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Transgressive Appetites: Deviant Food Practices in Victorian Literature and Culture
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Transgressive Appetites: Deviant Food Practices in Victorian Literature and Culture (hereafter *Transgressive Appetites*) takes its cue from the eponymous international conference held in Pescara in November 2017, jointly organized by the “Gabriele d’Annunzio” University of Chieti-Pescara and the Kore University of Enna. The volume collects both essays based on papers delivered at the conference and new contributions. It aims at exploring the connections between food, drink, and culture in Victorian Britain. Victorian eating practices and their symbolism have recently been the object of scholarly attention from a plethora of complementary perspectives: historical reconstructions, for instance, have detailed the increasing availability and variety of foods in the nineteenth century (Broomfield 2007); other studies have focused on class and gender implications in the preparation and consumption of meals (e.g. Day 2007); others, still, have explored the relationships between food, the body, and the construction of identity (e.g. Lupton 1996). While drawing on the wealth of available research, the sixteen essays in the collection, as Costantini writes, aim to delve “into unexplored conceptualizations of transgressive appetites” and to widen “the interpretation of those appetites that have not yet been fully examined” (2021, p. 17), in order to show how transgressive appetites actually slip through the cracks of Victorian societal and cultural mandates. In fact, Parrino states, “what happens at the mouth” reflects and problematizes culture, “the mouth being a separating point, a threshold, between inside and outside, familiar and unfamiliar, normal and abnormal worlds.” (2021, p. 258)

The volume opens with a reflection on Charles Dickens. Francesca Orestano’s erudite “Gastroliterature: Victorian Transgressions and the Dickensian Perspective” serves both as an introduction to the century’s notion of alimentary transgression and as a portrayal of such transgression’s complex and multiple incarnations. Orestano sifts through multimodal texts – James Gillray’s illustrations, *Oliver Twist*, Catherine Dickens’s *What Shall We Have for Dinner?*, end-of-the-century advertisements, among others – in order to showcase the diversity in Victorian approaches to food consumption. From poverty-induced cannibalism, through ideas of food preservation and degeneration, food-shopping savvy and skillful cookery, to transgressive bodies (either corpulent or excessively thin), Orestano’s excellent essay provides a thought-provoking range of transgressive appetites. In “Excessive Appetites: The Craving for Food, Sex and Money in Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*”, Maria Teresa Chialant examines the intersection of food, sex, and money discourses at the core of the book. She interestingly combines the analysis with a few concluding remarks on *What Shall We Have for Dinner?*, which, she states, “reveals a lot about Dickens’s own dietary predilections, as well as the typical culinary habits of a metropolitan household of the English middleclass (2021, p. 83). Claudia Capancioni’s “Cannibalism, Charles Dickens, and Franklin’s Last Arctic Expedition” focuses on Dickens’s interest in Sir John Franklin’s disastrous voyage to the

Arctic. Dickens famously suggested Wilkie Collins write a play about the expedition; he wrote a piece in Franklin's defense once Dr. John Rae's report to the Admiralty was published in *The Times*. Franklin's crew, according to Rae, resorted to cannibalism in order to survive; Dickens not only refuted the accusation, but he also provided a "colonial reading" (2021, p. 87) whereby Eskimo people assaulted and ate Franklin and his crew. Dickens's refusal of survival cannibalism as a story of endurance (as Rae tried to portray it) clearly emerges from Capancioni's essay. "[F]or [Dickens], a Victorian hero ought to die 'passively' (Dickens 1854a: 364), instead of surviving at all costs." (2021, p. 89). Dickens further demonstrates "Western limitations in defining the human" (2021, p. 99).

Colonial appetites and gender roles are explored by Ilaria Berti, Silvia Antosa, and Oriana Palusci. Berti's "Food and Colonists' Identity in Lady Nugent's Diary in the Pre-Victorian British Caribbean" reads Nugent's *Journal* and Janet Shaw's *Journal of a Lady of Quality* as pre-Victorian examples of imperialist agency. Since changes in "food traditions and habits are slower than political and social processes" (2021, p. 45), analyzing two Georgian women's views on Creole food sheds light on the colonizers' racist contempt: Nugent despises the quantities and the quality of food eaten in Jamaica, while Schaw enthusiastically describes the Creole culinary opulence only to eventually specify that she does not subscribe to her own enthusiasm, for no proper lady would. Antosa's "Cannibal Appetites and Transgressive Desires: Consumption and Corporeality" brings cannibalism back to London, where the Anthropological Society and the Cannibal Club were established in the same year (1863). Both the society and the club produced texts on cannibalism, but text types were different: the society dealt in pseudoscientific papers, while the club privately circulated short poems and letters. Antosa shows that such typological and formal difference should not blind to the fact that, within these texts, cannibalism is a "powerful signifier" whereby "Western audiences symbolically appropriate and consume the bodies of the colonized (populations), while stigmatizing and othering it as 'barbaric' and 'indigenous'" (2021, p. 152). In "Eating 'Tigress': Isabella Bird's Adventures in the Golden Chersonese", Palusci's lucid prose problematizes the relationship between food and the female body. Isabella Bird, woman travel writer, is shown to successfully write about female food consumption and to explore transgressive appetites through the experience of exotic foodstuffs and rituals. Bird performs the "trope of transgressive eating to a public of anorexic women at home, dedicated to self-denial, restrained in the body and the spirit" (2021, p. 173). Palusci shows how Bird's writing manages to combine food, dismembering and violent death (Palusci quotes Letters IV and XIV in Bird's book), and how her "culinary experiences in the jungle satisfy her appetite for and curiosity of the unknown" (2021, p. 180).

Transgression is further addressed by Kim Salmons's "Coffee, Biscuits, and Fruit Pies: Hierarchies of Food in Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus': A Tale of the Forecastle*". Salmons discusses the significance of food to Conrad's work by interrogating his depiction of life on board the *Narcissus* and the imperfect, vulnerable balance between harmony and transgression on a ship. Food is a site of contention and, Salmons writes, "is woven into the descriptions of life at sea, situating the crew in terms of hierarchies of status as well as hierarchies of moral conduct" (2021, p. 239). Conrad is also the focus of Marilena Saracino's complex analysis in "'A Fresh Crop of Lies': Marriage and Food as Epistemological Issues in Joseph Conrad's 'The Return'". A London story, "The Return" is read as staging the inextricable connection between the ritual of marriage and that of eating. Saracino's focus is a married couple: their dining table and shared meals are symbolic of the inexorable corruption and deterioration of their marriage. Saracino thus introduces the trope of cannibalism to read the quiet dissolution of one of the tenets of

bourgeois life, “a means to criticize what was once glorified – progress, individualism, capitalism and imperialism.” (2021, p. 253) Seafaring and transgressive drinking are the main concern in Pam Lock’s “Disfigured by Drink: Gothic Deformity and Extreme Drinking in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*”. In Lock’s essay, Stevenson combines “the medical realities of habitual drunkenness with the frightening gothic descriptions of the pirates’ physical and mental deformity” (2021, p. 184) in order to depict the “monstrosity” of their lives and, therefore, their innate amorality (2021, p. 195).

The volume further explores the ways in which transgressive appetites are connected to money and to language and semantics. The former lies at the core of Silvana Colella’s innovative “Greed and Gluttony: Transgressive Appetites in Finance”, which thematizes the increasing power of the City of London and its connection with food and consumption imagery. Colella explores several non-canonical visual and textual sources – in particular Charles Levers’ *Davenport Dunn* – and records how the thirst for profit is represented and redefined through eating (and scatological) habits, be it paper money in Gilliray’s *Midas Transmuting all into Paper*, opium in John Hollingshead’s sketches in *Household Words*, or overeating as a symbol of both business success and business failure. In Colella’s analysis of *Davenport Dunn*, the protagonist embodies the ideal of scarcity as a “precondition of success” (2021, p. 115). Straddling gender studies and the unmerciful logic of the economy, Jude V. Nixon’s “Forbidden Fruit: The Economy of Food in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*” reads Rossetti’s women as spellbound by malignant goblin men peddling exotic fruit and questions their existence in a “market economy run by men, where [they] do not control production nor their own consumption” (2021, p. 127). The poem, Nixon concludes, reflects the “community of women Christina Rossetti devises, embraces, and promotes” (2021, p. 133), which underlies the possibility of same-sex desire.

The connection between food and sexual transgression is present in another Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, and explored in Eleonora Sasso’s “‘Each Twin Breast is an Apple Sweet’: D.G. Rossetti’s Cognitive Grammar of Transgressive Food”. Sasso’s critical approach owes much to cognitive linguistics in her use of Lakoff and Johnson’s work on metaphors (1999), the notion of visual grammar, as well as conceptual blending and restructuring. Sasso thus offers a sophisticated reading of D. G. Rossetti’s art as a representation of transgressive food, often oscillating between the profane and the sacred. Emanuela Ettore’s “George Gissing’s Language of Food Between Industrial Modernity and Proto-Ecological Discourse” continues Sasso’s thematization of language. In particular, Ettore sees food in Gissing’s work as a powerful metaphoric and metonymic element, a “marker of social deprivation and disunity” (2021, p. 197). Gissing is seen to textualize food in order to stigmatize poverty and disadvantage, to signify the distortion of emotions and empathy that can be effected by basic needs like hunger or thirst, and to protest the defacing effect of industrialization on people and on the environment. William Greenslade’s essay – titled “Fluid Performances: the Circulation of Milk in Late-Nineteenth-Century Fiction and Culture” – also deals in meaning and symbolism. Milk goes from the “naturalness” of the female body to the institutionalized incarnation of breast-feeding as a marker of national identity. The circulation of milk is analyzed through a selection of texts in order to offer “innovative ways of understanding how [...] psychological, societal, economic” forces “bear down on milk’s symbolic relationship to the individual, social, and national body” (2021, p. 211).

It is Maria Parrino’s masterful essay that closes the volume. In “‘I have dined already, and I do not sup’: Food Issues in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*”, Parrino tackles Stoker’s novel beyond the coordinates of blood-sucking as contamination, contagion, and

transgression. The proven xenophobic fear of invasion embodied by the Count is here set aside in order to investigate other appetites: Jonathan Harker's interest in Transylvanian food and drink, Lucy Westenra's and Mina Harker's blood-sucking that defaces traditional motherhood tropes (Lucy drinks from babies; Mina drinks from Count Dracula), and Renfield's insect diet all point to the several ways in which food consumption is thematized in the book.

Transgressive Appetites is a remarkable collection of essays: the breadth of its scope, the diversity of its contributors and perspectives, and the editors' unflinching commitment to keeping the content relevant and thought-provoking, all make for an interesting and instructive read.

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