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Source: *MoveableType*, Vol. 8, 'Dissidence' (2016)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.068

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*MoveableType* is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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 **UCLPRESS**

## ‘Unexpected fruit’: The ingredients of *Tarr*

By Rachel Murray

In Wyndham Lewis’s first novel, his mouthpiece, Frederick Tarr, argues that the ‘condition of continued enjoyment is to resist assimilation’, before concluding: ‘A man is the opposite of his appetite’ (1996, 26)<sup>1</sup>. Throughout Lewis’s body of work characters often experience revulsion or a lack of appetite before meals, and are often nauseous or sick after eating. Only the most perverse of Lewis’s characters, Otto Kreisler in *Tarr* (1918) or Julius Ratner in *The Apes of God* (1930), appear to relish their food, and the sheer aggression of these eating habits is closely associated with other, more monstrous appetites. Lewis’s prose is rough, at times impenetrably dense, and often unappetising in content – full of violence and cruelty, a callous indifference to suffering, and in the 1930s a troubling predilection for fascist ideology. How can we stomach the ideas of an individual who, in 1931, published a forceful defence of Hitler, describing him as a ‘Man of Peace’? I suggest that we can develop a clearer understanding of this much-maligned modernist by engaging with, rather than attempting to either suppress or sublimate, these distasteful qualities.

Prior to enlisting as an artillery officer in 1916, Lewis travelled extensively, later describing his experiences in Brittany and Spain as the ‘raw rich visual food’ (1950, 117) for his writing. The ‘raw’ phase of Lewis’s early writing can be dated between 1909 and 1919, during which Lewis wrote a number of short stories as well as his first novel, *Tarr*, which he finished shortly before departing for the frontline. Lewis would later attribute his early fascination with primitive individuals and his pursuit of the ‘crudest textures’ of life to the fact that he had ‘remained, beyond the usual period, congealed in a kind of cryptic immaturity’ (1950, 118). Tellingly, Lewis suggests that his creative output was augmented by his tendency to, in Tarr’s words, ‘resist assimilation’ to social norms, recalling ‘this surface obtuseness on the one hand, and the unexpected fruit which it miraculously bore’ (1996, 118).

*Tarr* is set, and was largely written, in Paris, and is a cultural melting pot of German, Polish, Russian and English artists and émigrés. As with his short stories, much of Lewis’s novel is framed by the table, with events often taking place at mealtimes either in claustrophobic domestic settings or cafés. In an early scene, shortly after announcing that ‘a man is the opposite of his appetites’,

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<sup>1</sup>There are three 1918 versions of *Tarr*, but I cite the amalgamated Paul O’Keeffe version, which retains the rough textures of early Lewis. These are smoothed out somewhat in the 1928 version. All further references will therefore be to *Tarr: The 1918 Version*, ed. Paul O’Keeffe (1996).

Tarr goes to the home of his German fiancée, Bertha Lunken, to break off their engagement. Eager to keep relations amicable, Tarr brings food with him. This strategy bears fruit: when Bertha becomes upset, and is likened to a leaky vessel releasing a flood of ‘psychic discharges’ (1996, 60), Tarr diverts her attention by suggesting that they have lunch. The formality of the meal is a means of ‘clear[ing] the air of electricity’ and dragging the heightened, ‘unreal’ atmosphere back down into ‘ordinary’ life (62). During the meal, conversation is continually obstructed by mastication, and amid the heavy silence Tarr begins to ruminate:

To cover reflection, [Tarr] set himself to finish lunch. The strawberries were devoured mechanically, with unhungry itch to clear the plate. He had become just a devouring-machine, restless if any of the little red balls still remained in front of it.

Bertha’s eyes sought to carry her out of this Present. But they had broken down, depositing her, so to speak, somewhere halfway down the avenue. (1996, 70)

The air is thick with nervous energy in this scene, and yet the focal point of Lewis’s prose is not Bertha but the ‘little red balls’, strawberries estranged from their natural form and function. Although they are no longer a vehicle for appetite, these items appear to have absorbed Bertha’s agency, and, equally, Tarr uses food to ‘cover reflection’, as though the strawberries are capable of absorbing not only Bertha’s but also his own ‘psychic discharges’.

According to Gaston Bachelard ‘reality is initially a food’ (2002, 172). Of all the senses, it is taste which grants the individual the closest, most intimate knowledge of the external world, and yet this sense is also responsible for unsettling illusions of individual autonomy. While food is a source of bodily strength – here providing fuel for Tarr as ‘devouring-machine’ – it is during the act of both eating and excreting that we recognise our vulnerability, as the boundaries of selfhood are undermined by these bodily exigencies.<sup>2</sup> This is reflected in the way that between subject and object alike in this scene there is an overpowering sense of permeability. By likening Bertha to the ‘little red balls’ that are quickly cleared from the protagonist’s plate, Lewis’s narrator tantalises the reader with the thought: if only Tarr could dispense with his lover by eating her. Tarr is torn between his desire to assimilate Bertha into his life, and his desire to detach himself from her entirely. His indecisiveness leaves her feeling only partially digested: although she has been ‘broken down’ and ‘deposited’, she finds herself stuck ‘halfway down the avenue’, lodged in the gullet or the intestine of this painful process of what Tarr terms ‘*dis-engage-ment*’ (1996, 43). Here, the strange prominence of this ‘unexpected fruit’ produces an atmosphere

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the ways in which food and excrement undermine the boundaries of the self see Kristeva 1980, 2-6, 75.

of almost unbearable ontological indeterminacy. Just as the strawberries have more of a claim on Tarr's attention than his fiancée, so does this overcharged atmosphere leave the reader feeling disorientated and perhaps a little sick. Tarr's strategy of alimentary excess is designed to combat underlying feelings of 'indifference', as Lewis suggests that Tarr's engagement with something approaching the 'real' is reliant on feelings of discomfort. In this sense, food materialises Lewis's negative ontology – like *dis-engagement*, it is distaste, rather than taste, that defines this encounter.

W. B. Yeats was perhaps the first reader to acknowledge the curious prominence of food in *Tarr*, writing to Lewis in 1929:

[*Tarr*] is a sincere and wonderful work, and its curious, almost unconscious presentation of sex, those mechanical images and images of food—there also is mechanism, unites itself in my mind with so much in contemporary painting and sculpture. There is the feeling, almost Buddhist, that we are caught in a kind of steel trap. (qtd Lewis 1950, 126-27)

Yeats's sense that in the Lewisian text 'we are caught in a kind of steel trap' crystallizes the atmosphere of violent compression that often accompanies Lewis's depictions of food, eating, and digestion, or more often indigestion. Hugh Kenner also gestures towards the indigestibility of *Tarr* in his reading of its strange 'perfunctory textures' (1954, 36). He examines a scene in which Bertha receives a letter from Tarr at breakfast. In this case, it is Tarr who discharges psychic energy through the medium of the letter. Curiously, the narration focuses on the stove rather than either Bertha or Tarr's message, stating:

The letter had been laid on the table, by the side of which stood the large gas-stove, like a safe, its gas stars, on top, blasting away luridly at pans and saucepans with Bertha's breakfast. (1996, 166)

Other than the word 'blasting' – a possible nod to Lewis's short-lived little magazine – Kenner can see no reason why the stove is foregrounded in such a way. Instead, he argues:

The secret of much of the gripping reality of *Tarr* seems to lie in the artless interpolation of humdrum sentences like these, with their hypnotic mechanical claim on the attention, stirred by occasional quiverings of power. (1954, 36)

Again, a reader of Lewis is compelled to use the term 'mechanical'. Kenner notes the strange prominence of the stove, yet what appears to be occurring is a process of flattening. In both scenes of eating, the unusual textures of Lewis's

descriptions ask us to consider whether there is any essential difference between a strawberry, a stove, and a person. Here as elsewhere, Lewis foregrounds a complete loss of distinction – which, as Pierre Bourdieu has argued, is the foundation of our sense of taste, both gustatory and aesthetic.<sup>3</sup>

A lack of distinction is directly implicated with the palate when the German artist Otto Kreisler encounters the Russian cosmopolite Anastasya Vasek for the first time at the Restaurant Lejeune. The narrator recounts how the restaurant has expanded into the ‘bowels’ (1996, 96) of the building it occupies to cater to the swelling appetites of its clientele. Kreisler informs Anastasya that its menu becomes more elaborate and expensive from top to bottom, despite the fact that each dish has evolved from the same ‘rough materials’. ‘In the last dish’, he states ponderously, ‘you can be sure that the potatoes will taste like tomatoes, and the pork like the sirloin of beef’ (1996, 99). As the menu becomes more convoluted it becomes increasingly overcooked, spoiled in the process of refinement.

Lewis’s preoccupation with the corruption of taste can be traced back to the ingredients of the 1915 ‘Preface’ to *Tarr*, which evokes a sense of cultural degradation. An adamant individualist, Lewis describes how the masses have been infected by revolutionary ideas, citing Italian Futurist literature and Nietzsche’s books ‘of seductions and sugar plums’. ‘They have made an Overman of every vulgarly energetic grocer in Europe’, he asserts, observing how this ‘greedy, fleshy frantic strength’ has led to ‘a fascination’ with ‘material power’ (1996, 13). In this sense, the Restaurant Lejeune appears to function as an analogue for popular literature, expanding in accordance with the vast growth of the reading public. Against the backdrop of the First World War, Lewis identifies a destructive appetite that has evolved from attempts to transform the Everyman into the ‘Overman’.

Although Lewis began *Tarr* several years before Anglo-German tensions erupted into war, his depiction of a ‘disagreeable German’ artist Otto Kreisler who he felt compelled to ‘vomit forth’ (1996, 13) is, he would later agree, apt. Later on in *Tarr*, in a far more overt instance of devouring, Kreisler’s appetite erupts into violence. After a brief encounter at a dance, he invites Tarr’s now ex-fiancée, Bertha, to his room under the pretext of painting her. She removes her blouse and poses for him, and he eventually breaks the silence with the remark:

“Your arms are like bananas!” A shiver of warning had penetrated her at this. But still, he was an artist: it was natural, – even inevitable! – that he should compare her arms to bananas. (1996, 193)

This is not the only time that a body is transformed into food; elsewhere, Tarr compares Anastasya’s fleshy form to sausages in a butcher’s window (297), and

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<sup>3</sup>See Bourdieu 2010, xxix.

Kreisler is also likened to ‘a plate of meat or a banana fritter’ (269) avoided by a seasick man.<sup>4</sup> There is, however, something frighteningly incongruous about this particular ‘unexpected fruit’ that goes beyond its phallic overtones. Bertha attempts to reassure herself that Kreisler ‘was an artist’, but in fact his words reveal the opposite. By approaching the subject of his art as an object for consumption, particularly one known for its softness as well as the fact that it is shaped to the hand, Lewis exposes the way in which desire has deformed Kreisler’s aesthetic judgement, collapsing any objective or professional distance between himself and his art object. As Carolyn Korsmeyer notes, while the act of looking is predicated on distance, the sensation of tasting is that of extreme closeness to an object (1999, 21). Kreisler’s banana statement signals the complete dissolution of boundaries between the pair, with Bertha’s ‘shiver of warning’ manifesting her body’s outward recognition that it is about to be devoured.

What is so chilling about this scene is just how quickly Lewis shifts from the banal image of a banana to a vicious sexual assault. Rather than undermining the seriousness of the incident, the bathos of this tasteless transition leaves the reader all the more sickened. One of the reasons that this incident is so shocking is that it is so unexpected: because Lewis is only interested in presenting the ‘outside’ of characters and events, the reader is left to feel their way back over the rough surface of the text for hints as to the motivation behind Kreisler’s sudden eruption into violence. Lewis’s denial of access to the insides of characters becomes increasingly pronounced in his subsequent writing. In his 1937 war-memoir *Blasting and Bombardiering*, he explained his ‘externalist’ approach as follows: ‘I enjoy the surface of life because it conceals the repulsive turbidness of the intestine’ (1967, 9). I want to turn now to Lewis’s growing distaste in the interwar period for what he deemed the ‘internalist’ methods of modernist contemporaries, including James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf.

As is indicated by the prevalence of the term ‘stream of consciousness’ in contemporary philosophy and psychology, by the time Lewis returned from the frontline subjectivity had widely come to be associated with liquidity. Finding himself isolated from the main currents of literary modernism, Lewis lambasted the fluid textures of Woolf and the overcooked style of D. H. Lawrence, which, he argued, resulted in a ‘sickly stew’.<sup>5</sup> *Ulysses*, he argued in *Time and Western Man*, ‘imposes a softness, flabbiness and vagueness everywhere in its bergsonian fluidity’ (1927, 120). Lewis’s post-war writing – *The Childermass* (1928), *The Apes of God* (1930) – can therefore be understood as a reaction against what he felt to

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<sup>4</sup>For an excellent essay on meat in Lewis’s writing see Edwards 2011.

<sup>5</sup>In his essay ‘In Praise of Outsiders’, Lewis argued that ‘D. H. Lawrence was plainly an “internalist” of an almost pathologic intensity – a man very much of the “dark Within,” but one who rather oddly gathered his material from the sunlit Without, and then carried it, gnashing his teeth and in a blind rush, into his hot and sticky cave, to cook it up, for the strange carnivore within, into a sickly stew’ (1989, 201-2)

be modernism's privileging of the internal over the external, and his rejection of the notion that the text might obtain mastery of the world through processes of assimilation. The Lewisian subject is instead faced with the 'indigestion of Reality', with the narrator of *Tarr* explaining how the protagonist 'was very fond of reality; but he was like a man very fond of what did not at all agree with him' (1996, 204).

Lewis was also averse to a prose style that appeared to be predicated on reconstituted material, describing with gusto how:

Gertrude Stein's prose-song [*Three Lives*] is a cold, black suet-pudding. We can represent it as a cold suet-roll of fabulously reptilian length. Cut it at any point, it is the same thing; the same heavy, sticky, opaque mass all through, and all along. It is weighted, projected, with a sibylline urge. It is mournful and monstrous, composed of dead and inanimate material. It is all fat without nerve. (*The Enemy*, Volume 1, 82)

Lewis evokes the stodgy textures of Stein in his layering of modified repetition: 'cold, black suet-pudding', 'cold suet-roll', as well as 'the same thing; the same', all the while building up to the overt mimicry of the Stein-stutter that he deploys in *Apes* and *The Childermass*.<sup>6</sup> Like the menu of the 'Restaurant Lejeune', Lewis suggests that Stein's work is overcooked, spoiled in the process of refinement. Yet while Lewis delights in boiling down his literary adversaries to their essential qualities, the suet-pudding analogy reveals a lot about his own processes. In his novels, as in his criticism, food is intimately bound up with the materiality of form. Paradoxically, his breakdown of Joyce and Stein allowed him to construct a vision of art as a recalcitrant substance, unable to be broken down into its constituent parts. Rather than being incorporated into a stream of consciousness before dissolving into 'moments of being' (Woolf, 84), or transubstantiation into epiphany (Joyce, 213), Lewis's disruption of alimentary processes signifies his assault on the palatability of form, his preference for a reading experience predicated on discomfort or even pain. Yet this process may have brought him closer to the experimentation of contemporaries such as Joyce than he ever would have admitted. Woolf herself described reading *Ulysses* as a process that involved 'considerable pains to oneself' (*Letters* 2, 533).<sup>7</sup> Lewis's was perhaps not the only form of writing designed to lodge in the gullet.

Lewis was, however, a key early innovator of modernist indigestibility. In 1937 he recalled that his first novel *Tarr*:

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<sup>6</sup> For an example of the Stein-stutter in action see *The Apes of God*, 439. Satters also 'steins' in *The Childermass*, 50.

<sup>7</sup> In her diary, Woolf also deployed an alimentary metaphor to describe her distaste for *Ulysses* and her confusion as to why T. S. Eliot favoured it so highly: 'When one can have cooked flesh, why have the raw? But I think if you are anaemic, as [T. S. Eliot] is, there is glory in blood. Being fairly normal myself I am soon ready for the classics again', (1980, 188-189).

was not ‘constructed’, as the commercial pundit calls it. It did not conform to the traditional wave-length of the English novel. There was not a lot of soft padding everywhere, in other words, to enable the eggs to get safely to market. Indeed they were not eggs. They were more like bullets’. (1967, 88)

Instead of wave-lengths, the rhythms of *Tarr* are formed of ruptures and spasms that blast away at the conventions of the traditional ‘English novel’. Just as bullets make violent mouths in our bodies, Lewis transforms the boundaries both of readerly consumption and of the self into something hard and unpalatable. In its refusal to ‘conform’ to existing conventions, Lewis presents *Tarr* as having developed a hard outer shell that can penetrate its surroundings while remaining unassimilable. As well as anticipating his subsequent reaction against the more fluid currents of literary modernism, Lewis’s aesthetics of distaste in *Tarr* were part of an attempt to bring to the surface all that nineteenth-century realism tried to either conceal or render appetizing. Transforming some of the more negative attitudes that surround this hostile and recalcitrant writer is no easy task. Yet if Lewis is known for being, in W. H. Auden’s words, a ‘lonely old volcano of the Right’ (qtd. by Smith, 221), then he is also a figure who dared to erupt, turning our insides out, exposing our horrifying contents.

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