

A Tour of the Cannibal Quarters: Industrial Fantasies and Carnivorous Appetites in Roald Dahl's Fiction

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To a large number of readers, Roald Dahl is still remembered as the writer of beloved children's books, from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) to *Matilda*, *The BFG* and *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. And yet, in the midst of his nursery rhymes and whimsical characters, one can find another side to Dahl. In his *Tales of the Unexpected* – and other collections of adult stories, such as *Someone Like You* (1954), *Kiss Kiss* (1960) and *Switch Bitch* (1974) – there is to be found a home for the Gothic; a dwelling site of the psychologically disturbed. Indeed, in Dahl's fiction it is possible to identify an array of phobias, madness, criminality and perversions that define the characters of the stories. A fascination with the dark side of humanity underpins Dahl's adult stories and here it is particularly worth mentioning that oddities and murder are often associated with images of consumption. For instance, in 'Georgy Porgy' (1960), a young boy, George, imagines his mother as a huge, hungry monster, opening up its mouth and devouring him: 'All I see is the mouth, the huge red mouth opening wider and wider...and I scream again and this time I can't stop' (Dahl 1991, 115). This disturbed fantasy will haunt him for the rest of his adult life and prevent him from having a stable relationship with a woman (he will later imagine all women to be disgusting hungry monsters who wish nothing better than to devour him). In 'Lamb to the Slaughter' (1954), a woman discovers that her husband is going to leave her; in response, she kills him by barbarically hitting him with a frozen leg of lamb. Later on, she will get rid of the incriminating murder weapon by cooking it and serving to the police, who eat it unknowingly as she giggles in the kitchen.

As Gothic fantasies are indulged with tragi-comic humour, it soon becomes clear that this *other* side of Dahl's fiction is also the home of the cannibal. Dahl often likes to use metaphors of cannibalism to draw attention to consumerist tendencies and greedy commodity consumption. Stories of slaughter and unusual consumption are particularly associated with the United States; Dahl himself was fascinated by American consumer economies, having been in contact with the country during World War II and having married an American actress. It is worth recalling here that, in sociological discourse, the word 'consumption' is not only used to denote eating and drinking. Consumption is also understood, as Deborah Lupton puts it, as 'the uses people make of commodities or goods, including food but also those that are inedible' (1996, 22). The 'consumption' of commodities can also refer to clothes, television, radio and a variety of purchasable items which interact with each other in order to form 'consumer identity'. So the idea of something or someone being edible could emerge conceptually conspicuous and intriguing.

In Dahl's adult stories, however, the use of cannibalistic imagery becomes explicit and more clearly socially informed. An example of this is 'Pig'. The story, published in 1960, is perhaps best described as a gothic vegetarian tale which employs sledgehammer symbolism to demolish an insatiably carnivorous capitalism. 'Pig' foregrounds, in a melodramatic mode, issues of human ethics, capitalist appetite and the consequent 'cannibalisation' of the consumer. As such, Dahl unveils cannibalism as a metaphor for industrial appetites. This reveals a gothic relationship between consumption, capitalism and libidinal longing, as these issues intersect with political and cultural forces. Dahl evokes images of colonial mythology in order to expose the self-destructive nature of capitalism's economy of desire; the memory of colonial slaughter haunts the descriptions of economic systems in present-day New York. Literary representations of cannibalism in the story also allow us access to the psychology and politics of a

burgeoning consumer economy during the Cold War era. This article will particularly focus on how, in echoing elements of Marxist critique and the history of conquest, Dahl's allegory of anthropophagi brings the cannibal 'home'.

'Pig' is the story of Lexington¹, an orphan boy, who is raised as a strict vegetarian by his aunt Glossspan and is protected from the knowledge that humans slaughter and consume animals as 'meat'. We can mention here, en passant, that it is peculiar how Dahl names the vegetarian aunt 'Glossspan', almost implying that her cooking is 'transparent' and hides no secrets. Lexington's life on a Virginia farm offers a bucolic sanctuary from harsh urban realities. His lifestyle is based on self-reliance and intimate contact with the land:

He was learning to help his old aunt in all sorts of different ways around the property, collecting the eggs from the chicken house, turning the handle of the butter churn, digging up potatoes in the vegetable garden and searching for wild herbs on the side of the mountain. (Dahl 1991, 158)

However, after his aunt's death, Lexington is forced to leave this pastoral utopia and enter the 'big city'. In New York, Lexington encounters meat for the first time and is both excited and intensely curious: "[n]ever in my life have I smelled anything as rich and wonderful as this!" our hero cried seizing knife and fork. "What on earth is it made of?" [...] "I already told you" the man said "It's pork". "And what exactly is pork?" (Dahl 1991, 166). Lexington's inquisitiveness takes him to a slaughterhouse where he witnesses the spectacle of pigs being butchered. However, in an unexpected turn, our protagonist is horrifically transformed from observer to participant:

Before he had time to realise what was happening, our hero was jerked off his feet and dragged backwards along the concrete floor of the shackling pen. 'Stop!' he cried. 'Hold everything my leg is caught!' [...] and so the sticker [...] taking Lexington gently by one ear with his left hand [...] raised his

¹ The name is a curious, and perhaps deliberate, anagram of 'oxen glint.'

right hand and deftly slit open the boy's jugular vein with a knife (Dahl 1991, 171).

The story ends abruptly with the bleeding Lexington thrown into a boiling cauldron together with the other 'pigs'.

The cannibalistic undertones of 'Pig' are impossible to ignore. Although Dahl does not state explicitly that the boy will be 'eaten', the fact that he joins the pigs in the cauldron makes this a safe assumption. The subject of cannibalism has been recently explored by various critical theories, including postcolonialism, Marxism, feminism and eco-theory². One might want to recall here notable recent examples, such as Jeff Berglund's *Cannibal Fictions* (2006) and Daniel Diehl and Mark Donnelly's *Eat Thy Neighbour*. In *Carnal Appetites*, Elspeth Probyn attempts to explain the perverse charisma of the cannibal as a figure who 'emphasises the most human of attributes, as well as designating the limit beyond which humanity is thought to cease' (2000, 80).

As well as a generalised exploration of the limits of humanity, Dahl's 'Pig' also offers a very specific critique of consumerism. The choice of location for Lexington's murder is significant. According to industrial folklore, Henry Ford – the founder of modern-day factory production – took the idea for his assembly line from a slaughterhouse. Fascinated by the profitable efficiency of the slaughtering chains – where every worker had a specific task – Ford decided to apply it to the production of automobiles. Both processes of production – slaughtering and automobile construction – rely on the mechanised transformation of one product into another: metal parts into automobile and flesh and organs into meat. It is possible to construct here an interesting parallel with Herman Melville's 'The Tartarus of Maids', in which workers in a paper factory are

² See, for instance, Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Cannibalism as a Cultural System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Laurence Goldman, *The Anthropology of Cannibalism* (Santa Barbara: Bergin and Garvey, 1999); Kristen Guest, *Eating Their Words* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

described as almost drained of their blood and consumed by the factory's capitalist appetites: 'I seemed to see, glued to the pallid incipience of the pulp, the yet more pallid faces of the pallid girls [...] themselves whetting the very sword that slay them' (Melville 1998, 92-95). In similar fashion, Lexington is objectified, dehumanised and reduced to a product as part of a series: initially confined to a shackling-pen, then hung from a 'chain' as part of a procession of animal carcasses.

Connections between the mechanisation of society and the mechanised nature of cannibalised consumerism are perhaps more clearly hinted at in 'Pig' by the choice of proper noun: 'Lexington' was the name of an early automobile from the era when Ford introduced assembly-line manufacture. Lexington, the boy, is the victim not of 'primitive' cannibals, but of an industrial technology which is traditionally regarded as a signifier of civilised progress. It is very important to observe that, as conceptual analogies relate 'Pig' to the birth of the mechanised automobile industry, its setting in the Fifties also reveals a critique of the workings of American consumerist markets. Indeed, Dahl constructs a clear link between Lexington's death, the cannibal killings and the mechanised workings of Fordism within the story. The beginning of Fordism itself can be associated with the birth of modern American capitalism. In a broad sense, Fordism refers to an Americanised 20th century consumer society: Ford developed technologies that standardised the final product and allowed for quicker and less specialised production lines. High productivity allowed for high wages; the factory workers, earning more money, could then afford to buy the cars they were producing. Mass production, therefore, allowed for mass consumption. As a result, Fordism has been described as 'a model of economic expansion and technological progress based on the mass production: the manufacture of standardized products in huge volumes using special purpose machinery and unskilled labour' (Tolliday & Zeitlin 1987, 1-2). Although Fordism was a method used to improve productivity

in the automotive industry, the principles on which it is based could of course be applied to any kind of manufacturing process. Fordism is ‘the eponymous manufacturing system designed to spew out standardized, low-cost goods and afford its workers decent enough wages to buy them’ (de Grazia 2005, 4). In the United States – where ‘Pig’ is set – Fordism reached its potential heights during the 1940s-1960s. In 1960, when Dahl was writing his short story, American lives and economies were characterised by a system of mass production and consumption conceptually associated with evolved manufacturing. As Womack, Jones, and Roos explain: in the twentieth century, ‘[the auto industry] changed our most fundamental ideas about how we make things. And how we make things dictates not only how we work but what we buy, how we think, and the way we live’ (1990, 11).

Fordism was particularly famous for its ‘taking care of the worker philosophy’, introduced by Ford himself. With the idea of higher wages being thrown into the equation, Fordism suggested a form of ‘family-like’ mentality seen in some companies. However, as workers became the purchasers of goods, it became evident that the economy system promoted by Fordism exploited the workers’ own desires to possess and ‘consume’. In his cannibalistic tale, Dahl seems to be offering a satirical view of Fordist worker-consumer principles. Although the slaughterhouse appears to be taking care of the workers, it is not taking care of the consumers. Ironically, the factory workers literally consume a projection of themselves – the consumers by butchering the unaware Lexington. Celia Lury argues that the circular nature of Fordism, in which workers buy the goods they have produced, transforms capitalist economies into ‘a kind of cannibalism’ (1996, 134). As they slaughter Lexington and other visitors, they can be seen as ‘serial’ killers on more than one level. In their pursuit of consumer satisfaction – and obeying the system of serial production advocated by Fordism – the slaughterhouse workers in ‘Pig’ cease to be conceptual cannibals and exercise

the concept literally. One might argue that the idea of ‘seriality’, connecting the slaughterhouse to the factory, underpins the dangers of consumerism, which continuously produces while both the product and the consumer are anonymous. In this regard, the idea of cannibalism embodies, as Probyn points out, ‘the appeal of the unthinkable, just as it carries a yearning for a limit to the seemingly endless appetites of consumer society’ (2000, 8). It is, however, difficult to pin down if Dahl intends Lexington’s death to be perceived as a consequence of animal slaughter, industrial production or consumer capitalism. In the context of the boy’s death, these elements become hard to differentiate.

Devoured by industrial appetites, Lexington becomes the eponymous and anonymous ‘Pig’ as Dahl’s tale seeks to erase the lines between cannibalism and capitalism. As the story exposes a gothic critique of 1950s consumerism, it also hints at the libidinal dynamics underpinning consumerist drives. A psychoanalytical reading of political economy would detect in consumer capitalism a collective failure to progress beyond the oral phase. In the oral phase the subject lives as one with the world, introjecting and internalising it through the body of the mother. This was explicitly characterised by Freud – and later by Melanie Klein – as a mode of ‘cannibalistic’ existence³. Through sucking breast milk, the child consumes and ‘incorporates’ the body of the mother. If a separate and ‘civilised’ subject is to emerge, the oral phase must be abandoned and yet, according to Freudian psychoanalysis, it lies dormant in the unconscious and can resurface and be influential in subsequent phases: ‘the act of corporeal injection becomes the model for later [...] acts of psychic introjection, identification and internalisation, through which individual identity is formed’ (Freud 1965, 56). If oral fixations persist in adult age, sexualised desires can be displaced onto other oral activities, such as cigarette smoking and, of course, excessive and abnormal

³ See Melanie Klein, 2002. *Love, Guilt and Reparation: And Other Works 1921-1945* London: Simon and Schuster.

food consumption. A process of sublimation and substitution follows the oral stage in which the subject learns to replace physical incorporation with 'a higher form of psychic consumption' (Kilgour 1998, 245). During this critical stage in development the subject learns that it is impossible to physically incorporate the world but that psychic and symbolic appropriations can provide surrogate gratifications. Consumer capitalism is a mode of political economy founded on the provision of precisely such surrogate gratifications. Within the infrastructure of the consumer society which emerged in the US in the 1950s, the exchange and ownership of goods functioned, we might suggest, as a substitute for primal sacrifice: the desire to incorporate the mother's body – with its cannibalistic undertones – is immolated only to be resurrected, through transference, in the accumulation of commodities.

This subliminal exchange between libidinal and economic fixations can be identified in 'Pig' as the slaughterhouse attendant watches Lexington being cannibalised: 'The guide removed a cigar from his mouth and looked up serenely at the rapidly ascending youth' (Dahl 1991, 171). The cigar, as a metonymic signifier, is associated here with the slaughter and cannibalisation of the young boy which suggest a fantasy of infantile fixations. One could argue that the attendant engages in a process of oral substitutions, generating 'pleasure'. Following the path dictated by Freudian psychoanalysis, the cigar replaces the obsession with the mother's breast; the oral gratification of the cigar is then replaced by the pleasure given by literally consuming a 'commodity', represented by Lexington. Eli Sagan argues that fantasies and acts of cannibalism are caused by a failure to appropriate symbolic introjections: 'the underdeveloped imagination of the cannibal does not deal very adequately with metaphorical usage [...] He is compelled to take the urge for oral incorporation literally' (1974, 81). In the example of the slaughterhouse guide, the desire for oral identification is satisfied by the cannibalistic act: as the attendant removes the cigar, he replaces it

with ‘consuming’ Lexington’s death in the factory, which is itself a geographical symbol of accumulation. The cluster of associations here between commodities, oral fixations and murder hint at underlying continuities between the barbarity of cannibalism and the repressed rapacious desires for accumulation that are encouraged by and emerge in consumer society. In the slaughterhouse, oral desire craves its original form of satisfaction and, in Freud’s words, ‘no sublimation will suffice to remove the reprehended instinct’s persistent tension’ (1961, 36).

In drawing attention to the accumulative and greedy nature of capitalist economies, Dahl’s ‘Pig’ also evokes the bloody history of colonial conquest. Maggie Kilgour has argued that ‘cannibalism is a conventional satirical topos, which has been traditionally used for political purposes to demonise and attack forces seen as threatening’ (1998, 239). Dahl seems to deploy this ‘satirical topos’ by marshalling images of exploration, discovery and horror which are a key to the narrative formula in colonial tales of cannibalism – one could think of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance. If one considers the hints of ‘undiscovered’ territories and exploration in the plot, it is possible to read ‘Pig’ as a mock colonial travel narrative. Lexington abandons the familiar sights and sounds of his pastoral home to venture into the exotic and ‘undiscovered’ territory of modern New York. The explorer’s insatiable curiosity about local customs takes him deeper into the interior:

“Show me how”, Lexington said. “Butcher me one now so I can learn”. “We don’t butcher pigs in the kitchen,” the cook said. “That lot you just ate came from a packing-house over in the Bronx”. “Then give me the address!” (Dahl 1991, 168).

Although it echoes the explorations of colonial writing, the place for Lexington to ‘discover’ in ‘Pig’ is not a distant land, but a ‘civilised’ slaughterhouse. The connections between the horrors of colonial times and the contemporary threat of over-consumption are linked in ‘Pig’ through the image of the cannibal: here we

have both a reminder of the historical cannibal and a warning about what is currently happening in consumerist society. Margaret Cohen points out that 'if images from the past spring legibly to the present it is because they speak to its concerns' (1993, 11). After Lexington has his throat cut, his final moments are accompanied by nightmare images from colonial mythology and travel narratives:

He had a blurred impression of being in an enormously long room, and at the far end of the room there was a great smoking cauldron of water, and there were dark figures, half hidden in the steam, dancing around the edge of it, brandishing long poles (Dahl 1991, 171).

In evoking imagery of cannibal savages, almost mockingly dancing around a cauldron, 'Pig' appears to be haunted by mythologies of the early colonial past. Descriptions of cannibals proliferate, for instance, in Richard Hakluyt's collection of early modern English travel narrative collection: 'There remaine some among the wild people, that unto this day [1572] ete one another. I have seen the bones of a Spaniard that have bene as cleane burnished, as though it had bene done by men that had no other occupation' (1965, 397). Early modern literary works, like Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, seem to be informed by such representations of cannibals from the New World. One might also want to recall here that, according to Walter Benjamin, the past connects with the present through recurrent tropes that speak to both periods: '[t]o articulate the past historically [...] means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger' (1999, 247). The images employed by Dahl, flashing up in a moment of danger (albeit satirical), not only evoke the stereotypical iconography of dark-skinned savages popularised and demonised by Early Modern and colonial writing, but also function dialectically as a gothic mirroring of contemporary economic practices.

In exposing the dangers of consumer-capitalist appetites, Dahl's gothic allegory of cannibal consumption also echoes aspects of Marxist critique. Marx, himself a keen 'devourer' of horror fiction, often deployed gothic imagery in his

political, economic and philosophical writings. The capitalist is represented as a 'vampire': a parasitic creature with cannibalistic appetites that 'sucks out [...] blood and brains and throws them into the *cauldron* of capital' (Marx 1977, 320). The 'cauldron' in 'Pig' involves precisely this mix of cannibal hunger and capitalist growth. The ceremonial dancing which occurs around the cauldron as Lexington bleeds to death evokes not only the mythos of the cannibal feast which we saw but also, and more specifically, the gathering of wealth. In Jerry Phillips' polemical formula, the capitalist system of greed, corporate violence and accumulation is 'the ultimate statement of the savagery of history [...] whose proper moral is a cannibalistic idolatry' (Phillips 1998, 185).

As Dahl unveils gothic connections between colonial appetite and capitalism, he also re-positions the image of the flesh-eating 'savage' in a consumer context. Whilst echoing the horrors of the colonial conquest, the cannibals in 'Pig' become key figures of civilisation and progress, embodied in the factory. By suturing progress, financial accumulation and anthropophagi, one might say that Dahl brings the cannibal 'home'. From the Early Modern period through to the end of the nineteenth century the figure of the cannibal was used, in the European imaginary, as a political and cultural justification for the subjugation, enslavement and even genocide of other populations. According to Crystal Bartolovich, the intensified idea of the 'savage cannibal' provided colonists with an alibi for dispossession, 'justifying the Old World theft of New World wealth' (Bartolovich 1998, 207, 214).

However, in the twentieth century, the image of the cannibal underwent a radical transformation and Dahl's depiction is a clear example of this. The 'cannibal' is no longer associated exclusively with faraway lands, tales of tribal savagery and the colonial 'Other'. Patricia Walton argues that in Twentieth Century representations of cannibals, 'the fear of the Other is brought home, domesticated, made both more familiar and more insidious' (2004, 3). One need

only recall here the phenomenal success of Thomas Harris's iconic gothic villain Hannibal Lecter: portrayed as a 'savage', but also as home-grown and hyper-civilised. Similarly, in 'Pig', the cannibal is positioned not at the imperial margins but at the urban-industrial centre. Inside the slaughterhouse, the veneer of civilised amicability is maintained: the attendant who offers tours of the facility to visitors is a 'man with a merry pink face' (Dahl 1991, 168). Dahl's foregrounding of skin colour here offers an implicit subversion of colonial mythology whilst unveiling uncanny menace beneath the smile and inside the architectural symbols of Western progress. Walton has argued that the cannibal is demonstrative of 'a metaphoric process of signification projected onto everyday functions' (2004, 4). In 'Pig' Dahl transforms an everyday function, the manufacture of meat, into a richly metaphorical process that de-familiarises and unsettles the colonial antipodes of self and other, home and away, inside and outside. The breeching of these boundaries manufactures an anxious sub-text of endo-colonisation. Walton has proposed that renditions of contemporary cannibals 'not only reflect a continued fear of the Other but, as the Other concomitantly moves within, re-spatialises [...] home as a locus of threat' (Ibid, 5). As *heimlich* elides with *unheimlich*, stable binaries are displaced by the hauntingly dual nature of Western culture itself. Through Lexington's death, the 'arbitrary distinctions' between species 'gradually break down' as the cannibal, to borrow Walton's words, 'invades the home' (Ibid, 4).

In Dahl's brand of domestic cannibalism, which unveils links between colonial mythologies and 'civilised' industrialism, one can also notice a desire to render consumer capitalism as paradoxically destructive for the actual consumer. Whilst colonial representations of cannibals functioned primarily as expressions of the Other's inferiority and ungodliness, Dahl's slaughterhouse cannibals serve as 'a metaphoric indicator of [...] consumer habits' (Ibid, 6). Dahl's politicised uncanny relocates cannibalism as the everyday. The fear of being a victim of

cannibalism and the fear of everyday consumer culture are disturbingly blended in 'Pig'. The humans slaughtered at the factory: a loving young couple, a mother with her two children, a well-dressed woman, an elderly couple and of course, Lexington (Dahl 1991,169), are patiently waiting in small rooms outside the slaughtering, almost willingly 'serving' themselves. Later, they are picked up by the chains in a serial fashion and invited to their deaths with a disarmingly simple 'Next, please' (Dahl 1991, 169). Here, Dahl seems to be gesturing towards the idea that people in advanced societies actually desire consumerism, and as a result, are happy to be consumed by capitalist appetites. The Fordist slaughterhouse, with its rotating chain mechanisms, is a spatial symbol for an insatiable and indefatigable system 'the legendary cannibal monster that consumes and consumes, only to be hungrier and more destructive' (Root 1996, xiii).

In conclusion, it can be argued that by engaging in a gothic journey into consumerist society, Dahl's critique of the ultimately self-destructive nature of capitalist/consumerist/colonialist desires materialises cultural worries about the 'cannibalising' nature of consumer ideology. Industrial appetite is literalised in bloody allegories of cannibalism. Dahl represents the 'hunger' induced by capitalism as literally uncontrollable and turned ultimately towards the consumer's body itself. Phillips argues that re-imagining capitalism as cannibalism emphasises 'the profound irritability of a system that must perforce devour itself' (1998, 185). Conceptualising the consumerist cannibal, Dahl's 'Pig' suggests that capitalism might contain the seeds of its own destruction, eventually obliterating the consumer. Cannibalism is rendered as a metaphor for capitalist accumulation and the literal 'consumption' of the consumer becomes inevitable. This seems to confirm the idea that cannibalism, as Probyn puts it, 'brings together competing aspects underlying western identity: its analogy with capital and consumer society is congruent with fears that our appetites have no end (2000, 81).

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