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"SOMETHING THAT'S THERE . . . TO BE . . . NOT THERE":
FOOD AS MATTER AND METAPHOR IN KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S
SELECTED STORIES

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Among the numerous allusions to food, eating and drinking to be found in Katherine Mansfield's short stories, two instances stand out for the way in which food and words, text and taste are conflated. The first is an apparently offhand remark by the narrator of "An Indiscreet Journey," in which eating becomes the metaphor for the ruminative reading manner of the protagonist's fellow train passenger: "An old woman sat opposite . . . In her fat hands, adorned with a wedding and two mourning rings, she held a letter. Slowly, slowly *she sipped a sentence*, and then looked up and out of the window, her lips trembling a little, and then another sentence, and again the old face turned to the light, *tasting it . . .*" (*Stories* 23; emphasis mine). The second occurs in the story entitled "Psychology": here, the focus is on food as matter to be transfigured through its association with text. The female protagonist urges her friend to eat his cake "imaginatively," as though it were not just cake, but heavenly cake, made sacred by its worthiness to have been mentioned in the Bible, consecrated, as it were, through text: "Roll your eyes if you can and taste it on the breath. It is not a sandwich from the hatter's bag—it's the kind of cake that might have been mentioned in the Book of Genesis. . . And God said: 'Let there be cake. And there was cake. And God saw that it was good'" (127). In spite of the parodic, comic turn of the second example, these two instances in which food and writing are conflated both advocate a practice of reading and eating—a practice of consumption, essentially—in which both words and food would be lingeringly savoured, rolled around the mouth and relished for their texture, rather than merely swallowed in a basely expeditious fashion. Such a practice of reading, of textual consumption, is similar to that which Roland Barthes identifies as being the way in which the "texte de jouissance" (or text of "bliss" in the English translation) requires to be read: "ne pas dévorer, ne pas avaler, mais brouter" (Barthes 23-4). According to

Barthes, the text of bliss is one which, unlike the euphoric, comfortable reading experience afforded by the text of pleasure, destabilises and disconcerts the reader, eliciting a sense of having lost one's bearings:

Texte de jouissance: celui qui met en état de perte, celui qui déconforte (peut-être jusqu'à un certain ennui), fait vaciller les assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques, du lecteur, la consistance de ses goûts, de ses valeurs et de ses souvenirs, met en crise son rapport au langage. (25-26)

The text of bliss is thus linked to a ruminative practice of reading made necessary by its essentially intransitive nature, its refusal to yield any immediately graspable significance or comfortable meaning. Mansfield's texts, I suggest, should be read as just such texts of bliss (it is perhaps no coincidence that one of her most well-known stories should be entitled, precisely, "Bliss") on account of the unsettling quality of their style, and the elusiveness of their unstated meanings. It will be my contention in this paper that the motif of food and eating in Mansfield's stories becomes one of the privileged sites for the articulation of the representational "crisis" identified by Roland Barthes. By being foregrounded both as matter and metaphor, food and the dynamics of consumption become invested with both literal and figurative meaning, enabling Mansfield to give expression not only to the ambivalently conflictual and predacious nature of human and gender relations, but also to the problematic nature of the signifying process itself.

"Home products" (74): Food, the Feminine and Figuration

The specific textures of the foodstuffs mentioned in Mansfield's stories—the "delicate shaves of cold beef, little wads of mutton, just the right thickness" that Stanley Burnell prides himself on cutting in "Prelude" (74), or the luxuriantly "rich dark cake" (263) contrasting with the brittle shells of the

meringues served up by Josephine and Constantia, the "Daughters of the Late Colonel"—foreground the intrinsic status of food as matter and substance, the stuff of the daily lives of Mansfield's numerous female protagonists whose main occupation is to produce it, arrange it, transform it and serve it up for consumption. Replete with scenes and images of food and eating, many of the stories, such as "Bliss" or "Sun and Moon" actually hinge quite simply on the central event of a dinner party, or on a series of memories or enactments of almost ritualistic tea-drinking or meal-taking, such as in "A Dill Pickle" or "The Daughters of the Late Colonel." Marvin Magalaner has pointed out that "Bliss," for example, relies heavily on the imagery of food, eating and "other suggestions of oral satisfaction like smoking cigarettes" (415), as we see Bertha Young engaged in various apparently nurturing activities such as arranging fruit, feeding her baby, making coffee and almost "[weeping] with child-like pleasure" when her womanizing husband praises her for her "very admirable soufflé!" (119). "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" stages a series of meal-time scenes between sisters Josephine and Constantia, ravenous Nurse Andrews who "was simply fearful about butter" (254), and their recalcitrant servant Kate, and one of the weightier decisions the two sisters will be required to make following the death of their father is whether "we could manage our own food" (268). Food as something to be "managed" by the feminine here reiterates the commonplace identification of women with matter to be transformed in the most literal of ways, for human consumption and the perpetuation of life, which is what 'Jug' seems to suggest when she selects "eggs in various forms" (268) as the quintessential food of life.

This traditional association of the feminine with brute matter and the nurturing function also has implications for women's relation to language, involving, as Margaret Homans has pointed out, the identification of the feminine with literal rather than figurative language:

For the same reason that women are identified with nature and matter in any traditional thematics of gender (as when Milton calls the planet Earth "great Mother"), women are also identified with the literal, with the absent referent in our predominant myth of language. (4)

According to this myth, which Homans traces back through Wordsworth and Aeschylus before focusing on its psycho-linguistic retelling in the Lacanian "myth" of language and gender, the emergence of symbolic language, with its system of differences and absences, becomes a system for generating figurative substitutes for the forbidden mother, the absent referent of the oedipal exchange (Homans 5ff). In this system of signifiers and referents, the feminine occupies the

position of the absent referent, the literal or non-symbolic matter/mater, while the operations of figuration and figurative language are associated with the masculine:

What the son searches for, in searching for substitutes for the mother's forbidden body, is a series of figures: "someone *like* his mother." At the same time, language is structured as the substitution for the (female) object of signifiers that both require the absence of the object and also permit its controlled return, something *like* the lost object. Figuration, then, and the definition of all language as figuration gain their hyperbolic cultural valuation from a specifically male standpoint . . . Women must remain the literal in order to ground the figurative substitutions sons generate and privilege. (9)

This opposition throws interesting light on some of the figurative and literal operations and transformations that take place across the motif of food as matter in Mansfield's stories. As we shall see, the characters of Mansfield's stories constantly attempt to make food signify more than its merely literal, material status would seem to warrant, to invest it with figurative potential—stated or unstated—, with meaning beyond its merely literal denotative meaning. According to whether these figurative operations are narrated through a male or a female focaliser, the character's relation to food and other products of the fat of the land also comes to register his or her position in relation to language, literal and/or figurative, and to the production of meaning.

Two episodes in "Prelude" dealing with different attitudes to the "home products" yielded by the Burnells' newly-acquired homestead may serve to illustrate this. First of all, Stanley Burnell's manly carving of the roast duck, the "first of the home products" (74), is narrated from Stanley's point of view and gives rise to a series of metaphoric developments which essentially shift the emphasis from the bird's status as matter or foodstuff to a more figurative representation:

Burnell ran his eye along the edge of the carving knife. He prided himself very much upon his carving, upon making a first-class job of it. He hated seeing a woman carve; they were always too slow, and they never seemed to care what the meat looked like afterwards. Now he did; he took a real pride in cutting delicate shaves of cold beef, little wads of mutton, just the right thickness, and in dividing a chicken or a duck with nice precision . . . (74)

An explicit opposition between the sexes is voiced here in the allusion to the different ways of carving of men and women, the main difference apparently being that women "never seemed to care what the meat looked *like* afterwards" (emphasis mine). The emphasis here is both on the transformation of the meat into a visually pleasing form, and also on

the search for an equivalent *semantic* substitute for the meat, something the meat would be "like." And indeed the following sentence goes on to generate a chain of substitutive signifiers for the original meat, which now becomes "shaves" and "wads," figures or metaphors to designate the original matter. Women, it is suggested, are incapable of such processes of figurative transformation or re-presentation, having no eye for metaphorical likeness or similarity². Before the focalisation shifts back to one of the female members of the household (Stanley Burnell's perspective is adopted only intermittently in "Prelude" and "At the Bay"), Stanley's final reflection and comment round off the already initiated metaphorical expansion with a further series of hyperbolic analogies:

It was a superb bird. It wasn't meat at all, but a kind of very superior jelly. 'My father would say,' said Burnell, 'this must have been one of those birds whose mother played to it in infancy upon the German flute. And the sweet strains of the dulcet instrument acted with such effect upon the infant mind... Have some more, Beryl? ...' (74)

This hyperbolic metaphorical development begins by negating the literal matter of meat ("It wasn't meat at all") and substituting for it a more fanciful if not idealized type of food, jelly, thus purging the meat of its baser carnal associations. The following musical metaphor in which the bird is transformed into a child influenced by the dulcet strains of maternal music seems to be the inevitable next step in Stanley's metaphorical flight from food as matter. Yet as his abrupt interruption of his own lyrical outpourings suggests, the musical strains thus elicited themselves overstrain the comparison, which peters out into a series of materialized dots, bringing Stanley back to the original object, food: "I'm perfectly willing to state, in a court of law, if necessary, that I love good food." Stanley's return to food *qua* food significantly coincides with a return to the maternal, in the allusion to the bird's musical, non-symbolic communication with the mother, which in Homans' typology is an example of "literal" language, the maternal pre-symbolic language of presence that the son represses at the time of his entry into the symbolic order and his renunciation of his mother (see note 3). Stanley's awareness of the absurdity of his flight into figuration and his abrupt return to the literal thus plays out on another level the forbidden scenario of the return to the mother as matter/mater, and underscores the predominance of the literal over the figurative.

The primacy of the literal as an essentially feminine construct is further corroborated in a second allusion to another of the Burnells' "home products," this time by Mrs Fairfield speaking of the "fruit trees" in the orchard (78). Once

again, this "home product" becomes the focus of the character's transforming intentions, but unlike the figurative metaphorical transformations undergone by the bird through Stanley's eyes, here the transformation envisaged for the fruit trees is a literal one, transformation into jam:

'I haven't really been thinking of anything. I wondered as we passed the orchard what the fruit trees were like and whether we should be able to make much jam this autumn. There are splendid healthy currant bushes in the vegetable garden. I noticed them today. I should like to see those pantry shelves thoroughly well stocked with our own jam...' (78)

The only equivalent substitute Mrs Fairfield puts forward as to "what the fruit trees were *like*" is no metaphor, only matter, another foodstuff: jam. The proximity of this literal transformation to Stanley's series of hyperbolic figurative transformations (both occur in the same section of the story) juxtaposes the operations of figuration and literalization across the motif of food, with the literal or feminine position appearing to predominate³.

According to Margaret Homans' definition and use of the term, the process of literalization is structurally equivalent to that of child-bearing: "the very structure of child-bearing, in which something becomes real that did not exist before—or that existed only as a word, a theory, or a "conception"—is a structure of literalization, by which the relatively figurative becomes the relatively literal" (Homans 26). In the light of this, Linda Burnell, the prolifically reproductive wife of Stanley, would appear as a figure of literalization as well as a figure of nurture in her role as mother. Linda, however, repeatedly rejects her nurturing function, leaving the feeding to her mother (46) and even reflecting in "At the Bay" that "she did not love her children" (216). More precisely, what Linda actually rejects is the material, bodily aspect of the nurturing exchange, be it as receiver or giver of food. Hence she dismisses Stanley's offer of a chop with the reply "The very thought of it is enough" (46), and perceives her offspring in terms of a mortifying materiality as "three great lumps of children" (77) giving birth to whom had nearly killed her. Linda appears as literally consumed, "broken, made weak, her courage . . . gone" (216), by the material demands of giving and sustaining life. This rejection of the nurturing function and the "matter" of life coincides with a parallel repudiation of the literal, since Linda's attitude to that other emblematic "home product," the aloe, is characterised by an energetic figurative activity:

As they stood on the steps, the high grassy bank on which the aloe rested rose up *like a wave*, and the aloe seemed to *ride upon it like a ship* with the oars lifted. Bright moonlight *hung on* the lifted

oars like water, and on the green wave glittered the dew. (76; emphasis mine)

This figurative version of the aloe seems to Linda "more real" (76) and vital, more life-savingly meaningful than the "absurd" literal materiality of her actual existence: "How absurd life was—it was laughable, simply laughable. And why this mania of hers to keep alive at all? For it really was a mania" (77). Only a form of madness or "mania," a flight into the imaginary figurative constructs of the mind (mania < Gk *menos* spirit), can keep her from slipping into a state of death-like, meaningless literality.

For Linda, figuratio*n* is perceived as an alternative to the life-sapping, meaningless, literal exchange of child-bearing and the nurturing function. Elsewhere in Mansfield's fiction, the nurturing exchange is similarly associated less with life-giving than with life-taking, less with meaningful productiveness than with meaningless exchange, and in particular with debased if not predatory exchanges between the sexes.

Predatory Appetites

In several of the stories food and appetite appear as recurrent metaphors for the predatory or even cannibalistic mode in which sexual relations are played out. In "Je ne parle pas français," Raoul Duquette's sexual initiation with his African laundress involves his being bribed with "a little round fried cake covered with sugar" (88) after every "performance," and his subsequent fall into prostitution in moments of financial difficulty is couched euphemistically in the eating metaphor: "If I find myself in need of right-down cash—well, there's always an African laundress and an outhouse, and I am very frank and *bon enfant* about plenty of sugar on the little fried cake afterwards" (89). The description of Raoul's ambiguous relationship with Dick Harmon operates a shift from the eating metaphor into a more sinister register, that of predation, as Dick is perceived both as a "catch" (92) and a "prey" (98) caught by Raoul's "bait" (92) in the "trap" (98) of Paris, while Dick's fiancée, Mouse, similarly falls victim to Raoul, who is referred to in appropriately animalistic terms as "the little fox-terrier" (99). The whole atmosphere of this early story is informed by a sense of hyperphagia in human transactions, be they sexual or financial, and even Raoul's negotiations with his concierge about the payment of his rent are steeped in the nauseating miasmas of cannibalistic *cuisine*: "No, it was too nauseous. And all the while the black pot on the gas ring bubbling away, stewing out the hearts and livers of every tenant in the place" (97). Tenants too poor to pay their rent must give in to a debased form of exchange and offer up their bodies for consumption, as Miss Ada Moss, the down-and-out contralto

singer of "Pictures" discovers. The "pictures" of the title refer not only to the moving pictures produced by the "North East Film Company" where she attempts to find employment (139) but also to the mental images of food which torment her and accentuate her hunger:

'It's not as if I was skinny—I'm just the same full figure I used to be. No, it's because I don't have a good hot dinner in the evenings.'

A pageant of Good Hot Dinners passed across the ceiling, each of them accompanied by a bottle of Nourishing Stout...

'Even if I were to get up now,' she thought, 'and have a sensible substantial breakfast...' A pageant of Sensible Substantial Breakfasts followed the dinners across the ceiling, shepherded by an enormous, white, uncut ham. (133)

The formulaic expressions "good hot" and "sensible substantial" used to designate the dinners and breakfasts, turn into "pictures" of what is designated, and the use of capital letters in the expressions referring to these mental images is a gesture towards the conferring of emblematic status on these pictures, even though such a shift from the linguistic to the pictorial cannot in effect be carried out in the medium of narrative. It is as if the narrative impossibility of this shift from the linguistic medium towards a less mediated form of representation, the pictorial, also represented the impossibility of Miss Moss's attempt to get closer to the very matter or materiality of food. When she finally meets the "stout gentleman" with the "sausage finger" (141) to whom she will prostitute herself at the end of the story, the offer of food that he holds out to her (the dreamed of "Nourishing Stout" and breakfast *sausage*?) is, ironically, merely lexical. In a disconcerting inversion, Ada Moss, the would-be consumer, herself becomes the consumed object of her male client's sexual appetite, being "firm and well covered" (141), a little, perhaps, like the "enormous, white, uncut ham" of Ada's own gastronomical reveries.

The inversion of consumer and consumed is also central to "The Man Without a Temperament," which depicts the dragging monotony of the Salesbys' self-imposed exile in a Mediterranean country where they have fled on account of Mrs Salesby's poor health. Mrs Salesby is dying, perhaps somewhat appropriately of the wasting disease known as consumption, yet in being thus physically consumed by her illness she in turn becomes the figurative consumer of her husband whom she regards as her spiritual nourishment: "You see—you're everything. You're bread and wine, Robert, bread and wine," she tells him (154). Absorbed by the endless small errands he performs for his wife, Robert is consumed rather than consuming, and Mansfield conveys the sense of his diminished selfhood by highlighting his lack

of appetite and his resulting languidness. The recurrent allusions to the eating habits of the other members of the hotel—the “decoction” drunk by the Two Topknobs, “something whitish, greyish, in glasses, with little husks floating on the top” (142), the honeymoon couple quarrelling over which fish they will eat or the General and Countess complaining about the texture of their eggs (152)—all serve to foreground Robert’s own lack of appetite and refusal of nourishment as he twice turns down his wife’s offer of food (144/152), claiming to be “off food, that’s all” (152).

Narrative Anorexia

Symptomatic of the blandness and apparent indifference of this “man without a temperament,” Robert’s dwindling appetite finds its textual manifestation in a parallel form of narrative anorexia. What is striking about this particular story is the sparsity of any kind of authorial expatiation or narrative commentary on Robert’s state of mind or feelings about his enforced exile. On the contrary, the régime adopted by the narrator of “The Man Without a Temperament” is one of narrative rationing, of a paring down of any superfluous or extraneous detail beyond the level of mere narrative subsistence. The reader’s hunger for meaning and explanation is catered for less by the semantic content of the signifieds than by the more elliptical resonances of the signifiers which sustain the text with connotative effects of meaning rather than with more immediately digestible information. Hence, Robert’s listless indifference, for example, is not so much stated as inscribed in the languidness of the reiterated long drawn-out vowel sound of the words “drawled” (146), “sauntered” and “yawn” (147) used to denote his habitual gestures and manner of speaking. Robert’s range of expressiveness is, in fact, confined to the single gesture of turning the signet ring on his little finger, a gesture mentioned several times by the narrator, who nevertheless withholds any further interpretation as to the meaning of the gesture:

He stood at the hall door turning the ring, turning the heavy signet ring upon his little finger while his glance travelled coolly, deliberately, over the round tables. (142)

He turned the ring, turned the signet ring on his little finger and stared in front of him, blinking, vacant. (145)

Salesby stood in the cage, sucking in his cheeks, staring at the ceiling and turning the ring, turning the signet ring on his little finger. (151)

The gesture of “turning the ring” on his finger is accompanied on all three occasions by an allusion to the vacancy of Robert’s gaze or “stare,” a scopical emptiness which matches

the absence of any insight into his consciousness provided by the narrator. As a counterbalance to this dearth of explanatory material, the anaphoric repetition of the phrase “turning the ring, turning the heavy signet ring,” “turned the ring, turned the signet ring,” provides a compensatory node of potential meaning which the reader is invited to invest in it. On the other hand, it also appears as a mere linguistic excrescence, a superfluous verbal outgrowth whose redundancy underscores the narcissistically self-generating textual enterprise which ultimately refers back only to itself, refuses to gratify the reader with any interpretation or meaning beyond the play of signifiers in the text, and consumes itself in its own apparent self-sufficiency. Self-consumption as a result of confinement is indeed what is suggested in the third example as Robert stands “in the cage, sucking in his cheeks” in a gesture of self-silencing which is also one of self-annihilation.

Robert’s self-devouring muteness is also reflected in a form of narrative reticence which engenders a process of textual dissolution. Robert’s flagging interest in his wife’s letter-reading is registered textually by a kind of typographical emaciation as dots and suspension marks eat into the syntactic fabric of his wife’s sentences:

‘From Lottie,’ came her soft murmur. ‘Poor dear ... such trouble ... left foot. She thought ... neuritis ... Doctor Blyth ... flat foot ... massage. So many robins this year ... maid most satisfactory ... Indian Colonel ... every grain of rice separate ... very heavy fall of snow.’ (145)

Just like the “grains of rice” mentioned in the letter, the very texture of Mansfield’s writing replicates the process of separation or spacing out thanks to her very characteristic use of ellipsis, both typographical (the recurrent use of suspension marks) as well as rhetorical since the overall narrative line itself dissolves into a series of different juxtaposed time levels separated by blank spaces, such as when Robert’s memories carry him back first to a rainy November day in England (150) and next to a “late summer” day when he first learned of his wife’s illness (153). Significantly, the first of these time shifts is operated across a metonymic displacement triggered by Robert’s contemplation of the Mediterranean foods around him—tomatoes, vines, wild grapes—which conjure up memories of England and its foods such as “swedes,” “cold beef, potatoes in their jackets, claret, household bread” and some “bits of blackberry” he once picked for his wife:

On the hedges on the other side of the road there were grapes small as berries, growing wild, growing among the stones. He leaned against a wall, filled his pipe, put a match to it ... Leaned across a gate, turned up the collar of his mackintosh. ...

He looked over the bare field. From the corner by the gate there came the smell of swedes, a great stack of them, wet, rank-coloured. . . . Supper—cold beef, potatoes in their jackets, claret, household bread. (149-50)

The simple enumeration of the various foodstuffs of both countries, both present and past, separated by the hiatus of the blank line, communicates the unspoken sense of Robert's nostalgia and regret more vividly than any more explicit explanation could have done. The expression is stripped down to its most essential, evocative, sensory elements. This is perhaps what Willa Cather, the American novelist, had in mind when she wrote about Katherine Mansfield: "She communicates vastly more than she actually writes. One goes back and runs through the pages to find the text which made one know certain things . . . , and the text is not there—but something was there, all the same—is there, though no typesetter will ever set it" (Cather 137).⁴

Something that "is not there" yet "is there—all the same" irresistibly calls to mind the definition of food put forward by the male protagonist of "Psychology" as "something that's there . . . to be . . . not there":

It's queer but I always do notice what I eat here and never anywhere else. I suppose it comes of living alone so long and always reading while I feed . . . my habit of looking upon food as just food. . . something that's there, at certain times. . . to be devoured. . . to be. . . not there. (127; Mansfield's ellipses)

"Something that's there . . . to be . . . not there" defines the act of eating or consumption in terms of a dynamics of presence and absence, and of a general movement from matter to insubstantiality, a kind of vanishing act whereby, in the process of being embodied, absorbed by the body, food as matter is replaced by a vacuum. Such a process of embodiment/disembodiment is also analogous to the metaphorical process itself, in which the vehicle, the image which embodies the tenor, is at once both present and absent (for example, when the aloe is called a "ship" in "Prelude," the signifier *ship* is present while the object *ship* is absent from the actual context of Linda's garden). Food as matter is repeatedly called upon in Mansfield's texts to stand for something absent, to represent some feeling or desire which remains unspoken in the present context, to articulate "the thing not named," to borrow Willa Cather's expression (Cather 50). We shall see that as the characters of Mansfield's stories strive to make food signify beyond itself, to transform matter into metaphor, they come up against the impenetrable materiality of their chosen medium, so that the ensuing pervasive sense of loss and frustration emerges less from the actual breakdown in human relations dramatized in these

stories, than from the sense of the failure of the metaphorical leap which food is commissioned to articulate.

Food and "the thing not named"

At the beginning of "Psychology" and "Bliss," consumption initially appears as a metaphor designating a feeling of intense joy. As Bertha Young in "Bliss" turns the corner of her street, she is "overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss—absolute bliss!—as though [she'd] suddenly *swallowed a bright piece* of that late afternoon sun" (111); in "Psychology," the first greeting of the two unnamed protagonists is likened to a kind of exquisite savouring: "Still, as it were, they *tasted on their smiling lips* the sweet shock of their greeting" (125). In both stories, however, the initial rapture rapidly degenerates into despair and desolation as the metaphorical *dégustation* gives way to scenes of more literal ingestion. In "Psychology," the tacit, wordless communion elicited by the characters' figurative "tasting" of each other ("Their secret selves whispered: 'Why should we speak? Isn't this enough?'" 125) is abruptly broken off by the appearance of "tea" which disrupts the implicit harmony of the greeting, a disruption which the narrator underlines: "It was delightful—this business of having tea—and she always had delicious things to eat—little sharp sandwiches, short sweet almond fingers, and a dark, rich cake tasting of rum—but *it was an interruption*" (126; emphasis mine). The rift opened up between the two by this inventory of edibles, inscribed significantly between a set of severing dashes, will never be healed. On the contrary, the protagonists' mutual understanding and unstated desire for each other will be deflected onto food and books, the subjects of their conversation, as the overtly stated negation of their sexual appetite ("Passion would have ruined everything; they quite saw that" 127) gives rise to compensatory appetites, the "longing for tea" and literal food (125), and the devouring of literary fodder such as the "psychological novel" (129). Food and social chatter about food and books (the two indeed are conflated, as has already been mentioned in the introduction, when the woman describes her cake in biblical terms, and the man claims he always "reads" while he "feeds") take on an essentially phatic function, that of establishing superficial contact between people rather than real transitive communication. The meaninglessness of their social intercourse is foregrounded by the excessiveness of the various strategies designed to fill up the moments of silence and stave off the flood of passion: the hyperbolic comparison of cake and Genesis, the repetition of the intensifying adverb "too" ("Weren't they just a little too quick, too prompt with their replies, too ready to take each other up?" 128), the stodgy, turgid discourse about "psychology *qua* psychology" (129), all point to the essential lack of referentiality

of these discourses ("What have we been talking about? thought he" 129) in which meaning congeals, effectively masking the real locus of meaning, the pregnant silences, "the boundless, questioning dark" (128) which is the most eloquent expression of the characters' real desire. The semantics of stodginess and thickness which informs this awareness of meaninglessness ("What fools they were—*heavy, stodgy, elderly*—with positively *upholstered* minds" 129) recalls the irreducible materiality of the "thick little wads" of cake (127) of the beginning which now pervades even the minds of the characters. It is as if by attempting to deny the materiality of the body by displacing the consummation of the flesh onto the consumption of cake, the two characters are brought face to face with a more devastating form of materiality, the potential non-referentiality of language itself, its pure verbal materiality.

The well-known story "Bliss" similarly dramatizes, among other things, the difficult articulation of desire and longing through the doubly recalcitrant medium of words and food.⁵ In this story, the staging of a dinner party for a group of writers and literary people draws together the thematics of food, the body and meaning as we witness Bertha Young struggling both to find a suitable verbal form to accommodate her feelings for Pearl Fulton, and to come to terms with the meaning of her husband's inexplicable preoccupation with food and the body's digestive functions. Bertha's attraction to her husband, which she is unable consciously to explain, derives from his curious obsession with the digestive system. His remark that Pearl Fulton's enigmatic coldness is a sign of "a good stomach" (114), for example, elicits the following comment:

He made a point of catching Bertha's heels with replies of that kind... 'liver frozen, my dear girl', or 'pure flatulence', or 'kidney disease',... and so on. For some strange reason Bertha liked this and almost admired it in him very much. (115)

Bertha's inability to account for her feelings beyond it being "for some strange reason" is repeated when she contemplates Harry enjoying his dinner:

It was part of his—*well, not his nature, exactly, and certainly not his pose—his—something or other*—to talk about food and to glory in his 'shameless passion for the white flesh of the lobster' and the 'green of pistachio ices—green and cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers.' (119; emphasis mine)

Bertha is unable to find the adequate term to express Harry's relation to food, which is here explicitly associated with "flesh" and the body ("eyelids"), clearly pointing to his sensual, lusty nature⁶ and obliquely announcing his affair

with Pearl Fulton whose own "heavy eyelids" (118) are one of the first features mentioned about her. Bertha however appears incapable of making the imaginative leap necessary to associate Harry's metaphorical passion for "white flesh" and "the eyelids of Egyptian dancers" with his more literal love for the pale-skinned, heavy-lidded Pearl Fulton. She is blinded by the literal food-stuffs she believes his words to refer to, failing to perceive their metaphorical dimension.

Not that Bertha is totally alien to metaphorical elaboration. On the contrary, she constantly seeks figurative equivalents for her feelings. Right at the beginning of the story she compares her body to a fiddle kept in a case: "Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?" (111) Later she perceives the pear tree as "a symbol of her own life" (115). Usually, however, she recognizes the failure of her attempts: "No, that about the fiddle is not quite what I mean," she thought . . . 'It's not what I mean, because—Thank you, Mary'" (111). The aposiopesis which concludes the thought betrays a deficiency in Bertha's mastery of language, so that when her feeling of bliss returns, "she didn't know how to express it—what to do with it" (113). At the end of the story, even the pear tree has become a dubious, at best an obscure symbol of her life. As a counterpoint to Harry's carnal metaphors of food and the body, Bertha's metaphors for herself, her body and her life, tend to move *away* from the body (this being in keeping with her frigidity), and to deny the carnal, fleshy side of life in favour of a more rarefied, otherworldly form of expression. The hermeneutic process in which she is engaged in trying to "make out" Pearl Fulton (114) is couched in the semantics of "the beyond" ("Was there anything beyond it?" 114) and an ethereal dimension of being, as Bertha admits that "what she has to go on" is "less than nothing" (119):

Both [were] caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands. (120-1)

The irony of Bertha's considering Pearl to be "of another world" is driven home when we later realize that Pearl's association with the Youngs is of a far more terrestrial nature, and that the "bliss" in the story refers not only to some metaphorical "treasure" but also to a very physical bodily *jouissance*. Bertha systematically evacuates the body in her interpretations of Pearl and Harry, in spite of the recurrent signals foregrounding the primacy of the body which punctuate her guests' social chatter, such as the titles of the plays *Love in False Teeth* and *Stomach Trouble* which they discuss (119), or Eddie's quotation from a poem entitled

"Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?" (123). The title of this poem ironically echoes in a more prosaic register the "beautiful red soup" they have just consumed (118) which was part of Bertha's aestheticizing vision of Pearl Fulton, and thus inscribes a bathetic movement from the poetic to the prosaic which matches Bertha's own progression from pregnant expectation, "waiting for something... divine to happen... that she knew must happen... infallibly" (112), to privation and desolation on learning of her husband's infidelity. From the apprehension of an overwhelmingly present "something" imaged in the metaphor of Bertha's "*brimming cup* of bliss" (119), to the realization of the void of meaning, the narrative of "Bliss" is structured as an enactment of the consumptive process, of "something that's there . . . to be... not there."

Right up to the last moment, Bertha fails to seize the message of her husband's carnal desire for Pearl encoded in the sensual, fleshy evocations of food; yet she does come to an awareness of this sensuality indirectly, since "for the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband . . . ardently" (122). Just as Bertha's awakening to physical desire is inscribed obliquely in the descriptions of food, so the sexual frustration of the daughters of the late Colonel in the story of that title similarly manifests itself in the inordinate emphasis on food (especially meringues) and the latent significance the two sisters invest in it. The reminiscence of having their nephew Cyril to tea becomes less an illustration of Cyril's "sympathetic" nature, as it initially appears (263), than the expression of the sisters' submerged longings and motivations. Hence, the "rich dark cake" served up by Josephine and Constantia to their nephew is explicitly viewed as a feminine offering to masculine appetite, a masculine appetite which falls disappointingly short of their fervent attempts to excite it:

'Now, Cyril, you mustn't be frightened of our cakes. Your Auntie Con and I bought them at Buszard's this morning. We know what a man's appetite is. So don't be ashamed of making a good tea.'
... But Cyril was most unmanlike in appetite. (263)

Cyril is quite blind to the extent of the significance this ritual tea-taking has for his aunts. For Jug and Con, reined in until now by the necessity of "looking after father and at the same time keeping out of father's way" (271), tea-time represents a space in which they may abandon themselves to the lavish pandering of a man other than their father, a representative of the sex they have never met ("How did one meet men?" 271). It is a moment of reckless luxuriance, contrasting with their habitual penny-pinching pragmatism: "Josephine cut recklessly into the rich dark cake that stood for her winter

gloves or the soling and heeling of Constantia's only respectable shoes" (263). For the reader alert to the connotative quality of Mansfield's prose, the cake "stands for" more than simply the gloves and shoes they have deprived themselves of in order to buy the cake; it becomes the focus of the sisters' potentially voracious sexual appetite (fittingly, the cake has been bought at "Buszard's," a buzzard being a rapacious bird of prey), and this suggestion of predatory sexuality is corroborated by the fact that Josephine's reproval of Cyril's feeble appetite is accompanied by the strikingly castratory image of Constantia sitting "with her knife poised over the chocolate roll" (263).

Yet perhaps we are guilty of reading too much into these scenes of eating, of overloading them with a meaning that was never intended by Mansfield and which is certainly not overtly present in the text. Let us not, however, be lured into the opposite snare of the "intentional fallacy," but allow the text to unfurl its own spectrum of interpretations. The elusiveness of the meaning which may or may not be there is precisely the nature of the "text of bliss" defined by Roland Barthes, the text which destabilizes the reader's assumptions about how meaning is construed, and introduces a "crisis" in his relation to the language of representation. The overinvestment of meaning in food is, moreover, precisely what the characters of this short story are engaged in, and it is essentially a feeling of loss and discomfort (in Barthes' terms "*ce qui met en état de perte, qui déconforte*") which is experienced by the characters following the crisis in signification brought about by the episode of the meringues. That Cyril cannot remember whether his father is still "fond of meringues" or not (264) becomes a source of intense consternation for Jug and Constantia, and Cyril's feigning suddenly to remember causes an equally intense rush of pleasure and sighing which has unmistakable sexual overtones:

'Of course,' he said, 'it was meringues. How could I have forgotten? Yes, Aunt Josephine, you're perfectly right. Father's most frightfully keen on meringues.'
They didn't only beam. Aunt Josephine went scarlet with pleasure; Auntie Con gave a deep, deep sigh. (264)

When this momentous piece of information is conveyed with much repetition and yelling to the half-deaf Colonel under the pretext that "it will please him so much" (266), the meringues—and, by metonymic contamination, the very genuine sentiments they have been invested with by Jug and Con—take on, under the cumulative effect of reiteration, an undeniable absurdity: "What an esstrordinary thing!" said old Grandfather Pinner. "What an esstrordinary thing to come all this way here' to tell me!" And Cyril felt it *was*" (266). So,

indeed, does the reader, who feels the disparity between the fragile triviality of the brittle meringues and the excessive weight of meaning and significance they are made to bear by the two sisters (that the meringues are closely intermeshed with their affective lives is suggested by the way Constantia "wincd faintly as she broke through the shell of hers," 264). Once again, food, which is made to mean "something," reverts back to its status as "nothing," mere matter, referring to nothing but itself and its own irreducibly material condition.

Food and its lexicon, which Mansfield's characters make the language of their emotion, appear as totally inadequate to convey the depth and intensity of human feeling. The reader's understanding of Jug and Constantia's frustration and Bertha Young's desolation stems to a large degree from the failure of these characters to make food as matter function adequately, within their fictional universe, as metaphor for the range of their emotions. In "A Dill Pickle," the dill pickle of the title comes to stand for the sense of communion and "boundless understanding" (181) between the male and female protagonists, a metaphor of the woman's former love for "the only man who had ever understood her" (183). Yet the moment of metaphorical illumination embodied by the dill pickle is impossible to sustain, and as the narrative moves on and the focus is displaced onto, among other things, other edible items such as "a little pot of caviare" (181) and the pot of cream the man wishes not to pay for (183), the dill pickle recedes into the background and becomes just another foodstuff in Mansfield's culinary catalogue. Yet if the characters fail in their search to establish contact via the limited signifying powers of food, Mansfield, through her insistent and suggestive foregrounding of food succeeds in conveying to the reader "vastly more than she actually writes" (Cather 137). The unsustainable moments of figurative insight which play across the motif of food, endowing it with flashes of potential meaning, rescue it from an otherwise arbitrary and seemingly gratuitous presence in the text, and invite the reader not to devour the text, but, as required by the text of bliss, to sip each sentence and savour the quality of its full-bodied flavour. The intensity and compactness of the short story form, which it has not been possible to go into here, goes a long way, of course, towards enhancing the incisiveness of such fleeting, unsustainable moments, but that must be the subject of another essay—more food for thought from the Mansfieldian feast of words.

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NOTES

- 1 - As Homans recognizes, the literal/feminine/non-symbolic vs. figurative/masculine/symbolic polarity does not entirely account for women's ambivalent position in language, since for reasons of legibility women writers necessarily take part in the symbolic, being required to write "according to certain established principles of symbolic signification" (20) within which they merely "accommodate" the non-symbolic through various practices of "literalization" (26). The different means of literalization identified by Homans are: "1. Moments at which a figure is literalized. . . . 2. The figure of the Virgin Mary, who gives birth to . . . a child who is the Word, the embodiment of the Logos. . . . 3. The theme of women characters who perform translations from one language into another or from one medium to another, or who carry messages or letters for other people. . . . 4. Moments when the text itself performs any of these linguistic operations—translation, transmission, copying, and so on—with respect to the language of other (again usually male) authors" (31).
- 2 - See Lodge for a discussion of metaphor as a process of similarity and substitution (73ff).
- 3 - During this scene in the garden, Mrs Fairfield and her daughter communicate in what Mansfield calls "the special voice that women use at night to each other as though they spoke in their sleep or from some hollow cave" (76). This prehistoric mode of communication recalls that identified by Margaret Homans in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, when Mrs Ramsey lulls Cam to sleep with words which "matter as sounds, monotonous and rhythmic, issuing from and returning to the body . . . a literal language shared between mother and daughter: a language of presence" (Homans 18; emphasis mine).
- 4 - Many thanks to Françoise Palleau for drawing my attention to this text.
- 5 - For a full inventory of allusions to consumption and food in "Bliss," see Magalaner. For a discussion of the Biblical and Shakespearean intertexts articulated around the food motif in "Bliss," see Neaman.
- 6 - Gardner McFall traces the meaning of "bliss" as "lust" in the poems contained in the *Oxford Book of English Verse* which Mansfield was reading at the time of writing "Bliss."
- 7 - See the insistence right from the beginning on the sensual textures of the fruit she arranges: "tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones" (112).