part of a predetermined ontological end: Stillman takes action to change humankind’s current ontological state but this change is actually seen as part of the fulfilment of the destiny of humankind; in an analogous way, Quinn’s attempt to change his being through his eating is part of a teleological movement toward the fulfilment of the destiny of the detective figure. Therefore, the ontological changes envisaged through the essence-transforming potential of food, either as a symbol or as such, cannot be seen as radical changes that break from the status quo but, rather, as part of a pre-delineated trajectory.

What is meant to be liberating, then, indicated in the capacity of the agential subject to be otherwise through eating otherwise, is ultimately proved to be nothing of the sort. Instead, this radical change is shown to be part of a teleological project that is outside the subject’s control, a project that the subject is basically subjected to. What we have in *City of Glass* is, in this sense, very different from the subject’s pursuit of radical change found in the literary texts from the first half of the twentieth century examined in the previous chapters. Both of our representatives of the modernist project, Bataille and Beckett, take food, something ordinary and mundane, and ascribe to it ontological significance, in this way implying that the subject can, despite various limitations, take action in everyday life that could potentially make a difference, indeed, an ontological difference. *City of Glass*, by contrast, takes this idea and discredits it, even ridicules it, in this way acting in a typically postmodernist fashion. Not only does Auster’s novel ascribe the kind of aspirations we encounter in Bataille and Beckett to a madman but, further, its presentation of attempts to negate the possible reveals their sinister aspect in the association with today’s control societies. As we will see in the next chapter, Atwood’s fiction also discredits the rather positive vision found in Beckett and Bataille, rendering the sinister side of the correlation between eating otherwise and being otherwise all the more explicit.

## Chapter 5

## A Politics of Auto-Cannibalism Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Ontotheology

The whole of nature ... is a conjugation of the verb to eat,  
 in the active and the passive.

William Ralph Inge, “Confessio Fidei”

Like William Ralph Inge, Margaret Atwood understands “nature,” including human “nature,” in terms of the question of eating.[[538]](#footnote-538) More specifically, many of her works explore the idea that who one is depends on whether one eats or is eaten. On this “natural” basis, Atwood articulates a conception of being that resonates politically. In her much-cited Amnesty International address, published in a 1982 collection of essays, she defines politics via the alimentary: “By ‘politics’,” she says, “I mean who is entitled to do what to whom, with impunity; who profits by it; *and who therefore eats what*.”[[539]](#footnote-539) For Atwood, then, politics is a metonymy of eating, and vice versa; the one in power, she suggests, eats the one who lacks, or has less power. In other words, one is defined either as an edible being that is eaten for the benefit of others, or as a being that eats the other. This is a politics of figurative *cannibalism* which, according to Karen Stein, characterises Atwood’s “dystopian societies.”[[540]](#footnote-540) Although other contemporary authors have engaged with literally cannibalistic consumption in the context of the subject of survival – whether in post-apocalyptic settings as is the case with Cormack McCarthy’s *The Road*(2006),[[541]](#footnote-541) or in more fantastical settings as is the case with Yann Martell, Atwood’s compatriot,[[542]](#footnote-542) and his *Life of Pi*(2001)[[543]](#footnote-543) – it is in Atwood’s work that cannibalism has been most explicitly seen to relate to politics. As Stein’s comment serves to indicate, Atwood’s nonfictional food-based definition of politics is often used as a thumbnail sketch of the political critiques unleashed in her literary works.[[544]](#footnote-544)

In this chapter, however, I will be arguing something different. Focusing on *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985),[[545]](#footnote-545) I will suggest that we can discern a politically and ontologically significant scenario whereby nature or being is presented, in Inge’s words, as “a conjugation of the verb to eat, in the active and the passive” – but *simultaneously* so. For Inge, the need for survival dictates that one must eat *or* be eaten. Whilst Atwood’s definition of politics seems to be in agreement with Inge in this respect, we will see that *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as well as some of Atwood’s other texts,presents us with a figurative auto-cannibalism, whereby one eats and is eaten at the same time. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, auto-cannibalistic consumption underpins both the ontology that the Gilead regime seems to promote and its political operations.

To put it in by now familiar terms, Atwood’s treatment of food generally implies a correlation between the question of being and the question of eating – that one is/becomes who one is through what and how one eats, which points to the possibility that one can be otherwise through eating otherwise. In the dystopian world of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the potentially dire consequences of this possibility are highlighted, for it is here exploited by the oppressive theocratic Gilead regime which repeatedly appeals to “nature” and feigns that its task is to restore “the way things are” or should be, supposedly in accordance with God’s will (153). Although some have argued that food in the novel is also subversive, that through it the Handmaids challenge the regime,[[546]](#footnote-546) it is precisely those subversive powers that the regime exploits in the first place. As we will see, there is a sense in which the very dystopianism of *The Handmaid’s Tale* rests on its correlation of food with ontology.

Like Auster’s philosopher-theologian in *City of Glass*, Atwood’s Gilead offers a series of onto-theologico-alimentary associations. These associations aim to modify the being of Gilead’s citizens and to establish a status quo that serves the regime’s supposedly God-sanctioned aims. We will here engage with such associations as they emerge from Atwood’s representation of the crucial interrelation between eating, sacrifice, and politics. Although this interrelation has a long history,[[547]](#footnote-547) my aim is not to situate Atwood’s treatment of it within this history but rather to trace its development within her own oeuvre as a means to uncovering the ontotheological resonances of her representations of eating and their ambivalent implications. This task will, nevertheless, involve a discussion of a specific historical connection: there is, within *The Handmaid’s Tale*, an implicit analogy between Gilead and Nazi Germany which can be thought through the interrelation between eating, sacrifice, and politics from which emanates the concept of auto-cannibalism. Like “autophagy,” auto-cannibalism designates a consumption *from*“within” and *of* ”the within,”[[548]](#footnote-548) and,  as we will see, this underpins Gilead’s ontology, helps to define the politics of Gilead and Nazi Germany, and brings to the fore hitherto neglected tensions in Atwood’s work regarding her engagement with the question of being in association with eating and politics.

**Gilead’s O(o)ntotheology**

Gilead is plagued by dangerously low birth-rates and is ruled by a totalitarian regime that rises to power with the objective of achieving the nation’s “salvation” based on right-wing Christian fundamentalism.[[549]](#footnote-549) The country is populated by what the regime effectively treats as different “types” or “categories” of human being. The “Handmaids,” for instance, are young, fertile, unmarried women who are classified as “two-legged wombs” (145) with “viable ovaries” (153). The “Commanders” are middle-aged married men who assume the task of fertilising the viable ovaries, and their wives, simply labelled “Wives,” are defined by their supposed lack of such ovaries – their infertility.

These different categories are supposedly devised scientifically, based on biology. In 1991, a few years after the novel’s publication but without reference to it, anthropologist Emily Martin compiled popular as well as scientific descriptions of reproductive biology which echo the descriptions of the Gileadeans in Atwood’s dystopia.[[550]](#footnote-550) Martin does, in fact, touch on fiction in her essay, although, as her title suggests (“The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a *Romance*Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles”), only in very general terms.[[551]](#footnote-551) She does, however, give one specific example; she briefly mentions John Barth’s “Night-Sea Journey” (1966), where the narrator, who ultimately turns out to be a sperm, appears to have the capacity for agential action, wondering, for example, whether “he” should carry on striving to complete “his” journey (to the ovum) or whether “he” should just give up.[[552]](#footnote-552) Martin’s reference to Barth’s story shows that what is meant to be a funny *fictional* tale actually echoes serious *scientific* studies which basically ascribe to the male gamete a “behavioural repertoire.”[[553]](#footnote-553) In her discussion of the ovum, Martin might well have turned to *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a fictional text that echoes scientific descriptions of the female gamete. As the extracts cited in her essay show, biological accounts present ova as passive, confined in movement, wrapped up in protective vestments, and in need of accompaniment by attendant cells – much like Atwood’s Handmaids, who lie still during the fertilisation “Ceremony,” are clad in nun-like robes and headdresses to protect them from being seen, and are always accompanied when outside the house. The Handmaids are, in this sense, treated as if they were essentially nothing more than ova under Gilead’s rule. In fact, the regime defines all of its inhabitants in terms of their respective relations to the ovum: not only are the Handmaids defined on the basis of their “viable ovaries” but the Commanders are defined by their perceived capacity to fertilise them, and their wives by their supposed lack of fertilisable ova.

According to Martin, cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity feed into biological conceptions of eggs and sperm, which come to “scientifically” consolidate the cultural constructions from which they actually emanate. In Atwood’s novel, Gilead’s explicitly ideological-cultural construction of the biological-natural is also underpinned by the evocation of a superior, transcendent realm: what the regime presents as the will of God. The classification of the Gileadeans, for example, is explicitly based on the biblical story of Jacob, Rachel, and Bilhah (Genesis 30: 1-3), with the Commanders officially assuming the role of Jacob, the Wives thereby being given the role of Rachel, and the Handmaids that of Bilhah. This is the regime’s way of tackling, apparently in accordance with God’s will, the country’s low birth-rate problem. A woman’s God-given role, the state holds, is to bear children; “she shall be saved by childbearing,” one of the Commanders says, quoting St. Paul (1 Timothy 2: 15). Not only are the Gileadeans defined through their respective biological relations to the ovum, then, but their classification is also imbued with biblical meaning.

The definition of the Gileadeans on the basis of their relations to the ovum effectively renders them beings that, in a traditional ontological sense, partake in Being – a partaking which makes them what they are; here, then, Being (*on*)is the egg/ovum (*oon*). This is reflected, quite literally, in the scenes that describe Handmaid Offred, the narrator, looking at herself in the mirror, whose “oval” shape “frame[s]” her in the shape of an egg, in this way reminding her that, in Gilead, this is precisely what she is thought to be (59, 90). Further, in Offred’s room there is a rug which is, again, oval (17). This oval rug, we learn, is where she lies down to practice giving birth (80), that is, to practice actualising her “essence” by fulfilling what she is told is her God-given role. In this same room, the chandelier has been removed, leaving behind a mark which to Offred looks like “a frozen halo, a zero,” and, more widely, like “[a]ll things white and circular,” things that therefore evoke the egg (210). With these oval mirrors and rugs, the halos and the zeroes, not to mention the seeds and the oval faces (28, 124), the egg becomes an almost omnipresent signified in Gilead. Offred’s reference to “the inevitable egg” that she eats on a daily basis might thus be read within this wider context (210): the egg is the inevitable signified in Gilead, that to which everyone and everything exists in relation – their common denominator, the essence in which they partake and which defines their existence.

The regime’s use of the Bible suggests that the egg features as essence in Gilead not only in a secular sense but, rather, that it is also ascribed religious significance. There is, indeed, a sense in which the egg is deified in Gilead; for example, its avatars – the oval mirrors, rugs, halos, etc. – render the egg omnipresent, as though it were a kind of God. Offred does, in fact, make this association more explicit when, looking at the egg she is about to eat, she describes the eggshell as “a barren landscape,” “the sort of desert saints went into,” finally declaring that, “[t]his is what God must look like: an egg” (120).

Offred’s reference to the saintly desert in her description of the eggshell implies that Gilead’s egg is very much made in the image of the Christian deity – they are, after all, both edible. And, like Christ, who is sacrificed for the “remission of sins” (Matthew 26: 28), the figurative consumption of Gilead’s “viable ovaries,” the Handmaids, is presented as sacrificial, as a sacrifice for the “common good” (232). “You can’t make an omelette without breaking the eggs,” the Commander Fred tells Offred, suggesting that the nation’s survival – “the common good” – can only be ensured if sacrifices are made (222); the nation-sustaining “omelette” can only be made by breaking the “eggs” and, as Stein argues, the regime treats the Handmaids precisely as “the eggs which are broken and consumed.”[[554]](#footnote-554) The suggestion that the Handmaids are “sacrificed” and “consumed” is also alluded to by the narrator’s patronymic; as critics have observed, “Offred” (the Handmaid *of* the Commander *Fred*) sounds very much like “offered,”[[555]](#footnote-555) suggesting that she is, in Janet Larson’s words, offered as “a blood sacrifice for the nation.”[[556]](#footnote-556) Offred-as-offered thus features as the regime’s version of the sacrificial lamb, a Christ figure – or, as St. Paul refers to Him, “our paschal lamb” (1 Corinthians 5: 7) – who is of course symbolically eaten at the Last Supper. The Handmaid might, then, be seen as Gilead’s female *Agnus Dei*, a Lamb of a God who, as Offred says, “looks like an egg” – an ovary, if you will. *The Handmaid’s Tale* thus presents us with what we may call an “o(o)ntotheology.”[[557]](#footnote-557)

**Sacrifice, Politics, and Eating**

Gilead’s insistence that sacrifices must be made has clear repercussions in the realm of politics, and whilst it is easy to see that the regime’s appeals to sacrifice are presented in a critical light within the novel, the matter is a more complex one. For a start, this critique reveals a tension when considered in relation to Atwood’s earlier work. According to her 1982 definition, for example, eating metonymises the exercise of political power, and vice versa: the one in power figuratively consumes the one who has less power and, crucially, does so *without being punished* (“with impunity”)*.*[[558]](#footnote-558)Derrida also associates eating with politics, similarly suggesting that they both entail violence which is non-punishable and, for Derrida, this reveals what he calls a “*sacrificial* structure.”[[559]](#footnote-559) Eating, he says, involves killing “the living,” and given that one must eat it follows that one’s life depends on the death of another. Eating thus draws our attention to the fact that there is “a place left open,” as Derrida phrases it, for “a noncriminal putting to death.”[[560]](#footnote-560) The term “sacrificial structure,” then, expresses the non-punishable exercise of violence which is involved in eating and which, for Derrida and Atwood alike, characterises politics in general.[[561]](#footnote-561) Atwood’s definition of politics, however, does not mention sacrifice and, as we will see, it is this absence that takes us to the core of her critique.

Take the following extract from the early novel *Surfacing* (1972), where the protagonist calls for an acknowledgment that,

animals die that we may live .... [W]e eat them, out of cans or otherwise; we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life. Canned Spam, Canned Jesus, even the plants must be Christ. But we refuse to worship ... the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks.[[562]](#footnote-562)

With her reference to “Canned Jesus,” Atwood’s heroine aims to underline the sacrifice of Jesus by drawing attention to its resonance in the everyday act of eating. She does not seek a secularisation (or what might even be seen as a profanation) of the sacred but a restoration of what she views as the sacredness of things that are taken to be simply secular, like “Canned Spam.” For Atwood’s heroine, whatever is eaten – be it animal or plant – is Christ. She therefore views eating as an act of sacrificial violence, which she presents as both necessary and necessarily unjust: necessary because one must eat in order to live and necessarily unjust because the life that eating grants to one depends on the death of another. Far from expressing the views of an emotionally “unstable” person,[[563]](#footnote-563) Atwood’s heroine is actually quite pragmatic in this respect: she does not criticise eating on the basis of its injustice, for insofar as it is *necessarily* unjust to criticise its injustice, as if it could be done away with, would be to imply that eating itself could be done away with. This is already clear in *The Edible Woman*(1969), where Marian’s preoccupation with the injustice of eating involuntarily leads her to an unsustainable and thus suicidal abstinence from most foodstuffs.[[564]](#footnote-564)  *Surfacing*’s protagonist does not share Marian’s involuntary objections to the injustice of eating; rather, what she finds objectionable is the failure to acknowledge the killing that eating involves as a case of *sacrificial* violence and thus the failure to see what is eaten as *sacred* (etymologically, to “sacrifice,” from *sacer* and *facere*, is to “make sacred”).

This conjunction between food and the sacred suggests that Atwood is not exclusively preoccupied with cultural-ideological phenomena, which seems to be the standard view of her work.[[565]](#footnote-565) For instance, Sarah Sceats acknowledges, as we saw in the introduction, that the treatment of the question of eating entails “ontological concerns”;[[566]](#footnote-566) in her chapter on Atwood, though, Sceats does not seem to consider this kind of concern worth mentioning. Instead, she argues that eating in Atwood’s fiction “relate[s] to ‘how people order their societies’,” both on a “micro” level (which Sceats defines as related to the “individual”) and on a “macro” level (which she associates with the “cultural”).[[567]](#footnote-567) *Surfacing*, however, is clearly also preoccupied with the question of the sacred in reference to eating, thus giving rise to a very different conception of what the “micro” and the “macro” might involve. In discrediting down-to-earth matter-of-fact approaches (the “greedy head”), Atwood’s heroine is effectively discrediting the “micro,” which here actually encompasses both the “micro” and the “macro” as defined by Sceats, the “greedy head” being at once individual and cultural. The protagonist’s evocation of sacrifice in her meditation on what eating involves gives us a broader conception of the macro than Sceats’, a macro referring to a sacred and thus transcendent realm. In rejecting the greedy head’s approach to food, the extract from *Surfacing* suggests that eating should be thought of as an act that transcends the realm of the here and now. Indeed, Atwood’s protagonist goes as far as to say that failure to treat eating in this way is ungrateful, myopic, and simply wrong, the implication being that a non-punishable killing that is acknowledged as sacrificial is not morally condemnable. With this in mind, the absence of explicit reference to the question of sacrifice from Atwood’s 1982 definition can be read as a critique of the fact that the exercise of political power (which the analogy with the act of eating – “who eats what” – presents as something that is necessary) rests on violent acts that are *not* acknowledged as sacrificial. The implication of this critique would similarly be that such (supposedly necessary) violence is not morally condemnable if it *is* acknowledged as sacrificial. In both of these cases, then, the evocation of the sacred in reference to acts that occur in the here and now is preferable and, indeed, recommended. What this suggests, in turn, is that the term “sacrifice” does not really *describe*an event but, rather, *evaluates*it[[568]](#footnote-568) – and, crucially, it does so in a*positive* way.

It is precisely its positive connotations, however, that make sacrifice politically dangerous. As we will see in more detail later, Giorgio Agamben makes this point in *Remnants of Auschwitz*(1999), where he argues that to label an act of violence as sacrificial is to justify it as necessary or useful for the fulfilment of a sacred and thus “superior” goal.[[569]](#footnote-569)  This transposition to a “superior” realm, Agamben warns, ultimately amounts to the deflection of responsibility from a realm in which one can be held accountable. If, then, Atwood’s definition of politics implicitly criticises the failure to view the exercise of political power as a case of sacrificing the other then such a critique entails a failure to recognise the potential dangers of employing the term “sacrifice” – and thus evoking an otherworldly, superior, or transcendent realm – in reference to politics.

This is, in fact, shown to be the case in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where we are confronted with the materialisation of such dangers and, in this sense, with a challenge to the implications of Atwood’s 1982 definition. The Gilead regime openly acknowledges its dependence on sacrifice; it treats the Handmaids like the eggs that must be broken in order to make an omelette for “the common good” (232), a “common good” that the Handmaids are told depends on their being sacrificed, with “sacrifice” here being a shorthand for the deprivation of their freedom. Precisely because the regime presents this as a matter of sacrifice, it is able to not only justify its oppressive rule (by feigning that it is necessary for the superior end of the nation’s “salvation”) but to also claim praise for it – they have made “things better,” one of the Commanders says (222). Thus, whilst Atwood’s 1982 definition of politics implicitly criticises the failure to associate politics with sacrifice – and, therefore, with a realm that transcends the political realm of the here and below – her 1985 novel reveals how dangerous it can be to make this association.

Also, whilst in the former case Atwood defines politics as a figurative cannibalisation of those who lack power by those in power, we will see that *The Handmaid’s Tale* presents us with a scenario in which the politics of the Gilead regime is underpinned by a figuratively *auto*-cannibalistic consumption, the emphasis thus being on the self (with “auto” deriving from the Greek *eautos*,“self”). This consumption of the self by the self ties in with the type of sacrifice that the Handmaids are asked to make – namely, self-sacrifice; they are supposed to have been given a choice, and in choosing to become Handmaids rather than going to the Colonies to clear up nuclear waste, which was the alternative, have supposedly chosen to sacrifice themselves. In providing them with these two dire options, the regime effectively puts them in a position in which they act both as those who are sacrificed and as those who make the sacrifice, something which is reflected in their auto-cannibalistic consumption where the eaten is also the eater.

**Eat Thyself**

The key as to how figurative self-consumption materialises in the novel is the diet that is imposed on the Handmaids, which mainly consists of eggs, chicken, milk, bread, and canned pears – foodstuffs which, as Stein observes, and as will be shown in more detail shortly, function as “analogues for their bodies.”[[570]](#footnote-570) This clearly suggests an *auto-*cannibalistic consumption; nevertheless, when Stein engages with the operations of the Gilead regime from an alimentary perspective she simplifies the situation by positing the politics of Gilead as a politics of cannibalism, whereby the Handmaids are figuratively cannibalised by the Commanders. Stein’s account of political figurative cannibalisation, then, identifies the exploitation of those who lack power by those in power, which Gilead justifies through appeals to sacrifice and, indeed, the necessity of eating, one example of this being the Commander’s declaration that in order to make a sustenance-granting “omelette” sacrifices must be made, “eggs” must necessarily be broken (222). There is, however, more to it than this: the regime does not merely render the Handmaids “eggs which are broken and consumed [by others] to create a better life” for “the patriarchal ruling class,” as Stein argues,[[571]](#footnote-571) but, further, seeks to convince them this is also for their “own good” (93, 124), that they too partake, as it were, in the “consumption” of the “omelette” that they are “broken” to make.

The idea that the sacrifice of the Handmaids is also for their own benefit quite clearly contributes to their indoctrination. A brief comparison with another Atwood text, the short story “Hairball” (1990) and its climactic ovary-eating scene, is helpful here.[[572]](#footnote-572) The story’s protagonist, named Kat, which, she jokes, is short for Kit Kat, sends her former lover a gift – a box of chocolates in which she adds a special treat: the cocoa-sprinkled ovarian cyst she has had removed. The fact that Kat sends her ovarian cyst as a *gift*brings up the question of sacrifice in that, as John Milbank insists, the gift is “the giving up of something” and is thus “sacrificial.”[[573]](#footnote-573) Milbank’s Derridean understanding of the gift precludes that the giver might expect to gain something in return.[[574]](#footnote-574) Dennis Keenan, however, speaks of the impossibility of sacrifice-as-gift within a theological context because, he argues, the believer who makes a sacrifice is always aware that God watches and will reward.[[575]](#footnote-575) Although the context in which Kat “sacrificially” gives part of herself up for consumption is secular, she nevertheless expects to be rewarded for it; Kat’s “gift,” we are given to understand, somehow empowers her so that she is finally able to break free from the man who used to dominate her. This is, of course, a very different scenario to the one we encounter in *The Handmaid’s Tale* but it does resonate with the latter in that the Gilead regime seeks to convince the Handmaids that their offering of themselvesfor “consumption” would empower them: just as Kat is freed from the man who used to dominate her when she offers her ovarian cyst for consumption so the “ovarian” Handmaids will, they are told, find freedom through sacrificing themselves – “freedom from,” the regime clarifies, not “freedom to” (34).

The diet imposed on the Handmaids, with its implication of auto-cannibalistic consumption, plays a dual role in the regime’s indoctrinating programme. Whilst, as Stein stresses, it is others (“the patriarchal ruling class”) that figuratively consume the Handmaids, the foodstuffs which the Handmaids themselves consume are “analogues for their [own] bodies.” Note that every morning, Gilead’s “viable ovaries,” the Handmaids, are served eggs for breakfast. On one such morning, Offred, looking at the eggcup, begins thinking of it as “a woman’s torso in a skirt” under which one of the eggs is “being kept warm” (120), in this way conflating the hen’s egg that she is eating with a human ovary, which is precisely how she is treated under Gilead’s rule. Here, then, what is offered as a foodstuff is identified with its consumer, an identification that is sustained and extended in the scene that immediately follows, the birthing scene. While Offred is eating her egg-ovary, she is called to attend a ceremony during which another Handmaid gives birth, a birth which occurs, as per standard Gileadean procedure, on a special chair with two seats, one for the Wife and the other for the Handmaid, the former sitting up and behind the latter. This seating arrangement, Glenn Deer observes, reflects the image of the eggcup in the breakfast scene, with one egg “sitting” on top of the other,[[576]](#footnote-576) thus associating the women with the edible eggs of the previous scene. The Handmaid is, moreover, associated with the also edible animal that lays the egg, the chicken (another staple in a Handmaid’s diet), this being the setting in which the Handmaid gives birth or, in Deer’s words, “lays her egg.”[[577]](#footnote-577) The two scenes thus suggest not only that the Handmaids are treated as ediblebut also that they are self-eating.

There is, further, the standard Gileadean dessert, the canned pear, which Offred suggests is associated with the womb, an organ she does not name but instead refers to as “a central object [with] the shape of a pear” (84). The regime, we recall, treats the Handmaids as “two-legged wombs,” and in serving them this womb-shaped dessert it puts them in a position in which they are figuratively eating themselves. The Handmaids’ figurative self-consumption has clear repercussions in terms of their experience of the materiality of their bodies. There is a sense in which the situation in Gilead suggests something analogous to Butler’s treatment of eating in *Bodies that Matter*, where she argues that men in Plato are “relieved of the necessity of eating,” the male body being thus deprived of “morphe” – in short, that the male body is effectively “dematerialise[d].”[[578]](#footnote-578) As our analysis of Plato’s treatment of eating in the first chapter demonstrates, Butler’s specific claim about Plato is not entirely accurate; its wider implication, however, namely, that eating materialises bodies, that it gives the body a certain “morphe” or form, certainly is. Accordingly, by controlling what the Handmaids eat, the Gilead regime seeks to materialise their bodies in certain ways. And successfully so, it seems; Offred, for instance, admits to experiencing her body otherwise: my “flesh,” she says, “arranges itself differently,” becoming “congealed around a central object,” her womb, which contains ova ready for fertilisation (84). It is as if there is a vast empty space within her, she explains, like a dark sky, and “[e]very month there is a moon,” an ovum, which “transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again” (ibid.). That Offred experiences her pear-shaped womb as the centre of her body suggests that the Handmaids’ bodies are materialised differently through what they eat. Once again, then, we arrive at the idea that one becomes who one is through what one eats. And since in this instance we are not dealing with agential subjects who choose what to eat but with individuals who are subjected to what they eat, the sinister side of the possibility of being otherwise depending on what one eats comes to the fore. The indoctrinating power of the diet that the regime imposes on the Handmaids becomes clear with Offred’s admission that she truly experiences her body as centred around her womb despite the fact that she is well aware that this is precisely the way in which they want her to experience the whole of her being.

Something of this is also discernible in the Scrabble scenes. Since written language has been banned in Gilead, games of Scrabble are illegal and, to this extent, would appear to undermine the regime. For Offred, they are transgressive acts of eating; her exposure to the (now forbidden) alphabet, she says, makes her want to “put [the counters with the letters] into [her] mouth” (149), to “taste” them, to feel them more intimately, to internalise them. But, as Joseph Andriano observes, this consumption would presumably entail the consumption of the words spelled on the Scrabble board, which include the word “*Zygote*.”[[579]](#footnote-579) Offred’s desire for the internalisation of the counters thus features as a subliminally desired internalisation of the Handmaid’s role: to be fertilised, to bear within herself a zygote. Rather than undermining the regime, then, Offred’s forbidden act of eating upholds its principles; indeed, she almost becomes Gilead’s version of Ezekiel for, like the prophet who internalises God’s words by eating them (Ezekiel 3: 14), Offred is effectively fantasising the consumption of Gilead’s “Word”: the (here literalised) fertilised ovum.[[580]](#footnote-580)

It seems, then, that one of the fundamental commandments of the theocratic Gilead for the Handmaids is “Eat Thyself,” an idea that Atwood had already explored in her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, one of the most memorable scenes of which is Marian’s consumption of a cake in the shape of her own body.[[581]](#footnote-581) Marian goes through a period of time during which she is physically unable to eat most things because she starts viewing eating as a process that involves killing the living – a category under which she initially classifies animals, later adds animal products like eggs, and, finally, vegetables as well. Her figurative self-consumption leads to her re-integration to normative omnivorism, something which, according to Chloe Taylor, is meant to suggest that Marian finally “pulls [her] socks up,” “quit[s] whining,”[[582]](#footnote-582) and gets a “grasp on reality,” “overcom[ing] [her] mental turmoil” and putting an end to her temporary food-based “neurosis.”[[583]](#footnote-583) Taylor criticises Atwood’s apparent dismissal of ethical vegetarianism: “in a slippery slope argument,” Taylor writes, Atwood implies that this eating practice would logically lead to an abstinence from eating altogether and, therefore, that it amounts to a kind of “mental illness.”[[584]](#footnote-584) In light of this reading, Marian in the end comes to realise what Aunt Lydia might have described, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as “nature’s way” (153), which would here refer to the fact that one must eat regardless of what this does or does not involve.

Whilst it is clear that what the Aunts, and the Gilead regime in general, present as “nature” is not actually such,[[585]](#footnote-585) the idea of the “natural” is nevertheless upheld: quite simply, if what the regime presents as natural is actually unnatural or cultural it follows that something else must be natural. It is just such a tension between the cultural-ideological and the natural-biological, albeit in a different sense, that Marian’s figurative self-consumption also presents us with in *The Edible Woman*. It is not simply that Marian is re-introduced to society and its norms when she begins eating normally again but, more significantly for present purposes, that Marian apparently comes to accept that “nature is,” to return to Inge, a “conjugation of the verb to eat, in the active and the passive” – and that this is so simultaneously, that is to say, one eats and is eaten at the same time. Marian’s figurative self-consumption resonates on an ontological level since it is through this self-consumption, it seems, that she comes to accept and “re-incorporate” her own nature or essence as a human being, a sensual creature that must, in order to live, eat what is to a greater or lesser extent like her.

Unlike Marian’s, the figurative self-consumption of the Handmaids is imposed on them in what seems to be an attempt, on the regime’s part, to effect an almost ritualised internalisation of the roles and, indeed, the “nature” that it assigns to them. Their enforced consumption of chicken, for instance, might be read as a symbolic incorporation of the Handmaids’ supposedly natural role as egg-laying animals; their daily milk intake as an incorporation of their role as infant nurturers (137); their internalisation of womb-resembling pears as an internalisation of their role as “two-legged wombs” (146); and their consumption of eggs of their “natural” function as “viable ovaries” (153). This diet, then, is part of the regime’s indoctrination programme not only because, through it, Gilead seeks to subliminally persuade the Handmaids that they too partake in the “omelette” that their sacrifices make but also because their consumption of these carefully selected foodstuffs seems to be aimed at effecting the internalisation of the essence assigned to them.

**Ontology and Auto-Cannibalism**

Gilead’s treatment of the act of eating calls to mind Levinas’ association of eating with traditional ontology, whereby the Other is assimilated by and is thus reduced to the Self, leading to sameness. “The real I [sink] my teeth into” when I eat, Levinas writes,“is assimilated” and the “other” thus “become[s] *me*.”[[586]](#footnote-586) The figuratively auto-cannibalistic consumption that is in operation in *The Handmaid’s Tale* suggests that this process occurs “within”; what we have here is not a reduction of the *other* to the *self* and thus to sameness but a reduction of the *whole*, multi-dimensional self to only*part* of it – the viable ovary – that is the same for all Handmaids. This reduction comes to produce a false impression of what Heidegger calls, in a different context, “the wholeness of the whole”:[[587]](#footnote-587) the elimination of the individuality of each Handmaid, of what is different or “other” about each of them, produces the impression of a common “essence” which supposedly makes all the Handmaids what they “essentially” *are*. To stay with the alimentary side of Levinas’ analogy, the uniform diet Gilead imposes on the Handmaids consists of foodstuffs that are analogues for the “parts” that all the Handmaids share, that is, their viable ovaries and everything that goes with them (wombs, etc.), thus suggesting that what is internalised and assimilated is not an external “other” that is reduced to the “self” but rather an internal “sameness” to which are reduced all the individual traits that differentiate one Handmaid from another. The results of this ontologico-alimentary process are manifested not only in terms of how the regime treats the Handmaids but also in terms of how they themselves experience their existence, as Offred suggests when she says that her “flesh arranges itself differently,” around the body parts that matter to the regime (84).

The consumption of the Handmaids is, in this sense, reminiscent of the sacrificial meal-sharing ritual of the totem animal/god discussed in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, a ritual of shared internalisation through which the tribe’s common essence is produced and preserved.[[588]](#footnote-588) The identification of the eaters with the eaten suggests that this is, at bottom, a ritual of self-consumption like that of Atwood’s Handmaids, who figuratively, and almost ritualistically, eat their “within,” that is, the animal/god-like part – the egg – that renders them essentially the same. Gilead’s o(o)ntotheology is, then, underpinned by a figurative auto-cannibalism whereby one becomes who one is through “eating” oneself.

In the *MaddAddam*trilogy(2003-2013), Atwood explores this idea of an auto-cannibalistic consumption and its ontotheological resonances from a different perspective. In *Oryx and Crake*(2003), the first volume of the trilogy, Crake assumes the role of a secular god who re-creates the earthly world in an attempt to extend its lifespan.[[589]](#footnote-589) This goal of self-preservation entails self-destruction, as in the biological process of “autophagy,” defined as a process which involves the “degradation” of “dysfunctional cells” and which is believed to be connected to “lifespan expansion.”[[590]](#footnote-590)Crake seeks to wipe out human beings because, for him, humankind is no more than a dysfunctional cell in the body of the earth, a cell which is not only ill-adapted to survive itself but whose very existence limits the lifespan of the whole “organism,” the earth. In order to destroy the dysfunctional cell that is humankind, Crake produces the lethal virus JUVE (“Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary”), the effects of which assume theological significance in *The Year of the Flood*(2009), the second volume of the trilogy.[[591]](#footnote-591) The religious cult of the “Gardeners” interpret the theomeny-style pandemic caused by JUVE as “The Waterless Flood,” a new version of the Flood in the book of Genesis, where, as we saw in Chapter 1, it features as a process of decreation followed by re-creation. In a roughly analogous way, Crake’s plan is to replace the “previous,” dysfunctional “version” of humankind (that is, human beings as we now know them) with a type of humanoid creatures, the Crakers, whom he has created within “Paradice,” a dome which he describes, almost echoing Stillman from Auster’s *City of Glass*, as an “eggshell.”[[592]](#footnote-592) In *MaddAddam* (2013),the third volume of the trilogy, this leads to the articulation of a biblical-style story, an account of the creation of the Crakers according to which:

In the beginning, you lived inside the Egg. ...

The Egg was big and round and white, ... and there were trees inside it with leaves and grass and berries. All the things you like to eat. ...

And all around the Egg was the chaos. ...

And the chaos was everywhere outside the Egg. But inside the Egg there was no chaos.[[593]](#footnote-593)

As in the postdiluvian world of the Bible, where the emergence of Noah and his family from the Ark marks a different condition of being-human sealed by different dietary permissions, so the hatching of the Crakers out of the Egg after The Waterless Flood in Atwood’s trilogy marks a different world characterised by this humanoid species’ different dietary capacities. The Crakers, we learn, are able to “recycl[e] their own excrement,”[[594]](#footnote-594) rather like Timaeus’ global animal that eats its own waste products.[[595]](#footnote-595) The Crakers are designed so that they do not use up the earth’s resources and are thus able to live in a way that prolongs life on earth. This seems to be a large-scale version of biological autophagy, whereby self-destruction, in this case the destruction of humankind, is self-preserving in that it expands the span of life on earth.

In one respect, the world of the *MaddAddam* trilogy features as a self-eating “omelette” such as that of Gilead, only much bigger; here, it is not just one single isolated nation but the entire world that is presented as self-eating.[[596]](#footnote-596) The simultaneously self-preserving and self-destructing autophagic process, the trilogy seems to suggest, is a universal phenomenon rooted in the nature of humankind: on the most basic of levels, human beings eat up the resources upon which their survival depends. In this context, Crake’s self-destruction in order to achieve self-preservation does not render him a “strange” individual, as other characters repeatedly describe him, but an “everyman”; that he is presented as the “odd one out” might, then, be seen as a case of loose “defamiliarisation” in that it ultimately brings to the fore the auto-cannibalistic nature of humankind.

When Crake makes the case that humankind’s struggle for self-preservation materialises in what is actually a movement toward self-destruction, he cites history as proof, and it is of course true that many historical atrocities have been justified precisely through appeals to the supposed necessity of destruction to achieve the higher goal of preservation. Walter Duranty, for example, is infamously reported to have attempted to justify the horrors of Stalinism by saying: “*You can’t make an omelette without breaking the eggs*. ... If necessary, they’ll harness the peasants to the ploughs, but I tell you they’ll get the harvest in and feed the people that matter.”[[597]](#footnote-597) In light of this, and bearing in mind Atwood’s insistence in a 1985 interview that “there’s nothing in [*The Handmaid’s Tale*] that hasn’t already happened,”[[598]](#footnote-598) it cannot be accidental that the regime dresses the Handmaids in specifically *red* uniforms, that the function it ascribes to them is precisely to (go into) *labour*, and that it indoctrinates them at what is known as the “Red Centre,” where they repeatedly recite the sentence “*From each*...*according to her ability; to each according to his needs*” (127), which, they are told, comes from the Bible but is of course an altered version of a sentence taken from Marx.[[599]](#footnote-599) In this context, the Commander’s attempt to justify the regime’s exploitation of the Handmaids by using the very phrase through which Duranty sought to justify Stalinism (222) effectively aligns the Handmaids with Stalin’s peasants – the eggs that, as Duranty puts it, had to be broken to make an omelette for “the people that matter.”[[600]](#footnote-600)

We have, though, seen that the Handmaids are not just “eaten” by others but are also made to engage in figurative auto-cannibalism, which points us to a situation where the breaking of the eggs makes a self-eating omelette. This brings Gilead closer to a different historical manifestation of totalitarianism, namely, Nazi Germany,[[601]](#footnote-601) and it is through this particular association that the political implications of Gilead’s ontotheology emerge more fully.

**Sacrificial Consumption**

To begin tracing the Gilead-Nazi Germany analogy, a closer look at Gilead’s standard dessert, the canned pears, is firstly in order. The very existence of desserts in Gilead seems odd, for, like a series of totalitarian regimes in the history of dystopian fiction, Gilead promotes strict functionalism; desserts, by contrast, are traditionally sweet and insubstantial, lacking useful nutritional value. In Elizabethan and Jacobean England, for instance, desserts were aptly referred to as “voids” – they were usually sugar cakes shaped like animals but void in the middle, thereby revealing their nutritional emptiness, their insubstantiality.[[602]](#footnote-602) The Gileadean dessert, however, is by no means merely for pleasure’s sake but is also rich in “vitamins and minerals,” its consumption thus assisting the transformation of the Handmaids into “worthy vessels,” bodies that are healthy and, therefore, suitable to carry and deliver babies (75). In this respect, the canned pear is not to be seen as just a dessert but also as part of Gilead’s “main course” in that it aids in the fulfilment of the regime’s main goal, the “salvation” of the nation through reproduction.

It is this dual role as both a dessert and a main that is of interest here, for it implicitly links the Gileadean canned pear with the biblical holocausts or burnt sacrifices which are, in the King James Bible, described as being of a “sweet savour” unto the Lord.[[603]](#footnote-603) If we were to follow the Gilead regime’s example of being particularly attentive to the language of the Bible and, indeed, of taking it literally, then we would be inclined to read this description as an oxymoron which suggests that a burnt sacrifice is both a “dessert” and a “main” – *sweet* as well as *savoury*. This metaphorical sweetness and savouriness expresses the holocausts’ simultaneous “insubstantiality” and “substantiality”: they are insubstantial in that their substance is totally “consum[ed]” and “vaporiz[ed]” by the fire,[[604]](#footnote-604) and substantial because the offering is made in view of something that truly matters – forgiveness of sin, for example, and thus the salvation of the soul.

The implicit link between Gilead’s canned pears and the biblical holocaustsbrings to mind Offred’s observation about the Holocaust, an observation that is connected with another staple foodstuff in Gilead, the daily bread. When first told that the Nazis killed the Jews in “ovens,” Offred explains that she “got some confused notion that these deaths had taken place in kitchens” (155). Because “[o]vens mean cooking and cooking comes before eating,” Offred as a child “thought that these people had been eaten” and, as an adult, she says that “in a way” “they had been” (ibid.). This striking image of human flesh being “cooked” is strongly reminiscent of Offred’s description of the bread dough – which, she says, “feels so much like flesh” (21) – that is being baked in Gilead. As Stein suggests, this conspicuous parallel between the “flesh” in the Gileadean ovens and the flesh in the Nazi “ovens” suggests a parallel between Gilead and Nazi Germany: just as the Jews were figuratively consumed at the Holocaust, Stein argues, so the Handmaids are figuratively eaten in Gilead.[[605]](#footnote-605)

Although Stein does not explore the novel’s allusions to biblical sacrifices, it is only through these allusions that the importance of the link between Gilead and Nazi Germany can be grasped. Some critics have, in fact, touched upon this, drawing a link between Gilead’s theocracy and its fascist operations; for example, Larson speaks, in passing, of Gilead’s “Christo-fascist utopia,”[[606]](#footnote-606) and – again in passing – makes reference to the portrayal of the “nazification of the United States” in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.[[607]](#footnote-607) Dorota Filipczak, on the other hand, identifies a specific similarity: the “pseudo-religious aspects” of “the fertility cult ... in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” she writes, “are strongly reminiscent of Lebensborn in Nazi Germany.”[[608]](#footnote-608) Despite the brevity of their observations, the point both Larson and Filipczak want to make is clear: the novel suggests that the theocracy of Gilead is so horrific that it is comparable to one of the most horrific manifestations of totalitarianism in history.

The novel’s intertextual entanglement with biblical sacrifices does, however, complicate matters. For to draw an analogy between Gilead’s sacrificial lambs, the Handmaids, and the Jewish people under Nazism is to posit the latter as sacrificial victims and thus inappropriately suggest that the Holocaust is a sacrifice – a problem that is, of course, inscribed in the word “Holocaust” itself, which evokes the biblical holocausts.[[609]](#footnote-609) As Agamben writes in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, to use the term “Holocaust” is “to establish a connection, however distant, ... between death in the gas chamber and the ‘complete devotion to sacred and superior motives’,” which is precisely the connection that Nazi propaganda sought to establish.[[610]](#footnote-610) Though the term “Holocaust” is not used at any point in Atwood’s novel, the implicit parallel between the Jewish people and the Handmaids-as-sacrificial-offerings is just as troublesome. The suggestion, emerging from *Surfacing* and, less explicitly, from Atwood’s 1982 definition of politics that sacrifice and the transcendent realm it evokes are applicable to matters that would have otherwise been viewed as secular is thus rendered still more problematic through this parallel between the figurative consumption of the Handmaids in Gilead and of the Jewish people under Nazism.

**Consumption from Within**

The tension between the political and the sacred, the here and below and the transcendent beyond, and the way in which it informs the parallel between Gilead and Nazi Germany can be fleshed out further through a closer inspection of the novel’s intertextual entanglement with biblical sacrifices. Stein’s focus on the consumption of bread and her emphasis on “cannibalism” clearly reinforce the above-drawn association between the Handmaids and the Lamb of God, Christ.[[611]](#footnote-611) The Handmaids’ figuratively *auto*-cannibalistic consumption, however, also invites an association with another biblical sacrificial lamb, one that critics have not yet considered – that of the Passover. Indeed, from a Christian perspective, these two biblical lambs are in conjunction with one another; St. Paul, for instance, who is often quoted in Atwood’s novel, associates the two in characteristically referring to Jesus as “our paschal lamb” (1 Corinthians 5: 7).

In Exodus, we read that God advises the Jewish people to kill “the lamb” in preparation for the Passover; they are told to

take of [its] blood, and strike it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses, wherein they shall eat it. And they shall eat the flesh ... not ... raw ... but roast with fire (Exodus 12: 7-9).

Substitution is of course an integral part of any sacrifice, as is the case with the ram sacrificed in the place of Isaac (Genesis 22: 13), or with Christ who is sacrificed to make up for the sins of humankind (Matthew 26: 28). The Passover sacrifice, though, presents us with an additional type of substitution which resonates with the situation of the Handmaids in Atwood’s novel. In the extract above, the lamb is referred to in the singular (“the lamb,” “it”) even though it is not just *one* lamb that is sacrificed. One lamb stands for all the lambs that are sacrificed the night before the Passover and for all those lambs that will be sacrificed in remembrance of the event, which implies that the lambs are interchangeable and, therefore, that they are all essentially the same. The Handmaids too are rendered interchangeable and thus substitutable with one another; the diet the regime imposes on them, as we have seen, aims to reduce their individuality or “wholeness” to a “part” that is common to all of them, thereby producing a common essence, making them all essentially the same. Thus it is that a Handmaid is “offered” to one household for a certain period of time and is then substituted by another; one Handmaid, then, explicitly stands for any other Handmaid and, by extension, for all Handmaids. “Offred” is, in this sense, all the Handmaids of her generation and all those that come after her – they are all “offered,” all sacrificial offerings that are interchangeable in a manner akin to that of the Passover lamb(s).

Alongside the particular economy of substitution which associates the Passover lamb(s) with Gilead’s Offred(s) and, more widely, with Gilead’s o(o)ntotheology, the verses from Exodus also suggest an auto-cannibalistic consumption which constitutes another point of association. The blood of the Passover lamb is thrown on outer walls and doors, as though to *house* the Jewish people within it, protecting them by marking who they are and thus distinguishing them from the Egyptians, whose houses God strikes. Indeed, the lamb here functions like a *host*,providing not only shelter but also food: its blood serves to “house” the Hebrews and its flesh to feed them. And, bearing in mind that the lamb’s flesh is eaten *within* the house that its blood metaphorically constructs, what we have is a figurative auto-cannibalism in the form of a consumption that occurs from within the host body.

The auto-cannibalistic consumption that is at work in Gilead suggests an intertextual entanglement with the Passover sacrifice which can illuminate the Gilead-Nazi Germany analogy. As is well-known, certain interpretations of the Passover sacrifice have, throughout history and in different countries, featured in numerous attempts to promote anti-Semitism,[[612]](#footnote-612) with Julius Streicher’s notorious May 1934 issue of *Der Stürmer* providing us with a representative example of one such attempt in Nazi Germany.[[613]](#footnote-613) One of the articles in this issue relates a nineteenth-century murder of a girl who is conveniently named *Agnes* Hruza (*agnus*being Latin for “lamb”); whose young age invites the reader to think of her as “unblemished” (and thus associate her with the unblemished lambs sacrificed for the Passover); and whose murder is said to have occurred in late March/early April (which is when the Passover celebrations typically fall). This article is but one example of the “blood libel,” the misrepresentation of the Jews as a murderous people who supposedly kill non-Jews in order to obtain blood for their rituals. It is not, however, only the blood rituals involved in the Passover sacrifice that the Nazis exploited but also its portrayal of a consumption that occurs from within, as is evidenced in the Hitlerian rhetoric which presents the “Aryan state” as a host body on which the Jewish people parasitically feed; as Felicity Rash summarises, in *Mein Kampf* Hitler argued that “these ‘lower’ beings,” the Jewish people, “develop[ed] a parasiticdependency” upon “the ‘higher’ Aryans.”[[614]](#footnote-614)

Clearly, the Nazi state could only construct itself as a host body by means of incorporating within it a group of people that it posited as parasites; the latter are therefore indispensible for the existence of the former.[[615]](#footnote-615) It is this point that Žižek makes when he says that the Nazi subject was constructed by incorporating the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew within it; “take away the anti-Semitic fantasy,” Žižek asserts, “and the subject whose fantasy it is itself disintegrates.”[[616]](#footnote-616) From Žižek’s assertion we can extrapolate a process that is best expressed through the metaphor of eating: the subject constructs itself as a host body by consuming something which it presents as parasitic – something, that is, which will supposedly eat it up. This, then, is not a case in which one is what one eats but, on the contrary, a case in which one becomes who one is in opposition to what one eats. A distinction between the parasite-eater and the host-eaten is thus established, but this is a self-undermining process, for the host must “eat” – incorporate within it – the parasite, in this way assuming the role of the eater (parasite) whilst rendering the other the eaten.

It is not only the process of the establishment of these roles that is self-undermining but also the action it prompts. As Žižek’s claim implies, in undertaking a *kampf* to get rid of the Jew-as-the-parasite-within to ensure their survival, the Nazis were, in effect, inadvertently striving for their own abolition; what is conceived of as self-preservation coincides, once again, with self-destruction. At the core of the operations of Nazi Germany is, then, a figurative auto-cannibalism which takes the form not of a consumption *from* “within” (which the Nazis argued they were fighting against) but of a consumption *of* “the within” (which the Nazis themselves conducted) – an ultimately suicidal consumption: in “eating” away that which makes one who one is, one is effectively undoing oneself.

If, as Žižek’s analysis suggests, Nazi Germany was underpinned by an auto-cannibalistic type of consumption then the Gilead-Nazi Germany analogy can be further substantiated and thought through the concept of auto-cannibalism. Atwood’s novel presents us with not just a politics of cannibalism whereby the exercise of political power is analogous to one’s eating of another but, ultimately, a situation in which the exercise of political power is analogous to a consumption that occurs “within.” The Handmaids are, after all, told that “Gilead is within [them]” (33) and so, by forcing them to figuratively consume themselves, their “within,” the regime emerges as a body-politic that figuratively consumes itself. This form of auto-cannibalism, then, not only underpins the ontology promoted by the Gilead regime but also discloses, and offers a definition of, the politics of Gilead and Nazi Germany, whereby the aim of self-preservation coincides with self-destruction.

Deleuze and Guattari make a similar point about fascist politics in general, arguing that, in fascism, the “war machine” – which is set in motion by the State to *protect* it – actually “appropriates the State” (rather than the other way round), “channel[ling] into it a flow of absolute war whose only possible outcome is *the suicide of the State itself*.”[[617]](#footnote-617) In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, figurative auto-cannibalismflags up just this conjunction between self-preservation and self-destruction, thus pointing to an alimentary-related definition of fascist politics that is close to the Deleuzo-Guattarian one. Indeed, in advancing their definition of the fascist state, Deleuze and Guattari are following Virilio who, as we saw in Chapter 2, defines the fascist state as the “suicidal state,” demonstrating his point with recourse to Hitler’s obliteration of the State’s life-supporting resources such as drinkable water and fuel[[618]](#footnote-618) – an obliteration which causes the State to figuratively eat itself up, ultimately inducing a kind of starvation. The fact that Virilio demonstrates what he posits as fascism’s inherent suicidal tendencies through alimentary-related examples is, however, coincidental. In Atwood, by contrast, the conjunction between the inherent and the alimentary is far from being a mere coincidence. Atwood’s involvement of the question of sacrifice in the link between politics and eating suggests as much, for it amounts to an involvement of a superior and transcendent realm (associated with metaphysics and thus with the inherent) in the realm of the here and now (associated with the political-alimentary), which leads to a multi-faceted tension that has been pointed out throughout this chapter.

**Atwood’s Alimentary Turn**

This tension is also manifested in the alimentary turn with which *The Handmaid’s Tale* presents us in relation to earlier works – a turn that is not quite a U-turn, a revision that is not a reversal and thus preserves a certain ambivalence, an ambivalence in which the very dystopianism of Gilead’s o(o)ntotheology lies. The regime’s evocations of a transcendent realm, of the sacred, and of the inherent – of essence in the traditional ontological sense – enable atrocities and their justification. But it does not follow from this that the existence of a transcendent realm must therefore be rejected outright. For if *The Handmaid’s Tale* shows that belief in such a realm is dangerous (thus revising Atwood’s stance in earlier novels such as *Surfacing* as well as her 1982 definition of politics) it also shows that belief in its absence is equally dangerous in the sense that what ultimately enables the regime’s atrocities might be down to the belief that there is no essence. Indeed, Gilead’s rigid control over who eats what in its attempt to establish what it presents as natural/inherent seems to mirror Nietzsche’s claim that “hunger is no proof that the food that would satisfy it exists” but rather that “it desires the food.”[[619]](#footnote-619) In the Nietzschean outlook as laid out in Chapter 1, language constructs the false impression of essence, and what makes this construction possible in the first place is that essence is actually lacked. Similarly, in seeking to create the essence of the Handmaids through what they eat, the Gilead regime betrays a conviction that one is not who one is because of a transcendent realm which predetermines essence but that one becomes who one is through what one eats. Gilead is guilty of exploiting both of these understandings; on the one hand, it justifies its atrocities via the evocation of the inherent, the idea of proper being as something that is predetermined in a transcendent and thus superior realm whilst, on the other, its actions bespeak a conception of being as mutable and as dependent on the materiality of the here and now.

That the would-be liberating possibility of being otherwise through eating otherwise is, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,exploited by a totalitarian regime reveals its sinister side far more explicitly than any other of the texts that have been investigated in this study. And what is most sinister about it is precisely that it is not monolithic; although the possibility of being otherwise through eating otherwise certainly takes an oppressive form in the novel, this does not altogether negate its liberating potential: if the regime is able to use this possibility to its own ends it follows that it could have been used to different, noble ends. It is just this ambivalence that characterises Atwood’s understanding of dystopianism more generally, and it is this that she seeks to express by coining the term “ustopia,” a term which suggests that every dystopia entails a utopia (and vice versa).[[620]](#footnote-620) In light of this term, we can say that *The Handmaid’s Tale* ultimately suggests that the possibility of being otherwise through eating otherwise cannot be evaluated as altogether “bad” but neither, of course, can it be evaluated as “good”; it cannot be said to be *either* “dystopian” *or* “utopian” and, indeed, *either* “cultural-ideological” *or* “natural-ontological.” In leaving such tensions unresolved, Atwood’s work calls for a more nuanced, postmodernist approach which rejects the either/or in favour of the both/and. The correlation between eating otherwise and being otherwise in Auster, on the other hand, seems to point to a negative evaluation, in this way setting up a rather clear distinction with the by and large positive evaluation that emerges from Bataille’s and Beckett’s work. Auster’s, in this sense, is a postmodernism that discredits the modernist promises of liberation. It is by addressing this question of the relationship between the modernist and the postmodernist otherwise of eating/being that we will conclude our ontologico-alimentary investigations in the next and final chapter.

## Conclusion

## Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Otherwise of Eating

In *Glas* (1974), Derrida argues that “ontology ... can always lay its hand on whatever remains in the john [*aux chiottes*].”[[621]](#footnote-621) In other words, the body and its processes, like eating and its “remains,” are vulnerable to ontology – they can always be subjected to the philosophical investigation of being.[[622]](#footnote-622) In the course of this study, however, we have seen that this is not a one-way relationship: it is not only ontology that lays hold of the alimentary but also the reverse.

The survey undertaken in the first chapter explored some of the ways in which ontological preoccupations in the history of Western thought do indeed lay hold of the alimentary, and thus present us with what a gastro-critic would be inclined to think of as an unlikely entanglement of the “elevated” and transcendent “beyond” of the question of being with the “lowly” and “here and below” of the question of eating. Far from incompatible, we have throughout seen that the question of being and the question of eating come together in various ways, suggesting that the alimentary also takes hold of the ontological: it constructs a kind of counter-ontology within ontology as traditionally understood by pointing to conceptions of being as mutable and dependent on the materiality of the here and now. To return to the mantra that has guided us throughout, one *is* (through) what (and how, how much, or whether) one *eats* and so one may *eat otherwise* in order to *be otherwise*. In different ways, to different ends, in different settings, within different genres, and with different results, the texts we have engaged with explore the possibility of ontological transformation through food and the act of eating it, rejecting it, treating it as a sexual toy, as a symbol, or as an indoctrinating tool. Bataille, Beckett, Auster, and Atwood have all been shown to be authors whose work challenges gastro-criticism’s reluctance to explore the relationship between the question of being and the question of eating.

Indeed, the exploration of this relationship need not inhibit gastro-criticism’s goal of pinning down the particularity of eating within certain contexts. As Foucault’s forgotten alimentary monster would suggest, this relationship does not assume a singular form; although there are always behaviours that are thought of as “monstrosities” or “abnormalities,” behaviours which simultaneously challenge and help to establish “non-monstrosities” or “normalities” as ontological categories, such monstrosities also assume specific forms. In the nineteenth century, for example, the monster materialises in the form of the sexually “abnormal” individual and, in Foucault’s analysis, this particular form of the monster reveals much about the nineteenth century. In the same way, the alimentary monstrosities or acts of eating otherwise that we have encountered in the course of this study have something to reveal about the literature of the twentieth century wherein they materialise, and the two movements that mark it – namely, modernism and postmodernism.

Bataille and Beckett have been treated as representatives of modernism and Auster and Atwood as representatives of postmodernism. However, as discussed in the introduction, this is a classification that bypasses nuances which are, of course, already detectable in the very terms “modernism” and “postmodernism.” Take, for example, Matei Călinescu’s claim in his seminal *Five Faces of Modernity*(1977), that the “the prefix *post*implies ... an absence of *positive*periodizing criteria” which renders the postmodernists “writers who tr[y] to break away” from the modernist influence “without being able to shake it off completely.”[[623]](#footnote-623) This tension is exemplified in the acts of eating otherwise explored in this study. These acts, as we will see in this conclusion, suggest that postmodernism’s attempt to shake off modernism paradoxically assumes the form of incorporation. The concept of incorporation is, in fact, at the core of Linda Hutcheon’s definition of postmodernism: the very terms “postmodernism” and “postmodernity,” Hutcheon writes, “*incorporate* that which they aim to contest,” namely, “modernism” and “modernity”;[[624]](#footnote-624) and, as we will see here, postmodernism incorporates the radical otherwise of modernism and, in doing so, undoes it as such, as a radical “otherwise.”

**The Modernist Otherwise of Eating**

In “Contradictions of Modernism” (1997), Terry Eagleton argues that “modernism parodies realism, disfigures it, puts the skids under it, shatters it to bits” but “it can [only] do all this by continually reminding us of the realism it seeks to transcend, and so undoing itselfin that very act.”[[625]](#footnote-625) Representations of food and eating are, of course, a common means by which the realist achieves verisimilitude; they lend, we might say, the realist text some of its realism. And since, as Eagleton says, the modernist text seeks to shatter the realist tradition, the modernist engagement with food is particularly pertinent to his claim, featuring as one of the ways in which this shattering is achieved. As mentioned in the introduction, Eagleton does, in fact, have recourse to alimentary metaphors in his outline of characteristically modernist techniques, and here I want to see how the alimentary investigations of this study play out within this wider literary framework.

The very notion of eating otherwise is, in a sense, quintessentially modernist, for it expresses the “othering” of what is most ordinary, rendering it radically new. The word “radical,” though, immediately complicates things, its etymological origin in the Latin *radix* suggesting a return to the “roots”; by this logic, then, the modernist’s commitment to the radically new would seem to coincide with a return to the past. This is indeed the very paradox of the modernist injunction to “make it new” because this is actually very often a case of making it old, coinciding as it does with a return to a pre-modern world that the modernist imagination tends to idealise.[[626]](#footnote-626) Evidence of this can be found in the modernist’s characteristic use of myth,[[627]](#footnote-627) something that is amply demonstrated through the prevalence of the egg in the texts I have discussed. Thus it is that the modernist project is self-undoing and, as Eagleton suggests, this is so by default: “like any transgression,” he says, “it is [necessarily] dependent on the forms from which it deviates.”[[628]](#footnote-628)  Whilst Eagleton sees this principle as playing out at the formal, technical, or stylistic level, in *Story of the Eye* and its striking representations of eating it materialises at a thematic level. The anus’ assumption of the role of the mouth, for instance, presents us with an act of eating otherwise which of course inevitably reminds us of the fact that it is the mouth and not the anus that eats. Such unusual acts of eating, then, end up foregrounding the usual, thus featuring as unintentional instantiations of what Shklovsky calls “defamiliarisation.” We can therefore say that, in “making it new,” Bataille’s characters are actually returning to the “old”; indeed, the ontology of *Story of the Eye* is, as we have seen, traceable back to Stoicism, a pre-modern philosophical world-view. In this sense, Bataille’s novella is an exemplary case of modernist self-undoing.

Self-undoing is, though, present in all the authors I have been discussing, assuming the very specific form of *alimentary* self-destruction. Sticking, for now, with the modernists, we have seen that, in Bataille, acts of eating otherwise do not involve proper ingestion, with eating otherwise being, in effect, *not* eating. Because eating is here understood to be nourishing and self-preserving – through eating one sustains who one is – the otherwise of being is pursued through abstinence from it, that is, through starvation. In the Beckett texts we have looked at, alimentary self-undoing assumes the form of figurative auto-cannibalism, with food being tailored to resemble its eater. In “Whoroscope” as well as other Beckett works, eating is understood both as self-destructing and as possibly self-constructing: here, to eat what one is amounts to aborting or destroying one’s current state of being and thus opens up the possibility of being otherwise. In both Bataille and Beckett, then, the otherwise of eating bespeaks the self-undoing that Eagleton, amongst others, associates with modernism, positing it as that which makes modernist texts what they are.

It is telling, then, that Eagleton has recourse to a specifically alimentary metaphor to elaborate his point. As we have seen in the introduction, Eagleton argues that the modernist “literary art-work ... is anxious to transcend language” but “know[s] that if it did” so it “would just disappear into its own shimmering vacancy”; therefore, “[a]ll it can do is try to crowdlanguage or slimit drastically down, become as it were either bulimicor anorexic, cram itself with multiple meaning to the point of sheer opacity” – as in Joyce, for example, and T. S. Eliot – “or alternatively shed as much weight as it dare,” as in Beckett and Pound.[[629]](#footnote-629) According to Eagleton, the reason the modernist text is anxious to transcend language is that “language ties it to the ... social world,” and thus the world of realism that it seeks to shatter.[[630]](#footnote-630) The modernists’ – particularly the avant-gardists’ – rejection of the “social world” and their “bulimic” or “anorexic” treatment of meaning is, for Eagleton, also politically motivated. “[T]he avant-garde,” he writes, “believed that the only thing the bourgeoisie couldn’t swallow was not radical meaning” – for as long as there was “any kind of meaning it felt fairly secure” – “but a concerted assault upon meaning itself.”[[631]](#footnote-631) In *Antidiets of the Avant-garde*(2010), Cecilia Novero makes a very similar point in reference to Dada. “The Dada artists,” Novero argues, “intend to ... purge themselves of the hypocritical bourgeois word”; “[t]heir excrement ... is the word finally materialized and shown in its indigestible, real guise.”[[632]](#footnote-632) For Novero, Dadaist art, unlike the “bourgeois word,” is free from meaning, which it reveals to be “hypocritical”; it thus works as a kind of food that cannot be assimilated, or a kind of excrement that cannot be expelled. Because the bourgeois “is anxious” not to interrupt the “circulation” of commodities, which the Dada artists “equate with the consumers’ anal products,” these artists produce “refuse that will constipate the bourgeois compulsion to consume”: their art is indigestible.[[633]](#footnote-633) As Novero acknowledges, however, there is a crucial similarity between the practices of these supposed enemies: both the Dada artists and the bourgeoisie are “obsessed with ... cleansing.”[[634]](#footnote-634) The former want to “purify their stomachs” from “the bourgeois word” which they “ingest ... in order to discard” and the latter want to cleanse their stomachs “to be able to keep consuming and discarding.”[[635]](#footnote-635) Like Eagleton, then, Novero effectively uncovers an alimentary-related process of self-undoing at the core of the avant-garde.

Despite this similarity – the obsession with purification – the treatment of the alimentary in modernism does not cancel out the modernist critique but actually encapsulates it. Indeed, the authors we have examined reveal the modernist critique to be a critique of *assimilation* and its implications. In refraining from actual eating, for example, Bataille’s characters manifest an aversion to alimentary assimilation, as is also the case in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where we find some not-exactly-flattering descriptions of people “wolfing down gobfuls of sloppy food,” “shovel[ling] gurgling soup down [their] gullet[s],” and thus “wet[ting] [their] moustaches.”[[636]](#footnote-636) Alongside Joyce’s disgust-inducing representations of alimentary assimilation, Steven Connor thinks of Belacqua’s lunch in *More Pricks than Kicks*, reading this as an instance of eating that seems specifically “designed to ... deny the very appropriation involved in alimentary consumption.”[[637]](#footnote-637) Following a similar trajectory in his book on the use of food in the avant-garde, Delville refers to the modernist dissociation of food from the act of eating it, and a number of his examples demonstrate a very clear “fear” of assimilation.[[638]](#footnote-638) Discussing Beckett’s *Molloy* and the incident in which the eponymous character is offered a “greyish concoction” to eat, Delville argues that “Molloy’s violent rejection of [this] food” (his urgent smashing of the ‘pile of tottering disparates’ into ‘smithereens’) is, “above all,” prompted by “the liquid’s overflow” which “threaten[s] to sog the bread” and thus “mix” the separate ingredients of the meal, turning them into one.[[639]](#footnote-639) In this ‘little pile of tottering disparates,’ Delville writes, quoting from the novel, ‘the hard, the liquid, and the soft were joined,’ and this, he argues, is “Molloy’s culinary nightmare.”[[640]](#footnote-640) This nightmare appears to “retur[n] with a vengeance” in *Watt*, “in the form of a list of ingredients” – including ‘fish,’ ‘eggs’ and ‘meat,’ ‘all of various kinds’ – “that are boiled together for four hours in a pot,” producing a homogeneous “preparation which is served to Mr. Knott three times a day.”[[641]](#footnote-641) Such incidents, says Delville, echo “the culinary aversions of the Moderns” in general; the modernist culinary rule, he asserts, following Lucien Dällenbach, is that “the discrete ingredients of a dish may be ... juxtaposed but not mixed, for fear of their becoming a part of a single, monstrously homogeneous preparation which conceals” its constituent parts and the “conditions of its making.”[[642]](#footnote-642)

Illuminating in this respect is Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism*(1999), where they engage with the “artistic critique” of capitalism before May ’68 – that is, the critique unleashed by the modernists – and how this was *assimilated*in late capitalism.[[643]](#footnote-643) Although the authors defend their choice to talk about France in particular, their general findings are clearly applicable more widely as neither capitalism (in any of its stages) nor the modernist critique constitutes a specifically French phenomenon. Their study will thus provide us with a wider context within which to think the modernist otherwise of eating.

Boltanski and Chiapello argue that amongst the prominent targets of the artistic critique are the *inauthenticity* and the *loss of autonomy* under mass capitalism, both of which resonate with Delville’s argument that the modernists are averse to dishes whose constituent parts are mixed together, producing a homogeneity which destroys the individuality of each ingredient (thus depriving it of its autonomy) as well as the authenticity of the dish. What Boltanski and Chiapello refer to as the artistic critique of mass capitalism, then, connects with what Delville calls “the culinary aversions of the Moderns.” Bataille and Beckett do seem to point to just such a connection. For his part, Bataille views eating as an act that reveals the self to be an eating-defecating subject, a subject that *is* by means of assimilating the external world for its own purposes, the external world being thus reduced to subjective perceptions in a manner akin to that of the Hegelian spirit which, as if in a huge digestive process, assimilates everything. In brief, the eating-defecating subject in Bataille is the subject that does not let the other be as it is in itself and, in this sense, what is ultimately at stake here is the question of *authenticity*: eating does not allow the objects of one’s consumption to exist authentically, as they really are or could be, but only as mere objects for consumption – a process that is clearly systematised, accelerated, and accentuated with the rise of mass capitalism. Simone and the narrator’s unusual alimentary-related acts can, therefore, be seen as instantiations of the wider modernist critique of the loss of authenticity. Indeed, when Simone sits on the toilet and the narrator throws eggs into the toilet bowl, the eggs are allowed to exist as they are rather than as objects for consumption that have been assimilated by the consumer’s organism (and perceptions). Bataille does, after all, make the point explicitly in *The Accursed Share*; as we have seen, he here argues that the true use-value of a thing, and thus its authenticity, emerges precisely when it withdraws from the circuit of productive consumption, through “unproductive expenditure.”

Questions of consumption and authenticity are also raised, albeit in a different sense, by the characteristically modernist “stream of consciousness,” which Beckett champions, for this mode of narration effectively shows the world being swallowed up by and assimilated through the perceptions of the subject. This swallowing-up clearly suggests that the represented world is not “objective” or “authentic” but rather the product of subjective assimilation. Such explicitly non-objective representations of the world, however, can themselves be seen as authentic insofar as subjective perception is the way in which the subject truly experiences the world. But, in turn, this raises the question of the subject’s own authenticity since the process of assimilation is not a one-way process: the assimilation of the world – both literally, through the body, and figuratively, through perception – also has repercussions for the assimilating subject which is itself assimilated in the process. Connor makes this same point in relation to Sartre and Beckett, arguing that assimilation “threatens ... self-determination”; the “substance that seems to be docile to my touch” and, indeed, my mouth, also “appropriate[s] me as I appropriate it.”[[644]](#footnote-644) In other words, when I eat I assimilate what I eat but at the same time I am assimilated myself. Thus, if I am who I am by means of assimilating the other then I too cannot claim to be “authentically” me. Rather, I am just as much the product of this assimilation as is the object that I assimilate. The question of authenticity thus tips over into the question of self-determination or autonomy, with which, as Boltanski and Chiapello argue, the “artistic critique” of mass capitalism is also concerned.

Both Bataille and Beckett engage with these questions but each does so from a different angle; the treatment of eating in Bataille flags up the implications of assimilation in terms of the authenticity of the assimilated world, and the treatment of eating in Beckett flags up the implications of assimilation in terms of the autonomy of the simultaneously assimilating and assimilated individual. The figurative autophagyof Beckett’s characters is different from the starvation of Bataille’s characters in *Story of the Eye*, where the otherwise of eating (that is, non-eating) aims to destroy the subject which assimilates the world and in this way deprives it of authentic existence, a destruction that the characters think will give rise to an otherwise of being. The Beckettian autophagy, on the other hand, expresses the horror of the loss of subjectivity that assimilation seems to presuppose whilst also simultaneously opening up the possibility of the establishment of individuality – a possibility of being otherwise – *through* such assimilation, which is perhaps why the food of a Beckett character is so often tailored to reflect the character in question. As we have seen, the biological definition of autophagy expresses this association of self-destruction with self-establishment: the organism’s degradation of certain cells is clearly self-destructing but is also at the same time self-preserving since it contributes to the extension of the organism’s lifespan.

Not only Beckett’s autophagy but also Bataille’s starvation points to a simultaneously self-generating and self-undoing process, the otherwise of eating in both cases thus being characteristically modernist in that, as Eagleton and Novero both argue, the modernist or avant-gardist artwork is generated through self-undoing. Further, in these instances, the otherwise of eating encapsulates the main themes of the “artistic critique” as theorised by Boltanski and Chiapello; in aspiring to a world that is allowed to be as it is in itself, and to a subject that is distinct from a homogenous whole, Bataille’s and Beckett’s acts of eating otherwise bespeak a reaction against inauthenticity and the individual subject’s lack of autonomy, which they suggest are the consequences of assimilation.

**The Postmodernist Otherwise of Eating**

If eating otherwise can therefore be seen as a quintessentially modernist act then what are we to make of the fact that acts of eating otherwise also appear in postmodernist literature, as in the case of Auster and Atwood? On the one hand, the term “postmodernism” undoubtedly suggests a separation from modernism but, on the other, the “post” suggests that there is no rupture between the two. To return to Călinescu, the “post” implies “an absence of *positive* periodizing criteria” which, he says, renders the postmodernist someone who seeks to “shake off” the modernist influence without being altogether successful in doing so. There is, however, a sense in which the fact that postmodernism does not altogether shake off modernism is what actually makes it successful. This is because the “shaking off” to which Călinescu refers does not necessarily take the form of outright rejection; indeed, the literary texts we have engaged with here suggest that attempts at such shaking off paradoxically assume the form of *incorporation* – an incorporation through which the critiques of the modernist project and the liberating possibilities of the “new” or the “otherwise” are rendered inoperative.

Pertinent here is Michael Bell’s account of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. As mentioned in the introduction, Bell argues that “[t]he change from modernism to postmodernism” is “not a difference in metaphysic so much as a different stage in thedigestion of the same metaphysic.”[[645]](#footnote-645) This resonates with McHale’s distinction between modernism’s primarily epistemological preoccupations and postmodernism’s primarily ontological preoccupations, especially from Connor’s perspective, who sees McHale’s distinction not as a “clean break” but as a relation of “intensification.”[[646]](#footnote-646) Bell’s alimentary metaphor expresses just this intensification of modernism’s epistemological dominant in postmodernism’s ontological dominant, envisaging the latter as a later “stage in the *digestion* of the same metaphysic.”

Bell’s metaphor, moreover, resonates with our theorisation of an ontology redefined through its entanglement with the alimentary whilst also explaining why the same correlation between eating otherwise and being otherwise appears within both modernism and postmodernism. In envisaging postmodernism as a later stage in a process of an ontological digestion, Bell implies that postmodernism does not reject modernism but in fact assimilates it. As we will see in more detail later, this is the very argument that Boltanski and Chiapello advance, in broader terms, in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. For now, it is important to highlight the paradox with which such a theorisation of the relationship between the two movements confronts us. For if assimilation is precisely what modernism reacts against then the postmodernist assimilation of modernism both *is* and *is not* a rejection of the latter: it is not such because postmodernism’s assimilation of modernism suggests that the modernist critique is not ignored but is, on the contrary, taken on board; simultaneously, though, this does constitute a rejection insofar as it is a case of an assimilation of what reacts against assimilation.

In *Antidiets of the Avant-garde*, Novero makes, from a specifically alimentary perspective, a similar observation about the relationship between the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde. “Contrary to common wisdom,” Novero writes, the “neo-avant-garde production from the sixties through the eighties did not appropriate the quest for the new, which was characteristic of the classical avant-garde” because it “affirms itself as a return of the avant-garde”.[[647]](#footnote-647) But neither does the neo-avant-garde “reject the legacy of the earlier avant-garde”; rather, it “sets out to *incorporate* and *digest* [it].”[[648]](#footnote-648) According to Novero’s account, then, the neo-avant-garde does not appropriate the avant-garde’s injunction to make it new because it posits itself as a return of the avant-garde and, therefore, not as something new; whilst the former can be distinguished from the latter, then, it cannot be said to reject it. Admittedly, postmodernism does not posit itself as a return of modernism in the same way as the neo-avant-garde posits itself as a return of the avant-garde in Novero’s account; nevertheless, this account does suggest a similar relationship between the two – namely, a relationship of incorporation, assimilation, and digestion.

This metaphorically alimentary relationship between the two movements also manifests itself in their treatment of the alimentary. As we have seen in the introduction, Woolf criticises the “convention” amongst novelists of rarely “spar[ing] a word for what [is] eaten”[[649]](#footnote-649) – a critique that is taken on board, typically in explicitly self-conscious ways, by postmodernist artists like Andy Warhol. Crucially, it is this very self-consciousness that is at centre stage here; what matters in the “Soup Can Series,” for example, is not so much the object (the soup can) as the fact of its inclusion in the artwork, something further highlighted by the fact that nothing else is actually included in it. In a similar way, what stands out in Robert Hass’ poem “Poem with a Cucumber in It” (2005) is the title’s statement that a cucumber is included in the poem rather than the attention paid to the cucumber in the poem.[[650]](#footnote-650) If, then, Warhol and Hass incorporate Woof’s modernist critique there is a real sense in which their very incorporation of the critique ends up disabling it.

This can also be seen in the relationship between the treatment of food in the literary texts of the first and second halves of the twentieth century examined in the previous chapters. In presenting us with a conjunction between eating otherwise and being otherwise, for example, Auster and Atwood seem to incorporate the treatment of food in Bataille’s and Beckett’s work. But, as with Warhol vis-à-vis Woolf, this incorporation amounts to a kind of invalidation. Note how instances of figurative auto-cannibalismare found both in Beckett and Atwood; in the Beckett texts we have looked at, however, such figurative self-consumption allows for the emergence of a liberating possibility of transformation whereas in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* the alimentary-related possibility of transformation is exploited by a totalitarian regime that imposes this mode of consumption as a means to achieving the internalisation of its principles and the eradication of individual freedom.

Similarly, whilst the otherwise of eating in both Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* and Auster’s *City of Glass* materialises as an abstinence from, or a drastic limitation of, proper eating, this stems from fundamentally different reasons in each case. Bataille’s characters choose to reject actual ingestion in order to indulge in unusual acts of “eating” because of their dissatisfaction with the usual. Their eating otherwise is, in other words, a rejection of the status quo; it is their way of not conforming to the circumstances in which they find themselves. In *City of Glass*, on the other hand, Quinn makes the decision to limit his intake of food because he is, in effect, obliged to do so in order to prevent the possibility of Stillman Sr getting to Stillman Jr; Quinn must condition himself to eat as little as he can so that he does not need to abandon his post to get food. Contrary to the otherwise of eating in *Story of the Eye*, then, Quinn’s alimentary decision is about adapting to, rather than reacting against, the circumstances in which he finds himself. Crucial here is also the fact that Quinn’s aspiration to “total fast” is aimed at the limitation of the possible, which is, as we have seen, characteristic of what Deleuze calls “control societies.” In this sense, Quinn’s eating otherwise conforms to the status quo both specifically – that is, in terms of his own particular circumstances within the fictional context – and more generally, that is, in terms of the world within which Auster’s fiction is produced.

From this vantage, the treatment of the alimentary in the works examined in this study points to the wider relationship between modernity and postmodernity theorised by Boltanski and Chiapello – a relationship of incorporation and assimilation. Boltanski and Chiapello’s main aim is to discover why and how the critique of capitalism has been, as they claim, rendered ineffective under “late capitalism,” which Jameson famously associates with the postmodern condition. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that the “main themes” of artistic critique prior to May ’68, including the “demands for autonomy” and the “promise of unbounded liberation” from constraints, have been “adopted” by the late capitalist system.[[651]](#footnote-651) Boltanski and Chiapello examine various management texts from the 1970s onwards and find that such texts encourage managers to promote employee initiative and, therefore, to provide employees with a significant degree of autonomy. These management texts, then, seem to be actually taking on board the demands for autonomy articulated in the artistic critique of capitalism, and do so to the extent that they “blur” the “opposition between intellectuals and artists on one side” and “economic elites on the other.”[[652]](#footnote-652) Precisely because the latter “hasten to adopt on their own account” the critique that had been developed by the former, this “critique loses its point of application.”[[653]](#footnote-653) In a similar vein, we have seen that what was a nonconformist otherwise of eating in Bataille and Beckett becomes, in Auster and Atwood, something that reflects, and is imposed by, the status quo. The same principle applies to the interrelated theme of the demands for “unbounded liberation” from constraints. In Bataille’s fiction, this is expressed as a vision of allowing the world to exist as it is, without the intervention of the subject, and the stage of capitalism with which Boltanski and Chiapello are concerned perfectly agrees with such demands for unbounded liberation, the fundamental principle of neoliberalism being, of course, precisely that markets are left to operate unregulated, free from state intervention.[[654]](#footnote-654)

In light of this, Boltanski and Chiapello’s engagement with the relationship between the artistic critique of mass capitalism and what they call “the new spirit of capitalism” – a spirit of incorporation and assimilation – corresponds to the postmodernist incorporation and assimilation of the modernist correlation between the otherwise of eating and the otherwise of being explored in this study. This incorporation and assimilation effectively undoes the “otherwise” as such: what was a reaction against and rejection of the status quo becomes the status quo. Indeed, my aim in this concluding chapter has been to show, through the correlation of the question of eating with the question of being, that the literature we have examined provides an alimentary perspective through which the relationship between modernism and postmodernism can be thought. As Foucault’s forgotten alimentary monster would suggest, the entanglement of the ontological with the alimentary is *general*, and we have accordingly seen that there is an entire conceptual tradition wherein ontology lays hold of the alimentary and the alimentary lays hold of ontology, thereby reconfiguring it. Also in agreement with Foucault’s forgotten alimentary monster, this conclusion has flagged up the specificity of being in showing that such ontological reconfigurations assume forms that are revelatory of the contexts in which they materialise.

With these points in mind, I would like to end by suggesting that this focus on both the general and the specific could map out the task of the future gastro-critic. Within this task are not just the alimentary monsters of previous centuries but also the pertinent question of the contemporary alimentary monster and its future(s) as these emerge from various manifestations – be they the genetically modified foods in Ruth Ozeki’s fiction or, indeed, the Yorkshire “Enviropig”; the laboratory-created “ethical” animals of Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy (for example, the legless and headless “ChickieNobs”), or the now very real “shmeat”; the nearly realised vision of the “techno” pain-free animal and, by extension, of its conscience-clear eaters, or even the not-so-nearly-realised vision of the nourishing radio waves dreamed-up in  *The Futurist Cookbook.*In one way or another, explicitly or implicitly, literature has always imagined the alimentary monster, and such manifestations are revealing of our conceptions of past, present, and future being.

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1. Worse than “moron,” “vermin,” and “abortion,” “crritic” is the ultimate insult that brings Vladimir and Estragon’s game of insults to an end – Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 2006), 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Faber, 2009), 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 3-4, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, Descartes’ assertion that he “can think up countless [geometrical] shapes which there can be no suspicion of my ever having encountered through the senses, and yet I can demonstrate various properties of these shapes” – René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. and trans. John Cottingham(Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own; Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Christian Moraru, “To Eat is a Compromise: Theory, Identity, and Dietary Politics after Kafka,” *Symploke* 19, no. 1 (2011): 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Moraru, 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Most thinkers today would argue that being should not be thought in this way, and many do engage with the subject differently, presenting us with an understanding of being as mutable. One example is Catherine Malabou’s *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cesare Casarino, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2002), xxxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Jacques Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” trans. G. M. Goshgarian, in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s “Specters of Marx*,*”* ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Casarino, xxxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Probyn, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Tellingly, Probyn’s philosophical references are primarily drawn from thinkers such as Foucault and Deleuze, whose work radically breaks from “traditional” philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Samuel Beckett, “Whoroscope,” in *Collected Poems*, *1930-1978* (London: Calder, 1984), 1-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy: City of Glass; Ghosts; The Locked Room* (London: Faber, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (London: Vintage, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste: Or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, trans. M. F. K. Fisher (New York: Vintage, 2011), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Qtd. in Frederick Gregory, “Proto-Monism in German Philosophy, Theology, and Science, 1800-1845,” in *Monism: Science, Philosophy, Religion, and the History of a Worldview*, ed. Todd W. Weir (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Sandra Kumari de Sachy, “We Are What We Eat: Sri Swami Satchidananda on Vegetarianism,” in *Food for the Soul: Vegetarianism and Yoga Traditions*, ed. Steven J. Rosen (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger 2011), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Victor Lindlahr, *You Are What You Eat: How to Keep Health with Diet* (Hollywood, CA: Newcastle Pub*.* Co., 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Paul D. Swanson, “We Are What We Eat: The Origins and Current Legal Status of ‘Natural’ and ‘Organic’ Food Labels,” *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies* (2012). Web exclusives. Available at:

    <http://www.gastronomica.org/we-are-what-we-eat/> [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Signe Rousseau, *Food Media: Celebrity Chefs and the Politics of Everyday Interference* (Oxford: Berg, 2012), xix. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ruth Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2013); Irvine Welsh, *The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs* (London: Cape, 2006); Jackie Kay, “Reality, Reality,” in *Reality, Reality* (London: Picador, 2012), 1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Robert Appelbaum, *Dishing it Out: In Search of the Restaurant Experience* (London: Reaktion, 2011), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Robert Appelbaum, *Aguecheek’s Beef, Belch’s Hiccup, and Other Gastronomic Interjections: Literature, Culture, and Food among the Early Moderns* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 2006), xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2005), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Annette Cozzi, *The Discourses of Food in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. David Bevan, ed., *Literary Gastronomy* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988); Susanne M. Skubal, *Word of Mouth: Food and Fiction After Freud* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002); Michel Delville, *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-garde* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Lorna Piatti-Farnell, *Food and Culture in Contemporary American Fiction* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2000), 1, 3. See also Andrea Adolph, *Food and Femininity in Twentieth-Century British Women’s Fiction* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Sceats, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Georg Simmel, “Sociology of the Meal,” trans. Mark Ritter, in *Simmel On Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997), 130. A similar paradox emerges, in a different context, from Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of eating and excreting in *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Erica Fudge, “Why it’s Easy Being a Vegetarian’, *Textual Practice* 24, no. 1 (2010): 149-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), vol. 7, 1953, esp. 181-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Melanie Klein, “Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant,” in *Developments in Psycho-analysis*, ed. Melanie Klein et al.(London: Karnac, 2002), 198-236. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Len S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Sceats, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See, for instance, Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2007). Whilst some of Sartre’s ideas, for example that “man is nothing other than what he makes of himself” (ibid., 22), resonate with the fictional texts we will look at, they are nevertheless not necessarily upheld. The same is true of the wider point that Sartre wants to make with this declaration, namely, that in fashioning myself I fashion man (ibid., 25), as well as of the existentialist maxim that existence *precedes* essence. Therefore, even though the association between the “here and now” – which will be explored through the act of eating – and the question of essence or being can be broadly seen as existentialist, because of disparities such as those indicated here, as well as other complications, the term “ontological” (in McHale’s broad sense) rather than the more specific and heavily loaded term “existentialist” will be used throughout. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Casarino, xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France,* *1974-1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003), esp. 98-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Chloe Taylor, “Abnormal Appetites: Foucault, Atwood, and the Normalization of Animal-Based Diet,” *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 10, no. 4 (2012): 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Taylor also takes up Foucault’s forgotten alimentary monster in the above-cited essay, where she discusses the pathologisation of individuals with supposedly “abnormal” dietary habits in twentieth-century literature. We will here examine alimentary “monstrosities” from a different angle. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Foucault, *Abnormal*, 55-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Although Christianity is not associated with modernity as often as Freud, Hegel, and Marx are, Simon Malpass observes that “[s]ome critics locate the beginnings of modernity much earlier” than we are usually inclined to think, “by exploring the development of Christian theology which finds a key interpreter in the figure of the theologian Saint Augustine.” The examples Malpass cites are Hegel (particularly in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*) and Jean-François Lyotard (in *The Confession of St. Augustine*) – Simon Malpass, *The Postmodern* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. McHale argues that, in Beckett’s work “modernist poetics begins ... to leak away – though not fatally,” thus labelling Beckett as a “limit modernist” – McHale, 12-13. Richard Begam suggests as much in associating Beckett with the “end of modernity” in *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996). See also Connor, “Postmodernism and Literature,” *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 70ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Bataille’s writings were openly endorsed by many poststructuralist thinkers, including Jacques Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 317-50; Julia Kristeva, “Bataille, Experience and Practice,” in *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, ed. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 237-64; Roland Barthes, “The Metaphor of the Eye,” in *Story of the Eye*, 119-27; Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*,ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980), 29-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Terry Eagleton, “Contradictions of Modernism,” in *Modernity, Modernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Manuel Barbeito (Santiago de Compostella: Santiago de Compostella UP, 2000), 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?*,4th ed. (London: Academy Editions, 1996), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid. See also Lyotard’s assertion that “[e]clecticism is the degree zero of” postmodern culture: one “eats McDonald’s food for lunch,” Lyotard says by way of exemplification, “and local cuisine for dinner” – Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), 76. David Harvey too has recourse to food so as to demonstrate certain characteristics that he sees as symptomatic of postmodernity in *The Postmodern Condition: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), esp. 87-88, 286, 299-301. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (London: William Heinemann, 2007), 106. Gay’s claim, however, is somewhat misleading because, as Michael North has pointed out, Gay mistakenly gives 1914 as the year in which Pound’s injunction first appeared, thus making it “seem foundational” of the modernist project; Pound’s injunction was actually first published in 1928, that is, “well after the appearance of [many] major works of modernist art and literature” – Michael North, *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2013), 169. The phrase “make it new” first appeared in Ezra Pound, *Ta Hio: The Great Learning, Newly Rendered into the American Language* (Seattle: University of Washington Chapbooks, 1928), 12. Although the actual year of the publication of Pound’s injunction makes Gay’s observation misleading, it is nevertheless undeniable that the modernists were committed to novelty. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Malpass, 18. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Woolf, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Filippo T. Marinetti, *The Futurist Cookbook*, ed. Lesley Chamberlain, trans. Suzanne Brill (London: Trefoil, 1989), 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. André Breton, “First Manifesto of Surrealism,” in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 438. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Delville, 8, 80-82, passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Franz Kafka, “A Hunger-Artist,” in *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. Michael Hofmann (London: Penguin, 2007), 252-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Moraru, 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. For a comprehensive overview, see Malpass, 56-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. North, 150.      [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Steven Connor, *Beckett, Modernism, and the Material Imagination* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2014), 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. See also Chad Lavin’s claim that the “you are what you eat” mantra presents us with a paradox regarding the question of subjectivity: on the one hand, Lavin argues, the phrase assigns responsibility to the subject (“you”), thus presenting it as sovereign, autonomous, and agential; on the other, it challenges this conception because it shows the dependency of the subject on what it eats, thus presenting it as “vulnerable” and “needy” – Chad Lavin, *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2013), xii, xxv. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. McHale, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid., 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. A case in point is Ihab Hassan’s table of two columns juxtaposing modernist characteristics with postmodernist ones – Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1982), 267-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Connor, “Postmodernism and Literature,” 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. A list of examples from modernist literature demonstrating a clear aversion to canned food can be found in John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 2002), 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Malpass, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, trans. Don Bary et al. (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1992), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Cecilia Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2010), xv*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Michael Bell, “The Metaphysics of Modernism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 9. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ana Ruiz, *The Spirit of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Algora, 2001), 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. The name “Phanes” comes from *phaino*, meaning “to bring to light, reveal.” [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*,2 vols. (Middlesex: Penguin, 1960), vol. 1, 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Laird Scranton, *The Cosmological Origins of Myth and Symbol: From the Dogon and Ancient Egypt to India, Tibet, and China* (Rochester, Vt: Inner Traditions, 2010), 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid., 98, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Venetia Newall, *An Egg at Easter: A Folklore Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 197-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Robert Burton, *Egg: Nature’s Miracle of Packaging* (London: Collins, 1987), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Clara Pinto-Correia, *The Ovary of Eve: Egg and Sperm and Preformation* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1997), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Microspherology*, trans. Weiland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Ibid., 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Ibid., 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Ibid., 324-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone, 1981), 50, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al.(Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2000); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Gilles Deleuze, “Desert Islands,” in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina(Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1969), 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Robert Eaglestone, “Postmodernism and Ethics Against the Metaphysics of Comprehension,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Ibid., 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Elizabeth Telfer goes further than Levinas in arguing that eating and drinking are *primarily* for enjoyment, as they are not actually “necessary for survival. What is necessary is ... being fed and watered, and these can happen without eating and drinking,” for example “by intravenous drip” – Elizabeth Telfer, *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. This survey is not exhaustive; many other thinkers whose work will not be discussed here also correlate questions of eating and questions of being, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johan Gottfried Herder being two examples. For their treatment of food and being see the relevant chapters in Kelly Oliver’s *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. See Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia UP, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham Press, 2008), 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Joanne Faulkner, “Negotiating Vulnerability through ‘Animal’ and ‘Child’: Agamben and Ranciére at the Limit of Being Human,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 16, no. 4 (2011): 76. Faulkner’s impression that philosophy has brushed aside the question of food is widely accepted, as indicated perhaps most forcefully by people such as Michiel Korthals, who, like Faulkner, disagree with the claim that philosophy’s “higher” concerns do not “go together” with “lowly, everyday concerns,” like the question of food. Asserting that such claims are “misconceptions,” that “food and philosophy belong together,” Korthals argues that “[f]ood issues have been ignored for too long by philosophy,” in this way effectively agreeing with Faulkner’s statement – Michiel Korthals, *Before Dinner: Philosophy and Ethics of Food*, trans. Frans Kooymans (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004), 1. This is also the impression in pop philosophy; the thirty-first issue (“Philosophy and Food”) of the magazine *Philosophy Now*, for example, features an essay by Ray Boisvert, which “describes the disdain which many philosophers down the ages have had for food, and the dire consequences this has had for their philosophy.” Boisvert, like Korthals, thinks that philosophy and food do go together but clearly agrees with Faulkner, subscribing to the view that philosophy has ignored the question of eating – Ray Boisvert, “Philosophy Regains its Senses,” *Philosophy Now* 31 (March/April 2001). Available at: <https://philosophynow.org/issues/31/Philosophy\_Regains\_its\_Senses> [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (London: Athlone, 1990), 50-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Qtd. in Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Ibid., 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Lévi-Strauss associates cooked food with culture and raw with nature, thus apparently upholding a rather clear distinction, but acknowledges complications (i.e., roasted food is cooked outside and raw in the middle) which suggest that food may indeed be viewed as a scandal – Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Culinary Triangle,” trans. Peter Brooks, in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 28-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Aristotle, *De Anima: Books II and III (With Passages from Book I)*, trans. D. W. Hamlyn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Interesting in this respect is Plato’s stance on meat-eating and soul “transmigration,” explored by Daniel A. Dombrowski in “Was Plato a Vegetarian?,” *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 18, no. 1 (1984): 1-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. David Gallop (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Plato, *Republic*,trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Ibid. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Lisa M. Heldke, “Foodmaking as a Thoughtful Practice,” in *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food*, ed. Lisa M. Heldke and Deane W. Curtin (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992), 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Plato, *Timaeus*,trans. Benjamin Jowett (Rockville, MD: Serenity Publishers, 2009), 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Plato, *Republic*, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Plato, *Gorgias*; *Menexenus*; *Protagoras*,ed. Malcolm Schofield, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2010); Plato, *Symposium*,trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2008). In *Gorgias*, for example, sophistry is associated with pleasant (yet harmful) food, and philosophy with unpleasant (yet beneficial) food – see Jessica Moss, “The Doctor and the Pastry Chef: Pleasure and Persuasion in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2007): 229-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Plato, *Timaeus*, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. This is from Derrida’s unpublished seminar series “*Rhetorique du Cannibalisme*” (University of California). The references are from David Farrell Krell’s account of the seminars in “All You Can’t Eat: Derrida’s Course ‘*Rhetorique du Cannibalisme*’ (1990-1991),” *Research in Phenomenology* 36 (2006): 147, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*,trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Ibid., 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Ibid., 480. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Plato, *Timaeus*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Michael Inwood, *A Commentary on Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 435. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nicholls (New York and London: Basic Books, 1969), 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Ibid., 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, intrvs., “An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the Limits of Digestion,” trans. Brian Manning Delaney, *E-flux* 2, no. 1 (2009): 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton(Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2004), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Inwood, *A Commentary on Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind*, 435. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Penguin: London, 1975), 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology: Part One with Selections from Parts Two and Three and Supplementary Texts*,ed. C. J. Arthur (S.l.: International Publishers, 2004), 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011), 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Ibid., 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Ibid., 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Inwood makes the same point in *A Commentary on Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind*, 436. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Although “Judeo-Christianity” is clearly a problematic term, the brevity required for this survey does not allow for a separate discussion of Judaism and Christianity. Here and throughout, I quote from the King James Version of the Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. This has given rise to the debate whether vegetarianism/veganism is the most appropriate diet for Christians – see Teresa M. Shaw, “Vegetarianism, Heresy, and Asceticism in Late Ancient Christianity,” in *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology*, ed. David Grumett and Rachel Muers (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 73-99. For a wider discussion of food within Christianity, see Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John William Rogerson (Cambridge: Eerdmans: 2003), 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. The most well-known attempt to decipher which animals are unclean is in Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 51-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” intrv. Jean-Luc Nancy, trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell, in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Sara Guyer, “Albeit Eating: Towards an Ethics of Cannibalism,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 2, no. 1 (1997), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Jean Soler, “The Semiotics of Food in the Bible,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 63, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Ibid., 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Mark Forsyth, *The Etymologicon:* *A Circular Stroll Through the Hidden Connections of the English Language* (London: Faber , 2011), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*,vol. 7, 1953, 181-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Ibid., 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Ibid., 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Lacan’s “hommelette” myth, which will be discussed in Chapter 4, centres on this unattainable object that drives and sustains human desire *–* Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 196-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Rand (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1994), 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Ibid., 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Ibid., 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*,vol. 13, 1955, 134-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Ibid., 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Ibid., 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Ibid., 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. On the controversies of the Anna O. case, including the effectiveness of the “talking cure,” see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Remembering Anna O.: A Century of Psychoanalytic Mystification*,trans. Kirby Olson (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*,vol. 2, 1955, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. For more cases that seem to verify the pattern “food in/words out” (and vice versa), see *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*,vol. 2, 1955, 211-12; and, vol. 3, 1962, 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2, 1955, 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Jakob von Uekxüll, “An Introduction to *Umwelt*,” trans. Gösta Brunow, *Semiotica* 134, no. 1 (2001): 107-10. On Uexküll’s influence on continental thinkers, see Brett Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies: The Animal Environments of Uexküll, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze* (Albany: SUNY, 2008). See also Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell(Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), 39-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*,trans. William McNeil and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), 243. Although Uexküll experimented only on very small animals, Heidegger ignores this to draw conclusions about all nonhuman animals – on this, see Matthew Calarco, “Heidegger’s Zoontology,” in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*,ed. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 24-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Ibid., 241-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Ibid., 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Ibid., 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Ibid., 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, trans. John Irons (London: Reaktion, 2005), 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*,trans. Duncan Large (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Joanne Faulkner, “Disgust, Purity, and a Longing for Companionship: Dialectics of Affect in Nietzsche’s Imagined Community,” *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 44, no. 1 (2013): 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemical Tract*, trans. Ian Johnston (Virginia: Richer Resources Publications, 2009), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Nicholas D. More, *Nietzsche’s Last Laugh: Ecce Homo as Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014), 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudmarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Ibid. The scholarship on Nietzsche’s views on evolution and his complex relationship to Charles Darwin is extensive. Book-length studies on this subject include John Richardson’s *Nietzsche’s New Darwinism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) and Dirk R. Johnson’s *Nietzsche’s Anti-Darwinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Ibid., 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Malcolm Pasley, “Nietzsche’s Use of Medical Terms,” in *Nietzsche: Imagery and Thought: A Collection of Essays*,ed. Malcolm Pasley (London: Methuen, 1978), 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. Slavoj Žižek, “Hegel and Shitting,” in *Hegel and the Infinite*, ed. Clayton Crockett and Creston Davis (New York: Columbia 2011), 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Ibid., 223. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 223-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Ibid., 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*,181. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Derrida, “Eating Well,” 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974): 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” trans. Daniel Breazeale, in *The Nietzsche Reader*,ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Ibid., 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. In “White Mythology,” Derrida engages with this point, reading Nietzsche “against the grain.” [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies,” 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Ibid., 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Sara Guyer, “Buccality,” in *Derrida, Deleuze, Psychoanalysis*,ed. Gabriele Schwab (New York: Columbia UP, 2008), 77-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Emmanuel Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” intrv. Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley, trans. Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Roberto Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 168-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Guyer, “Buccality,” 79. Guyer’s association of the nonhuman animal’s facelessness with the question of language finds a specific example in Carol Adams’ engagement with the word “meat” – Carol J. Adams, *Neither Man Nor Beast: Feminism and the Defense of Animals* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 115. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida makes the same point about the term “the animal,” which makes all animals the same, depriving them of their distinct faces (42ff). Leaving aside Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche in “White Mythology,” Nietzsche claims that this deprivation of individuality is not a characteristic of specific words (like “meat,” “animal,” or “leaf”) but of all words, of language. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. See John Llewelyn, “Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal),” in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. Roberto Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 234-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies,” 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*,trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Derrida, “Eating Well,” 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Objections to Derrida’s dismissal of the “what to eat” question include: David Wood, “*Comment ne pas manger*: Deconstruction and Humanism,” in *Animal Others: On Ethics, Ontology and Animal Life*, ed. H. Peter Steeves (Albany: SUNY, 1999), 15-36; Matthew Calarco, “Deconstruction Is Not Vegetarianism: Humanism, Subjectivity, and Animal Ethics,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 37 (2004): 175-201; and, Gary Steiner, *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2013), 77-131 (esp. 125-31). [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Faulkner, “Negotiating Vulnerability,” 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 149-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. (See overleaf image). Edia Connole and Scott Wilson, “*En soirée culinaire par Georges Bataille, pour* Radical Love (II),” in *Mouth.* Available online at:

     <http://mmmouth.wordpress.com/en-soiree-culinaire-par-george-bataille/> [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin, 2001); *Histoire de l’oeil*, in *Oeuvres Complètes, 1922-1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 9-78. All page references, given in brackets in the main text, are from these editions. Page numbers from the English translation appear first. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1990), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. During his lifetime, however, “Bataille was known mainly as the ... author of ‘erotic’ or ‘pornographic’ novels” and as the editor of *Critique* – Allan Stoekl, “Preface,” *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” *Deadalus* 101 (1972): 61-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, *Un chien andalou* (Les grands films classiques, 1929). [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkley: California UP, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Georges Bataille, *Blue of Noon*,trans. Harry Mathews (London: Penguin, 2012); Georges Bataille, *My Mother; Madame Edwarda; The Dead Man*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Penguin, 2012). Like de Sade’s, Bataille’s works are usually considered to qualify as “*literary* pornography” rather than “*pure* pornography.” Most relevant here would be Jean-Marie Goulemot’s distinction between *pornographic* and *libertine* narratives, the former referring to fictions that are only concerned with sexual encounters, and the latter to fictions that are concerned with the “interplay” between “the sexual and the cerebral.” In libertine narratives, Goulemot asserts, “physical ecstasy” often turns out to be “less important than the cerebral pleasures of manipulation” – Jean-Marie Goulemot, “Toward a Definition of Libertine Fiction and Pornographic Novels,” trans. Arthur Greenspan, *Yale French Studies* 94 (1998): 135, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination,” in *Story of the Eye*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Ibid., 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Barthes, “The Metaphor of the Eye,” 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. In a 1951 letter to Marguerite de Bassiano, Bataille asked for a manuscript of Beckett’s new novel (*Malone Dies*), expressing his unwillingness to wait for another ten months until its publication – Georges Bataille, *Choix de lettres 1917-1962*,ed. Michel Surya(Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 434. See also Georges Bataille, “Molloy’s Silence,” in *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. S. E. Gontarski, revised ed. (London and New York: Anthem, 2012), 103-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Amongst other thinkers, Heidegger has drawn intricate associations between the use/non-use of a thing and its being. For Heidegger’s and Bataille’s respective understandings of “use,” see Richard A. Lee, “Politics and the Thing: Excess as the Matter of Politics,” in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007), 240-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. A correlation between a thing’s “use-value” and its “proper” nature is discernible in Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, trans. Robert Hurley, 3 vols. (New York: Zone, 1991-1993); and, Georges Bataille, “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1985), 91-102. To this extent, Bataille’s use of the term is close to Marx’s but, as Amy Wendling argues, in Bataille it coincides with unproductive expenditure/consumption whereas in Marx it is primarily geared toward productivity – Amy E. Wendling, “Sovereign Consumption as a Species of Communist Theory: Reconceptualizing Energy,” in *Reading Bataille Now*, 35-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. I define “utilisation-value” as a purely *qualitative* term and, as such, it is not to be conflated with Marx’s “exchange-value,” which is primarily *quantitative*. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. A rare exception is Eugene Thacker’s “Spiritual Meat: Resurrection and Religious Horror in Bataille,” *Collapse vii: Culinary Materialism*, ed. Reza Negarestani and Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), 437-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Criticism on the novella can be divided in three groups: the first includes readings that focus on the linguistic aspect of the text – see Barthes, “The Metaphor of the Eye,” 119-27; the second includes readings that focus on the theme of sex/death – see Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women’s Press, 1981), 167-78; and the third readings that strike a balance in their emphasis on the text’s sexual and linguistic elements – see Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 72-87; and, Michael Halley “. . . And a Truth for a Truth,” in *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, 285-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. On Bataille and Heidegger on nonhuman animality, see Tom Tyler, *Ciferae: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2012), 9-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Ibid., 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. In *Eroticism*, Bataille explores the concepts of “continuity” and “discontinuity” not from the angle of *consommation* as food consumption but as sexual consummation – Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London and New York: Boyars, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (London: Virago, 1993), 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Marx and Engels,48. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Ellmann, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Other interpretations of the novella deprive its human characters of any intentionality. Shannon Winnubst argues that there is “no narrative of desire” that “drives” the characters, who are apparently simply immersed in “the energy of the scenes themselves.” Patrick ffrench [*sic*] similarly denies the characters any intentionality, ascribing it instead to body parts, to a “vagina that deploys itself around various objects” and an eye that “has its own mind” – Shannon Winnubst, “Bataille’s Queer Pleasures: The Universe as Spider or Spit,” in *Reading Bataille Now*, 89; Patrick ffrench, *The Cut: Reading Bataille’s Histoire de l’oeil* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. The term “alimentary-sexual” is Elspeth Probyn’s, who coins it through Deleuze and Guattari and uses it in reference to one of Bataille’s contemporaries, Alice B. Toklas – Probyn, 60-62, 78, passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 149-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” trans. William Lovitt, in *Philosophical and Political Writings*, ed. Manfred Stassen (London: Continuum, 2003), 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*,ed. and trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1965), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. On the importance of behaviour in Stoicism, see John Sellars, *Stoicism* (California: California UP, 2006), 32ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Qtd. in Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus: Collected and Preserved by Arrian, his Disciple, in Four Books* (London: S.n., 1766), 111. See also Bataille’s use of the image of the foot “dipped in mud” in “Big Toe,” in *Visions of Excess*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. The energy and violence associated with Bataille’s work are at odds with the calm endurance of the Stoic attitude; that Bataille’s *attitude* to being is not Stoic, however, need not mean that his *conception* of being does not share any similarities with the Stoic conception of being. For another engagement with Bataille’s understanding of being in reference to the Stoics, particularly Marcus Aurelius, see Marc de Kessel, “A Sovereign’s Anatomy: The Antique in Bataille’s Modernity and its Impact on his Political Thought,” trans. G. Daniël Bügel, in *Cogito and the Unconscious: Sic 2*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1988), 219-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. Franz Kafka, “Metamorphosis,” in *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, 90; *Die Verwandlung*, ed. Peter Hutchinson and Michael Minden (Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2006), 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Malabou, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Boyars, 2006), 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. Barthes, “The Metaphor of the Eye,” 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, ed. François Matheron and Oliver Corpet, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006), 163-207. For Althusser, however, the “taking of form” refers to the coming into being of something (of a “form” that may or may not “take hold”) *out of nothing,* out of a *void*. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. Terry Eagleton, “Edible Ecriture,” *Times Higher Education* (24 October 1997). Available online at: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=104281&sectioncode=26>. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Ros Bramwell, “Blood and Milk: Constructions of Female Bodily Fluids in Western Society,” *Women & Health* 34, no. 4 (2001): 85-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. See Richard Iveson, “Domestic Scenes and Species Trouble – On Judith Butler and Other Animals,” *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 10, no. 4 (2012): 20-40; Chloe Taylor, “The Precarious Lives of Animals: Butler, Coetzee, and Animal Ethics,” *Philosophy Today* 52, no. 1 (2008): 60-72; and, Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 2013), esp. 18-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Nonhuman animals are not referred to at all in *Gender Trouble* and when they are mentioned in *Bodies that Matter* (48) it is only briefly and merely to facilitate Butler’s critique of Plato’s portrayal of the male *human* body. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Sova Fisher, “The Vision Thing: The Cat’s Eye and the Sacred in Georges Bataille’s *Histoire de l’oeil*,” *Romantic Review* 89, no. 4 (1998): 541. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. Thacker, 476. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Ibid., 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Ibid., 471. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. Richard Iveson, “Deeply Ecological Deleuze and Guattari: Humanism’s Becoming Animal,” *Humanimalia* 4, no. 2 (2013): 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. Whilst Deleuze and Guattari associate “becoming-animal” with “demonic animals” (which they distinguish from “Oedipal” or domesticated animals, amongst which the cat in *Story of the Eye* would have to be included), Iveson’s wider point that “becoming-animal” is an exclusively human capacity illuminates the scene in question– Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 265-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. De Kessel, 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Ibid., 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Although Simone brings food for the narrator while he is staying with her (21/24) and, in another instance, appears to bite into a bull’s raw testicle (53/56), neither the food she brings for the narrator nor the testicle she bites into are said to have been actually eaten. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Bataille’s preoccupation with excess (primarily the excess of energy, which encompasses excesses like non-reproductive sex as well as art) associates his work with decadence. The general absence of proper acts of eating in *Story of the Eye* suggests that this is an association with the kind of decadence portrayed by authors likeJori-Karl Huysmans, which Naomi Schor describes (particularly in reference to *A Rebours*) as “an eating disorder” manifested as a “rejection of substantial food,” food, that is, which serves the purpose of sustenance – Naomi Schor, “Agape and Anorexia: Decadent Feast and Democratic Feast,” in *French Food on the Table, on the Page, and in French Culture*, ed. Lawrence R. Schehr and Allen Weiss (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. Michael Richardson (London and New York: Verso, 1994), esp. 44-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Antonin Artaud, “To Have Done with the Judgment of God,” in *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*,ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (Berkley: California UP, 1988), 559. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. “Lord Auch,” Bataille’s pseudonym for *Story of the Eye*, supports the association between “shit” and “God” emerging from this reformulation. Bataille reveals that *Auch* (pronounced *ōsh*) is a shortened version of *aux chiottes* (“to the shithouse”) and explains that, since “*Lord* is English for God (in the Scriptures),” “Lord Auch is God relieving himself” – Bataille, “W.C. [Preface to *Story of the Eye* from *Le Petit*: 1943],” in *Story of the Eye*, 76. Guattari also reformulates Artaud’s title in an essay where, like Bataille, he elaborates on defecation, albeit in a different way. Here, Guattari calls for the recovery of “the pleasure of shitting” which is “systematically destroyed by the coercive conditioning of the sphincter” – “a conditioning,” he claims, “used by capitalist authority to inscribe even onto the self its fundamental principles,” like “neurotic accumulation” and “the mystique of property” – Félix Guattari, “To Have Done with the Massacre of the Body,” trans. Jarred Becker, in *Chaosophy: Texts and Interviews, 1972-77*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. David L. Sweet et al. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. Žižek, “Hegel and Shitting,” 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. Scholarship on Bataille’s relationship to Hegel (particularly Kojève’s Hegel) is extensive. David Cunningham argues that the early Bataille’s “perceived anti-Hegelianism” was not based on a careful reading of Hegel but on his personal conflict with André Breton who (misguidedly) cited Hegel when attacking Bataille – David Cunningham, “The Futures of Surrealism: Hegelianism, Romanticism, and the Avant-garde,” *SubStance* 34, no. 2 (2005): 50-51. See also Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy,” 317-50; and, Christopher M. Gemerchak, *The Sunday of the Negative: Reading Bataille Reading Hegel* (Albany: SUNY, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Inwood, *A Commentary on Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind*, 435. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*,trans. Beckett and Patrick Bowles (London: Faber, 2009), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, trans. Eric Prenowitz et al.(London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. Rodolphe el-Khoury, “Introduction,” in Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. Rodolphe el-Khoury and Nadia Benabid(Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber, 1995), 242, 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Marinetti, 68, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Ibid., 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Pound, *Ta Hio*, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Ezra Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (S. l.: Liveright, 1970), 112. Emphasis added. On this, see also North, 167-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. See Laura Frost, *Sex Drives: Fantasies and Fascism in Literary Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002). See also Carey’s above-cited *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, which traces links between Hitler’s views and the views of many modernists (including Wyndham Lewis, Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf, W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, and E. M. Forster) on “the masses,” mass media, consumerism, and high art. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Salvador Dalí, *The Unspeakable Confessions of Salvador Dalí, as Told to André Parinaud*,trans. Harold Salesmon (New York: William Morrow, 1976), 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. See Frost, 64-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Michael Richardson, however, makes a brief reference to Bataille’s first surviving text from 1919, arguing that it gives “the impression ... of the sort of young man who would soon be drawn towards the neo-fascism of *L’Action Française*” – Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 20. On Bataille’s connection with fascism, see Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason*: *The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 153-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1990), 102-23; Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930s,” in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 26-45; Jesse Goldhammer, “Dare to Know, Dare to Sacrifice: Georges Bataille and the Crisis of the Left,” in *Reading Bataille Now*, 15-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Goldhammer, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkley: California UP, 1993), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Marinetti, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Stanley G. Payne, “Fascist Italy and Spain, 1922-45,” in *Spain and the Mediterranean since 1898*,ed. Raanan Rein (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. The semi-autobiographical nature of the novella is revealed in the “Coincidences” section (69-74/73-78). [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Georges Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” in *Visions of Excess*, 137-60. See also Georges Bataille et al., “Counter-Attack: Union of the Struggle of Revolutionary Intellectuals,” in *Surrealism Against the Current: Tracts and Declarations*, ed. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (London: Pluto, 2001), 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Georges Bataille, “Popular Front in the Street,” in *Visions of Excess*, 161-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. For a list of the laws on animals and nature passed in the Third Reich, see Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000), 181-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Adolph Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Hutchinson, 1969), 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Victoria Johnson, “Everyday Rituals of the Master Race: Fascism, Stratification, and the Fluidity of ‘Animal’ Domination,” in *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation*,ed. John Sanbonmatsu (Maryland and Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. Paul Virilio, “The Suicidal State,” in *The Virilio Reader*,ed. James Der Derian, trans. Michael Degener et al. (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 29-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Deleuze and Guattari endorse Virilio’s argument. Eugene Holland, however, maintains that this politics of suicide is not *inherent* in fascism but applies specifically to Nazi Germany as a result of historical contingencies. Nicholas Michelsen directly challenges Holland’s argument, examining the integral politics of suicide of the Meiji regime in Japan – Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 255; Eugene W. Holland, “Schizoanalysis, Nomadology, Fascism,” in *Deleuze and Politics*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2008), 74-97; Nicholas Michelsen, “Fascist Lines of the Tokkōtai,” in *Deleuze and Fascism: Security, War, Aesthetics*, ed. Brad Evans and Julian Reid (New York: Routledge, 2013), 148-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Marinetti, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Ibid., 73, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Michael Hollington, “Food, Modernity, Modernism: D. H. Lawrence and the Futurist Cookbook,” in *The Pleasures and Horrors of Eating: The Cultural History of Eating in Anglophone Literature*, ed. Marion Gymnich and Norbert Lennartz (Bonn: Bonn UP, 2010), 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. Qtd. in Allan Stoekl, “Introduction,” in *Visions of Excess*, xviii. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Georges Bataille, “Outline of a Sequel to *Story of the Eye* [from the fourth edition: 1967],” in *Story of the Eye*, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Félix Guattari, “Everybody Wants to be a Fascist,” trans. Suzanne Fletcher and Catherine Benamou, in *Chaosophy*, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Friedrich Rainer, “The Deconstructed Self in Artaud and Brecht: Negation of Subject and Anti-Totalitarianism,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 26, no. 3 (1990): 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Samuel Beckett, “Whoroscope,” in *Collected Poems*, *1930-1978* (London: Calder, 1984), 1-6. All line references, given in brackets in the main text, are from the version of the poem found in this edition. Page numbers will be given in footnotes when quoting from Beckett’s notes to the poem. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Peter Fifield examines the influence of *Story of the Eye* on Beckett in “‘Accursed Progenitor!’: *Fin de partie* and Georges Bataille,” *Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 22 (2010): 107-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Simon Critchley, *Very Little – Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, revised ed.(London: Routledge,2004), 165-215. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. David Cunningham, “Farts and Formalization,” *Radical Philosophy* 126 (2004): 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1997), 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Substantial engagements with “Whoroscope” are rare: Lawrence E. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970); William Bysshe Stein, “Beckett’s ‘Whoroscope’: Turdy Ooscopy,” *ELH* 42, no. 1 (1975): 125-55; Francis Doherty, “Mahaffy’s *Whoroscope*”, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 2, no. 1 (1992): 21-37; Minako Okamuro, “A Cartesian Egg: Alchemy in Beckett’s Early Works,” *Journal of Beckett Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 63-80; Narges Montakhabi, “Deleuze and Beckett: The Case of ‘Whoroscope’,” in *Samuel Beckett and the Encounter of Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Arka Chattopadhyay and James Martell (London: Roman Books, 2013), 207-26. These analyses display a variety of different approaches to Beckett’s poem. Both Harvey and Stein focus on its themes and technical aspects whilst Doherty is concerned with the poem’s source, arguing that Beckett relied more on Mahaffy’s biography of Descartes than on Baillet’s. Okamuro focuses on one specific theme (that of alchemy) whilst Montakhabi’s reading focuses on a cluster of concepts found in Deleuze and Guattari’s work, arguing that these are present in “Whoroscope.” All of these readings point out the importance of the egg in the poem (with the particularly surprising exception of Montakhabi’s essay) without, however, forming a consensus in regard to its functions. In this chapter, we will see that there is something that runs throughout Beckett’s representations of the egg, and of the alimentary more generally, both in “Whoroscope” and other works – namely, their association with the question of being. Harvey, to whom we will return, picks up on the ontological significance of the egg in the poem. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, ed. Eoin O’Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade, 1992), 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (London: Faber, 2010), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. Samuel Beckett, *Company; Ill Seen Ill Said;* *Worstward Ho; Stirrings Still*, ed. Dirk van Hulle(London: Faber, 2009), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. Deleuze, “The Method of Dramatization,” in *Desert Islands*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. My discussion of the ontological in Beckett will not delve into the particulars of the human-animal question. On this, see Mary Bryden, ed., *Beckett and Animals* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Stein argues that the “question-and-answer formula places ‘Whoroscope’ in the genre of the riddle, not the dramatic monologue” – Stein, “Beckett’s ‘Whoroscope’,” 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2006), 28. Maclean’s translation is “I am thinking therefore I exist”; as we will see, Maclean’s use of the present continuous expresses more accurately the Cartesian *cogito*. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Descartes, *Meditations*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, esp. 21-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Peter Poiana, “The On-tology of Beckett’s *Nohow On*,” *SubStance* 38, no. 2 (2009): 136-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Gilles Deleuze, “The Exhausted,” trans. Anthony Ulhmann, in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1997), 152-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Woody Allen, “Thus Ate Zarathustra,” *New Yorker* (3 July 2006). Available online at:

     <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/07/03/thus-ate-zarathustra>. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. The vast scholarship addressing the question of Beckett’s Cartesianism *or* anti-Cartesianism will not be engaged with here – our task is not to pick one of the two sides of the argument but to explore how Beckett engages with Descartes from a specifically alimentary perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. Alys Moody, “Tasteless Beckett: Towards an Aesthetics of Hunger,” *Symploke* 19, no. 1-2 (2011): 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Delville, 79ff *.* [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), 150, 298, 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Alys Moody, “The Non-*lieu* of Hunger: Post-war Beckett and the Genealogies of Starvation,” in *Early Modern Beckett; Beckett Between / Beckett et le début de l'ère moderne; Beckett entre deux*, ed. Angela Moorjani et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 265-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Ibid., 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Laura Salisbury, “Bulimic Beckett: Food for Thought and the Archive of Analysis,” *Critical Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (2011): 60-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. Moody, “Tasteless Beckett,” 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. Beckett, *Murphy*, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. According to Cronin, Beckett’s primary source for “Whoroscope” was Baillet’s biography of Descartes (Cronin, 117) but the extent to which Beckett relied on Baillet has been contested – see Doherty, 21-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Beckett, “Whoroscope,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. Feldman’s wider point is that Beckett’s relationship to Cartesian philosophy has been blown out of proportion in Beckett studies. Examining Beckett’s “Philosophy Notes,” Feldman argues that Beckett gathered his information about Descartes’ writings from secondary sources, and reaches the rather far-fetched conclusion that Beckett’s relationship to Cartesianism was “short-lived or otherwise inconsequential” – Matthew Feldman, *Beckett’s Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett’s Interwar Notes* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. On the 10th of November of 1619, Descartes’ “intense meditation” in the “stove-heated room (*poêle*)” concluded with “three strikingly vivid dreams” (to which Beckett refers in “Whoroscope” in lines 45-50),which led Descartes to a vision for a new philosophical system which would overthrow Aristotelianism – John Cottingham, “General Introduction: The *Meditations* and Cartesian Philosophy,” in *Meditations*, xxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Richard Wrangham, “Reason in the Roasting of Eggs,” in *Collapse vii*: *Culinary Materialism*, 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. Ibid., 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Thacker, 437-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Probyn, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Samuel Beckett, *Not I,* in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 2006), 373-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Derrida, *Dissemination*, 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Ibid., 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Ibid., 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Derrida in fact argues that the question has been answered by ancient Egyptian sarcophagi which posit the egg as origin but, crucially, this is a *mythical* origin; the sarcophagi to which Derrida refers depict the birth of god Ra – Ibid., 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Beckett, “Whoroscope,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Lawrence S. Rainey, *Modernism: An Anthology* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 1078. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Beckett, *Molloy*, 3, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Daniel Katz, *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett* (Evanston, Illinois: North Western UP, 1999), 35.  [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. “Hours Press” offered the “prize of ten pounds” for “the best poem under one hundred lines on the subject of time” – Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Michigan UP, 2004), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (London: Faber, 2010), 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, in *Collected Shorter Prose, 1945-1980* (London: Calder, 1986), 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Descartes, *Discourse*, 28. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Descartes, *Meditations*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. One of the “objectors” to *Meditations* argues that Descartes’ belief in God (the “cause that ... creates me afresh” at each segment of time) and His omnipotence – and, therefore, His power to alter essences – is incompatible with his belief in the immutability of essences. In his reply, Descartes resorts to a mythical analogy: “the poets feign that, while the fates were indeed established by Jove, yet once established, he was restricted in his action by his maintenance of them; similarly I do not think that the essence[s] of things ... are independent of God; yet I think that because God so wished it and brought it to pass, they are immutable and eternal” – *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1911), vol. 2, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. For an interpretation which partly resolves this conflict, see Harry G. Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 55-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. Descartes, *Meditations*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Faulkner, “Negotiating Vulnerability,” 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. Plato, *Phaedo*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. René Descartes, *The World and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Stephen Gaukroger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), esp. 41-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 2, 226. The context of this assertion has been given in an earlier footnote (no. 52, p. 118). [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Surprising as this association between Descartes and Deleuze might seem, Alberto Toscano has investigated Deleuze’s treatment of Descartes, rendering problematic the impression that the “orientation of Deleuzian philosophy” is “anti-Cartesian” – Alberto Toscano, “Everybody Thinks: Deleuze, Descartes, and Rationalism,” *Radical Philosophy* 162 (2010): 8. In terms of the concept of “becoming” more specifically, see Frankfurt’s comparison between Descartes’ views on motion (kinetic inertia) and essence (what Frankfurt calls “ontological inertia”) – Frankfurt, 55-79 (esp. 59). [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. The number of lines differs in other versions of the poem, which are included in Seán Lawlor and John Pilling, eds., *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett: A Critical Edition* (London: Faber, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. Dan Mellamphy, “Alchemical Endgame: ‘Checkmate’ in Beckett and Eliot,” in *Alchemical Traditions from Antiquity to the Avant-garde*, ed. Aaron Cheak(Melbourne: Numen Books, 2013), 566. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Beckett, “Whoroscope,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Descartes apparently “kept his own birthday to himself so that no astrologer could cast his nativity” and thus predict his death – Beckett, “Whoroscope,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett*, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Carl Gustav Jung, *Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 78. On Beckett’s use of the phrase, see Davyd Melnyk, “Never Been Properly Jung,” in *Historicising Beckett; Issues of Performance / Beckett dans l'histoire; En jouant Beckett*, ed. Marius Buning et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 355-62; and, Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 128-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. Ibid., 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. For a different interpretation, see Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (London: Legenda, 2005), 134-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Ibid., 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. Ibid., 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. Beckett, *Malone Dies*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. Ibid., 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. Simone Weil associates creation with decreation, arguing that God’s creation of the world and its creatures is dependent on God’s abdication because He selflessly allows the existence of beings other than Himself. “I am,” Weil declares, “God’s abdication. The more I exist the more God abdicates.” For this reason, we, as creatures made in the image of God, must pursue *our* decreation as the most appropriate response to God’s creation-by-abdication. The alimentary dimension of the decreation that Weil proposes may be evidenced in the programme of severe fasting that she imposed on herself and her idea that “[m]an eats God” and so he should similarly let himself be “eaten by God” – Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970), 213; Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*,trans. Arthur Wills (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. On the question whether angels have wings or not, see Valery Rees, *From Gabriel to Lucifer: A Cultural History of Angels* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 95-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Stein, “Beckett’s ‘Whoroscope’,” 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett’s Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Beckett, *Malone Dies*, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. Ibid., 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 2, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. Beckett’s treatment of religion has attracted a great deal of critical attention. Some essays on the subject are collected in *Beckett and Religion; Beckett/Aesthetics/Politics / Beckett et la religion; Beckett/L’esthétique/La politique*, ed. Marius Buning et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. In between “differen*t*iation” and “differen*c*iation” are the stages of “individuation” and “dramatization” – Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. Ibid., 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. Gavin Rae, *Ontology in Heidegger and Deleuze: A Comparative Analysis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Faber, 2009), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, and Text* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974), 58, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Rodney Sharkey, “‘Local’ Anaesthetic for a ‘Public’ Birth: Beckett, Parturition and the Porter Period,” *Journal of Beckett Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012): 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. Fredric Jameson, “The Antinomies of Postmodernity,” in *The Jameson Reader*, ed. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 2000), 233-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. Connor, *Beckett, Modernism, and the Material Imagination*, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Ibid., 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Ibid., 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. Beckett, *Watt*, 43-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. Rainey, 1079. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. Plato, *Republic,* 220ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Delville, 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith(London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. Beckett, *Molloy*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. Ibid., 21. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. Beckett, *Molloy*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. Ibid., 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. Ibid., 3, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*,ed. and trans. Nina Power and Alberto Toscano (Manchester: Clinamen, 2003), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Ibid., 27ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 2, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. Ibid., 117-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (New York: Random House, 1917), 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. Stein, “Beckett’s ‘Whoroscope’,” 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. In his notes to the poem, Beckett points out that “Christina, [the] Queen of Sweden,” “required Descartes, who had remained in bed till midday all his life, to be with her at five o’clock in the morning” – Beckett, “Whoroscope,” 6. When Descartes fell fatally ill, he was convinced that his early risings were responsible for his illness, which is why in the poem he refers to the Queen of Sweden as “Christina the ripper” (93). [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. Biologists define “autophagy” as a process that involves the “degradation” of “dysfunctional cells” so as to effect “lifespan expansion” – Zhifen Yang and Daniel J. Klionsky, “An Overview of the Molecular Mechanism of Autophagy,” in *Autophagy in Infection and Immunity*, ed. Beth Levine et al. (Berlin and London: Springer, 2009), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. Artaud, 559. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 21-23, 32-35, passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. Paul Auster, “Spokes,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 2007), 19-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy: City of Glass; Ghosts; The Locked Room* (London: Faber, 1988). All page references to *City of Glass*, given in brackets in the main text, are from this edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. Sylvia Söderlind, “Humpty Dumpty in New York: Language and Regime Change in Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 1 (2011): 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. The postmodernism of *City of Glass* is rarely a matter of contention. For one rare exception that identifies both modern and postmodern elements in the text, see Chris Tysh, “From One Murder to Another: The Rhetoric of Disaffiliation in *City of Glass*,” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14, no. 1 (1994): 46-52. The vast majority of critics read *City of Glass* as a postmodernist rewriting of the traditional detective story – see Stephen Bernstein, “‘The Question is the Story Itself’: Postmodernism and Intertextuality in Auster’s *New York Trilogy*,” in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, ed. Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeney (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1998), 134-53; and, Jeffrey T. Nealon, “Work of the Detective, Work of the Writer,” in *Detecting Texts*, 117-33. Even Brendan Martin, who argues that “Auster cannot be categorized” simply as “a definitive postmodernist,” bases this claim on Auster’s later writings – Brendan Martin, *Paul Auster’s Postmodernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), x.  [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. See *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett: Uncollected Interviews with Samuel Beckett and Memories of Those who Knew Him*, ed. James Knowlson and Elizabeth Knowlson (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. For a book-length account of the case, see Russ Rymer, *Genie: A Scientific Tragedy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. On feral children and the question of human nature, see Douglas Keith Candland, *Feral Children and Clever Animals: Reflections on Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. Agamben, *The Open*, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* trans. A. Robert Caponigri (Chicago: Gateway, 1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Ibid., 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. Ibid., 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. Ibid., 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. Associations between Christianity and the detective genre are explored in Anya Morlan and Walter Raubicheck, eds., *Christianity and the Detective Story* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013). Auster’s fiction is examined in Eric Biddy’s contribution “Theodicy and the Detective Story: Holmes, Hauerwas, and Auster,” 37-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. Söderlind, 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. Auster, “Spokes,” 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. Michael Inwood, *Hegel* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Ibid., 97-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Ibid, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. Ibid, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. Ibid., 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Walter Benjamin:* *Selected Writings, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1997), 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Ibid., 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. Ibid., 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. See also Paul Auster’s *Travels in the Scriptorium* (London: Faber, 2007). This novel shares many common elements with *The New York Trilogy*, including the reappearance of characters from *City of Glass* and *The Locked Room*. The emphasis placed on language in this later novel is strongly reminiscent of *City of Glass*, with its main character, Mr Blank, finding himself in a room in which objects have pieces of paper attached to them to designate their names. In light of *City of Glass* and Stillman’s theory, the condition from which Mr Blank suffers can be seen as the postlapsarian condition of humankind in that things are not in a state of “natural unity” or interchangeability with their names but, rather, their names must be artificially attached to them. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. Pinto-Correia, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. Moshe Idel, amongst many others, has flagged up the influence of the Jewish Kabbalah on Benjamin’s essay on language in *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2010), 168-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. Although Auster’s work is not customarily classified as Jewish American literature, some have acknowledged the presence of the Jewish tradition in his work – see Derek Rubin, “‘The Hunger Must Be Preserved at All Cost’: A Reading of *The Invention of Solitude*,” in *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1995), 60-70; and, Josh Cohen, “Desertions: Paul Auster, Edmond Jabès, and the Writing of Auschwitz,” *Journal of the Midwest Language Association* 33, no. 3 (2001): 94-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Leonora Leet, *The Universal Kabbalah* (Richmond, VT: Inner Traditions, 2004), 328-29. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. Daniel C. Matt, *Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. Leet, 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. Kerry Gordon, “Worlds within Worlds: Kabbalah and the New Scientific Paradigm,” *Zygon* 37, no. 4 (2002): 975. [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. Paul Auster, Paul Karasik, and David Mazzucchelli, *City of Glass, The Graphic Novel* (London: Faber, 2005), 15-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. Ibid., 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. For a different reading of the Lacanian “hommelette” in relation to *City of Glass*, see Bernd Herzogenrath, *An Art of Desire: Reading Paul Auster* *(*Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 197-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005), 62-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. Pascale-Anne Brault, “Translating the Impossible Debt: Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 39, no. 3 (1998): 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” trans. Joseph F. Graham, in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1985), 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. McHale, 9, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeney prefer the term “metaphysical detective story” whilst William Spanos uses the term “anti-detective detective story” – Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeney, “The Game’s Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story,” in *Detecting Texts*, 1-24; William V. Spanos, “The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination,” *Boundary* 21, no. 1 (1972): 147-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Jeanne C. Ewert, “‘A Thousand Other Mysteries’: Metaphysical Detection, Ontological Quests,” in *Detecting Texts*, 179-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. Connor, “Postmodernism and Literature,” 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. Joanne Pence, *Angie Amalfi Mysteries* (New York: Avon, 1993-present). See also other similar series, such as Nancy Pickard’s (previously by Virginia Rich) *Eugenia Potter* series (New York: Dutton, 1982-2001), J. B. Stanley’s *Supper Club Mystery* series(Woodbury, MN: Midnight Ink, 2006-2010), Chris Cavender’s *Pizza Lovers* series (New York: Kensington Publishing, 2009-present), and Ellery Adams’ *Charmed Pie Shoppe Mystery* series (New York: Berkley Publishing, 2012-present). [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. With recourse to literary texts, myths, and cultural practices, Sandra Gilbert has recently expanded on the correlation between food and death – Sandra Gilbert, *The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2014), esp. 25-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. John Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure: A Novel* (London: Picador, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Derrida, “Eating Well,” 96-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. For Derrida, the matter is much more complex because, for him, it is precisely through the calculation of such answers that the “subject” is itself “calculated” or constructed. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. Pierre Verdaguer, “The Politics of Food in Post-WWII French Detective Fiction,” in *French Food on the Table, on the Page, and in French Culture*, 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. See, for instance, Bernstein, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
495. Beckett, *Molloy*, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
496. See Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 171; and, Jeffrey Meyers, *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1992), 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
497. Edgar Allan Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings: Poems, Tales, Essays and Reviews* (London: Penguin, 2003), 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
498. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, ed. and trans. John Warrington (London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1956), 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
499. Ibid., 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Red-Headed League,” in *Sherlock Holmes: The Major Stories with Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. John A. Hodgson (Boston: Bedford Books of St Martin’s Press, 1994), 53-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
501. Poe, “The Purloined Letter,” in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, 281-99; Conan Doyle, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” in *Sherlock Holmes*, 32-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
502. Norma Rowen also sees Stillman Sr as a detective in “The Detective in Search of the Lost Tongue of Adam,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 32, no. 4 (1991): 224-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
503. The distinction between two different potentialities in Aristotle’s work has been repeatedly flagged up by Giorgio Agamben throughout his oeuvre. [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
504. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
505. Gilles Deleuze, “The Philosophy of Crime Novels,” in *Desert Islands*, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
506. Philip K. Dick, “The Minority Report,” in *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick*, 5 vols. (Burton: Subterranean Press, 2010-2014), vol. 4, 2013, 91-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
507. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 2000), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
508. Ibid., 508. [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
509. Incidentally, Joyce’s short stories have been read as rewritings of the detective genre. Hugh Kenner argues that “the detective story” is “a two-dimensional parody of the Joycean short story” – Hugh Kenner, *Dublin’s Joyce* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1956), 175. See also Suzanne Ferguson, “A Sherlook at Dubliners: Structural and Thematic Analogues in Detective Stories and the Modern Short Story,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1978): 111-21; and, Kevin Dettmar, *The Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism*: *Reading Against the Grain* (Wisconsin and London: Wisconsin UP, 1996), 51-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
510. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, ed. Frederick Neuhouser, trans. Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
511. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
512. Grégoire Chamayou, “Fichte’s Passport: A Philosophy of the Police,” trans. Kieran Aarons, *Theory and Event* 16, no. 2 (2013): para. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
513. Ibid., para. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
514. Ibid., para. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
515. Ibid, para. 82, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
516. Ibid., para. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
517. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
518. Ibid., para. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
519. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
520. Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things* (London: Faber, 1989), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
521. Knut Hamsun, *Hunger*, trans. Sverre Lyngstad (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
522. Paul Auster, *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews and the Red Notebook* (London: Faber, 1997), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
523. Leroy Lad Panek situates the Sherlock Holmes stories at the origin of the detective genre as a distinct genre. Although Poe clearly influenced Conan Doyle, what we now refer to as “detective” stories were not considered to be such before Sherlock Holmes; Poe used the term “tales of ratiocination” – Leroy Lad Panek, *The Origins of the American Detective Story* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2006), 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
524. See, for example, Peter Humm, “Camera Eye/Private Eye,” in *American Crime Fiction: Studies in the Genre*, ed. Brian Docherty (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 23-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
525. Marx, *Early Writings*, 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
526. Kafka, “A Hunger-Artist,” 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-526)
527. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*,ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 8 vols.(Harvard: Harvard UP, 1931-1958), vol. 4, 1958, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
528. Thomas Sebeok, *The Play of Musement* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-528)
529. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
530. Nieves Pascual Soler, *A Critical Study of Female Culinary Detective Stories: Murder by Cookbook* (Lewiston, NY and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
531. Ibid., 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
532. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
533. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
534. Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, Fla.: Miami UP, 1971), 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
535. G. K. Chesterton, *The Complete Father Brown Stories*, ed. Michael D. Hurley (London: Penguin, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
536. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on Control Societies,” in *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia, 1995), 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
537. Ibid., 177-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-537)
538. William Ralph Inge, “Confessio Fidei,” in *Outspoken Essays* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1923), 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-538)
539. Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*(Toronto: Anansi, 1982), 394. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-539)
540. Karen Stein, “Margaret Atwood’s Modest Proposal: *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Canadian Literature* 148 (1996): 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-540)
541. Cormack McCarthy, *The Road*(London: Picador, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-541)
542. For an elaboration on the subject of cannibalism from a specifically Canadian perspective, see Marlene Goldman, “Margaret Atwood’s *Wilderness Tips:* Apocalyptic Canadian Fiction,” in *Eating their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity*, ed. Kristen Guest (Albany: SUNY, 2001), 167-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-542)
543. Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*(Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
544. See, for example, Emma Parker, “You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in Margaret Atwood’s Novels,” *Twentieth Century Literature*41, no. 3 (1995): 349, 363-67; Taylor, “Abnormal Appetites,” 133; and, Diane S. Wood, “Bradbury and Atwood: Exile as Rational Decision,” in *The Literature of Emigration and Exile*, ed. James Whitlark and Wendell Aycock (Lubbock: Texas Tech UP, 1992), 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-544)
545. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*(London: Vintage, 1996). All page references, given in brackets in the main text, are from this edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
546. See Parker, esp. 354-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
547. The conjunction between eating, sacrifice, and politics has been traced back to ancient Greece – see Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, eds., *The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-547)
548. As mentioned earlier, the biological term “autophagy” refers to a type of “consumption” of what is within the body and which occurs from within the body; it is a natural mechanism whereby the body “eats” parts of itself in a process that is believed to be linked to lifespan expansion. I use the term “auto-cannibalism” to avoid the positive connotations of “autophagy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-548)
549. Atwood has described *The Handmaid’s Tale*as a tale that warns of the possible rise of totalitarianism in the US through right-wing Christian fundamentalism – Mervyn Rothstein,  “No Balm in Gilead for Margaret Atwood,” *The New York Times*(17 February 1986). Available online at:

     <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/03/specials/atwood-gilead.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-549)
550. Emily Martin, “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles,” *Signs*16, no. 3 (1991): 485-501. [↑](#footnote-ref-550)
551. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-551)
552. John Barth, “Night-Sea Journey,” in *Lost in the Funhouse*(New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 3-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-552)
553. Martin, 491. [↑](#footnote-ref-553)
554. Stein, “Atwood’s Modest Proposal,” 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-554)
555. Anne K. Kaler, “‘A Sister Dipped in Blood’: Satiric Inversion of the Formation Techniques of Women Religious in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Christianity and Religion* 38, no. 2 (1989): 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-555)
556. Janet Larson, “Margaret Atwood and the Future of Prophecy,” *Religion and Literature*21, no. 1 (1989): 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-556)
557. The term designates the deification of the egg-ovary (*oon*) and its assumption of the status of essence or being (*on*). It does not, then, correspond to Kant’s “ontotheology,” which refers to the kind of “transcendental theology” that “believes that it can cognize [the] existence” of an “original being” through “mere concepts, without even the least aid of experience” – Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 584 (A632/B660). The term “ontotheology” is most commonly associated with Heidegger, who ascribed to it a much broader sense than Kant, famously declaring that the whole of “metaphysics is Onto-Theo-Logie” – Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-557)
558. Atwood, *Second Words*, 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-558)
559. Derrida, “Eating Well,” 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-559)
560. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-560)
561. What remains Agamben’s most famous concept, “bare life,” expresses the intricate associations between the question of politics and sacrifice – Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-561)
562. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*(New York: Popular Library, 1976),164-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-562)
563. Chloe Taylor accuses Atwood of ridiculing ethical vegetarianism by ascribing concerns about eating animals to characters portrayed as mentally or emotionally unstable. For Taylor, Atwood is basically suggesting that if you start thinking about animals as living beings that must be treated with respect then you will start thinking of plants in the same way, and you will end up dying – Taylor, “Abnormal Appetites,” 130-48. Taylor’s reading, however, does not represent a consensus; Carol Adams, for example, finds a defence of vegetarianism in Atwood’s work – Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010), 174-86, 236-38. These opposing interpretations indicate that Atwood’s treatment of eating is fraught with tensions, some of which will be engaged with in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-563)
564. Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*(London: Virago, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-564)
565. Whilst sacrifice can certainly be viewed as a secular and thus cultural-ideological phenomenon, its roots in religious practices do evoke an “otherworldly,” non-secular, superior, or transcendent realm. Religion itself could, of course, similarly be classified under the category of the cultural-ideological but this would be reductive; as Jameson says in his discussion of Atwood’s treatment of religion, this is a “tricky topic”: on the one hand, “to call it ‘religion’ is to reify it and confirm its status as a non-secular phenomenon,” which means that “you have implicitly acknowledged ‘belief’ in the throes of an effort to deny such a thing in the first place,” but, on the other, “if you call it something else, ideology, say, ... you at once lose [the] curious specificity” of its meaning – Fredric Jameson, “Then You Are Them,” *London Review of Books* 31, no. 17 (2009): 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-565)
566. Sceats, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-566)
567. Ibid., 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-567)
568. On this, see James W. Watts, “The Rhetoric of Sacrifice,” in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 3-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-568)
569. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-569)
570. Stein, “Atwood’s Modest Proposal,” 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-570)
571. Ibid., 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-571)
572. Margaret Atwood, “Hairball,” in *Wilderness Tips*(London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 39-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-572)
573. John Milbank, “The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice,” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*91 (1999): 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-573)
574. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf(Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1992), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-574)
575. Dennis K. Keenan, *The Question of Sacrifice*(Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-575)
576. Glenn Deer, *Postmodern Canadian Fiction and the Rhetoric of Authority*(Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1994), 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-576)
577. Ibid., 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-577)
578. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-578)
579. Joseph Andriano, “*The Handmaid’s Tale*as a Scrabble Game,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 48 (1992): 89-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-579)
580. Without reference to Ezekiel, Larson also sees Offred as a prophet but advances a positive interpretation according to which Offred’s assumption of this role challenges “readings of the Logos as totalitarian monologic” – Larson, “Future of Prophecy,” 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-580)
581. Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, 271-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-581)
582. Taylor, “Abnormal Appetites,” 135. Taylor is here directly quoting from Atwood’s *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Writing* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2004), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-582)
583. Taylor, “Abnormal Appetites,” 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-583)
584. Ibid., 136, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-584)
585. See Roberta Rubenstein, “Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, ed. Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988), 101-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-585)
586. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-586)
587. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-587)
588. *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 13, 134ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-588)
589. Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-589)
590. Yang and Klionsky, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-590)
591. Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* (New York: Anchor Books, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-591)
592. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-592)
593. Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*(New York: Anchor Books, 2014), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-593)
594. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-594)
595. Plato, *Timaeus*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-595)
596. For Calina Ciobanu, the *MaddAddam* trilogy “has its roots ... in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” – Calina Ciobanu, “Rewriting the Human at the End of the Anthropocene in Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* Trilogy,” *Minnesota Review* 83 (2014): 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-596)
597. S. J. Taylor, *Stalin’s Apologist: Walter Duranty, The New York Times’s Man in Moscow*(Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1990), 222. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-597)
598. Margaret Atwood, intrv. Kathryn Govier, “Margaret Atwood: There’s Nothing in the Book that Hasn’t Already Happened,” *Quill & Quire* 59, no. 1 (1985): 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-598)
599. Marx’s phrase reads: “From each according to his capacity, to each according to his need” – Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1933), 31. Whilst Larson reads the sentence in reference to Acts 4: 35 (“distribution was made unto every man according to his need”), the association with Marx is clearly much stronger – Larson, “Future of Prophecy,” 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-599)
600. Use of this phrase has been traced back to the French Revolution.Joseph Walker, for instance, reports that, after being captured, François de Charette, one of the leaders of the counter-revolt movement during the French Revolution, said that “omlets [*sic*] are not made without breaking the eggs,” seeking to justify the employment of violent means to the “higher” end of restoring the previous status quo – Joseph Walker, *Walker's Hibernian Magazine Or, Compendium of Entertaining Knowledge* (Dublin, 1796), 411. In light of this, the Commander’s use of the phrase in *The Handmaid’s Tale*traces Gilead’s lineage back to the Royalist counter-revolt movement, which is particularly significant since Gilead itself seeks to counter a revolution – the women’s liberation movement – and restore the previous status quo, preferable to the patriarchal elite. [↑](#footnote-ref-600)
601. It is useful to observe that Deleuze and Guattari argue that fascism is not an extreme form of totalitarianism; they classify Stalinism as a totalitarian regime, arguing that it exercises power in a structurally and thus fundamentally different way from Nazi Germany. As we will see, Deleuze and Guattari’s engagement with the latter is influenced by Paul Virilio’s description of “the fascist state” as “the suicidal state,” and this politics of suicide brings Gilead – and its self-consuming omelette, its politics of auto-cannibalism – closer to Nazi Germany than Stalinist Russia. [↑](#footnote-ref-601)
602. Patricia Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1991), 111ff. See also Žižek’s comparison of the visible void of the Elizabethan dessert with the filled void of what he views as today’s equivalent of it: the *Kinder Surprise* egg – Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2003), 145ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-602)
603. Exodus 29: 18, 25, 41; Leviticus 1: 9, 14, 17; 2: 2, 9, 12; 3: 5; 4: 31; 6: 15; 8: 21; 23: 18; Numbers 15: 3, 13-14, 24; 18: 17; 28: 2, 6, 13, 24, 27; 29: 2, 6, 13, 36. The term *ריח*(“rêyach”) used in the Hebrew text translates as “odour,” “scent,” “aroma,” or “fragrance”; in some translations, including the English Standard Version, burnt sacrifices are accordingly said to be of a “pleasing aroma” unto the Lord. In the King James Version (as well as in the American Standard Version), the term is rendered as “savour” and the burnt sacrifices are described as being of a “sweet savour” unto the Lord. The references above and throughout are taken from the King James Version, from which Atwood is quoting in *The Handmaid’s Tale* as is, for example, evident in one of the novel’s epigraphs from Genesis 30: 1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-603)
604. Robert Daly, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice*(London: Longman & Todd, 1978), 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-604)
605. Stein, “Atwood’s Modest Proposal,” 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-605)
606. Larson, “Future of Prophecy,” 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-606)
607. Janet Larson, “Margaret Atwood’s Testaments: Resisting the Gilead Within,” *Christian Century*(20 May 1987). Available online at:  <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1021> [↑](#footnote-ref-607)
608. Dorota Filipczak, “Is There No Balm in Gilead? – Biblical Intertext in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Literature and Theology*7, no. 2 (1993): 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-608)
609. Bruno Bettelheim stresses that “it was not the hapless victims of the Nazis who named their incomprehensible ... fate ‘Holocaust’” and Boria Sax reveals the extent of the inappropriateness of the term in observing that it implies “an identification between the Jewish people and the sacrificed animal,” which in turn “equates the Nazis, as those who perform sacrifice, with the priests of ancient Israel” – Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays*(New York: Vintage, 1980), 91; Sax, 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-609)
610. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-610)
611. Larson examines the possibility of viewing the Handmaids as Gilead’s Christ(s) in “The Future of Prophecy,” 46-48, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-611)
612. Melito of Sardis’ sermon “On the Passover” is an example of a Christian engagement with the Passover sacrifice which promotes anti-Judaism – see Tobias Nicklas, “The Bible and Anti-Semitism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb et al. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-612)
613. Julius Streicher, “Ritual Murder,” *Der Stürmer* (May 1934). Available online at:

     < http://der-stuermer.org/ritualmurder.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-613)
614. Felicity Rash, *The Language of Violence: Adolph Hitler’s Mein Kampf*(New York: Laing Publishing, 2006), 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-614)
615. See also Michel Serres’ discussion of the concept of the parasite in *The Parasite*, trans. L. R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-615)
616. Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-616)
617. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 231. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-617)
618. Virilio, 29-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-618)
619. Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-619)
620. Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds*: *SF and the Human Imagination* (London: Virago, 2012), 66.  [↑](#footnote-ref-620)
621. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: Nebraska UP, 1986), 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-621)
622. Ibid., 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-622)
623. Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, DC: Duke UP, 1987), 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-623)
624. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*(Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2004), 3. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-624)
625. Eagleton, “Contradictions of Modernism,” 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-625)
626. Telling in this respect is Pound’s use of the phrase “make it new” as the title for a collection including essays on the troubadours, on Elizabethan classicists, on translators of the Greek, as well as on Henry James and Cavalcanti; a collection, then, in which “the new” is tied with “the old” – *Make It New: Essays by Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1934). And, as mentioned earlier, “make it new” is Pound’s translation of an ancient Chinese inscription. What is more interesting, as Michael North points out, is that this phrase is actually Pound’s translation of a French translation of the original Chinese, which reads “*fais-le* *de nouveau*” and can therefore be rendered “make it new” but it “might just as easily be rendered ‘do it again’”; “[h]ad Pound translated it so,” as “do it again,” then “the whole history of modernist scholarship would presumably have been quite different” – North, 162-64.    [↑](#footnote-ref-626)
627. See Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-627)
628. Eagleton, “Contradictions of Modernism,” 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-628)
629. Ibid., 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-629)
630. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-630)
631. Ibid., 37-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-631)
632. Novero, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-632)
633. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-633)
634. Ibid., 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-634)
635. Ibid., 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-635)
636. Joyce, 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-636)
637. Connor, *Beckett, Modernism, and the Material Imagination*, 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-637)
638. Delville, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-638)
639. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-639)
640. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-640)
641. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-641)
642. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-642)
643. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-643)
644. Connor, *Beckett, Modernism, and the Material Imagination*, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-644)
645. Bell, “The Metaphysics of Modernism,” 9.  [↑](#footnote-ref-645)
646. Connor, “Postmodernism and Literature,” 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-646)
647. Novero, xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-647)
648. Ibid., 146. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-648)
649. Woolf, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-649)
650. Robert Hass, “Poem With a Cucumber In It,” in *Time and Materials: Poems, 1997-2005* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 57-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-650)
651. Boltanski and Chiapello, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-651)
652. Ibid., 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-652)
653. Ibid., 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-653)
654. Relevant to this conceptual link between the realm of art and the realm of economics is John Lanchester’s analogy between the financial system and literature, which associates the twentieth-century literary breakthroughs of modernism and postmodernism with the twentieth-century financial breakthroughs of derivatives and credit default swaps – John Lanchester, *Whoops! Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay*(London: Penguin, 2010), 33-65. Franco “Bifo” Beraldi draws a similar kind of analogy between finance and twentieth-century symbolist poetry in  *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-654)