

Cannibalism in the Colonial Imaginary: A Reading of Joseph Conrad's "Falk"*

Harry Sewlall

Summary

Together with terms such as "savage", "child" and "simpleton", the word "cannibal" has played a significant role in the lexicon of colonial discourse as a signifier of alterity. Using Peter Hulme's thesis on the origin of the term "cannibal" as an anchor, this essay explores the fraught relationship between anthropophagy and the discourses surrounding the topic of cannibalism. As a point of articulation, I shall examine the short story "Falk" by Joseph Conrad in which a European protagonist confesses to the act of cannibalism *in extremis*. Reading the story contrapuntally, this essay interrogates the circumstances around Falk's "crime", unravelling the narrator's own preconceptions and prejudices which feed into society's fixation with labels and stereotypes such as "savages" and "cannibals".

Opsomming

Terme soos "barbaar", "kind" en "swaap" het saam met die woord "kannibaal" 'n beduidende rol gespeel in die leksikon van koloniale diskoers as 'n aanwyser van alteriteit. Deur Peter Hulme se tesis oor die oorsprong van die term "kannibaal" as steun te gebruik, ondersoek hierdie essay die beswaarde verhouding tussen antropofagie en die diskoerse rondom die onderwerp kannibalisme. As 'n toeligtingspunt ondersoek ek die kortverhaal "Falk" van Joseph Conrad, waarin die Europese protagonis 'n daad van kannibalisme *in extremis* erken. Deur die verhaal kontrapuntal te lees ondervra hierdie essay die omstandighede rondom Falk se "misdaad" en ontrafel die verteller se persoonlike vooropgesette menings en vooroordele wat die samelewing se fiksasie op etikette en stereotipes soos "barbare" en "kannibale" onderskryf.

Human beings who eat other human beings
have always been placed on the very borders
of humanity.

(Peter Hulme, in *Colonial Encounters*, p. 14)

Fantasy about man eating is probably as old
and widespread as human history and
community.

(Ted Motohashi, in *Travel Writing and Empire:
Postcolonial Theory in Transit*, p. 85)

1 Introduction

The subject of cannibalism is periodically recuperated in media reports of isolated incidents of one of the strongest of social taboos, the eating of other humans. In the popular imagination, cannibalistic practices are associated with survival *in extremis*, as well as the occult and the psychopathological. Cannibalism has been reported in extreme conditions such as war and famine, as evidenced during the Xhosa Cattle Killing in the Eastern Cape from 1856 to 1857, and Stalin's policy of agricultural reform (Hari 2003: 13). Apropos of the Xhosa Cattle Killing, J.B. Peires writes that in a very few cases believers in the prophetess Nongqawuse "maddened with hunger attempted to kill and eat little children" (1989: 242). Survival cannibalism was highlighted by the 1972 air crash in the Andes when surviving members of the Uruguayan rugby team ate the dead to stay alive. If life sometimes imitates art, then our postmodern era has seen its fair share of cannibals – à la Hollywood's Hannibal Lecter – in psychopaths such as the late serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer and more recently, Armin Meiwes, who flambéd and consumed his victim's penis. Meiwes was not charged with cannibalism but with murder for "sexual satisfaction" (Murphy 2003: 1) for which he received a prison sentence of eight-and-a-half years in 2003.

In literary texts, the sign of the cannibal has served as an effective trope of the signifier of the other/Other. The first canonised novel in the English language to allegorise Europe's expansionism was Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). A product of the outreach of the Enlightenment, it may be regarded as the *Urtext* in postcolonial discourse, having promulgated the trinarities of us, them and cannibals. Crusoe's island is situated in the estuary of the Orinoco, which is where Columbus first encountered rumours about fierce one-eyed creatures who consumed their enemies. Hence it is not surprising that Defoe's protagonist should also encounter such unwholesome characters. This is soon evident from the graphic description of the remains of a cannibal meal:

[N]or is it possible for me to express the horror of my mind, at seeing the shore spread with skulls, hands, feet, and other bones of humane bodies; and particularly I observed a place where there had been a fire made, and a circle dug in the earth, like a cockpit, where it is supposed the savage wretches had sat down to their inhumane feastings upon the bodies of their fellow-creatures.
(Defoe [1719]1965: 172)

Crusoe, who is literally sick at the sight of what he beholds, begins to ponder the horror of the degeneracy of human nature, which, he tells us, "I

had heard of often, yet I never had so near a view of before” ([1719]1965: 172). Like most people, Crusoe had heard of cannibalism but now this ocular proof before him corroborates hearsay. The original text, disingenuously titled “The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner” to convey the impression of a veritable ethnographic account, thus inaugurates the fictional moment when the civilised Westerner has to do battle with the anthropophagite Caribs and rescue others from them. What is more, Crusoe even rescues another Carib, whom he promptly names Friday, and soon begins to civilise him so that he is weaned away from eating his own kind! In terms of Peter Hulme’s Marxist reading, the production of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* as a boy’s adventure story in the nineteenth century “foregrounds the colonial alibi – the man alone, on a desert island, constructing a simple and moral economy which becomes the basis of a commonwealth presided over by a benevolent sovereign” (Hulme 1986: 222).

Whilst Defoe’s imaginative text demarcates clear boundaries between the savage and the civilised, later writers such as Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad problematise the notion of cannibalism in their works. Referring to Melville’s *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and “Benito Cereno” in *The Piazza Tales* (1855), Geoffrey Sanborn avers that these works

embod[y] Melville’s imperfectly formulated recognition that culture structures everything, even the unstructured act of cannibalism I thought that Melville was attempting to replace the assumption that cannibals were creatures of the primitive night with the recognition that their thoughts and acts were just as structured, just as meaningful on their own terms, as those of humans who did not eat human flesh.

(Sanborn 1998: xii)

In Joseph Conrad the trope of cannibalism, with its implied binaries of the civilised and the savage, is never without its ironic investment. In “Heart of Darkness” (in “*Youth*” and *Two Other Stories*), Marlow reflects on why the cannibalistic black crewmen have not devoured the whites on the steamer:

Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear – or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is, and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze. Don’t you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its sombre and brooding ferocity? Well, I do. It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly.

(Conrad [1903]1927: 105)

The word “restraint” has an ironic resonance when one thinks of the highly gifted and civilised Kurtz, the apotheosis of Europe (“All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (Conrad [1903]1927: 117), who lacks all restraint in the gratification of his desires. Such ironic representations are not out of place in Conrad, considering that his work serves the broader purpose of deconstructing stereotypes ingrained in the Victorian Imaginary – a Lacanian construct which Homi Bhabha construes as the fetishising of difference as well as a disavowal of it (1994: 77).

2 The Origin of the Term “Cannibalism”

Peter Hulme, in his study *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*, embarks on a close and deconstructive reading of Christopher Columbus’s journal entries during his epic journey to the Caribbean which he mistook for India and the Far East. Out of this monumental navigational blunder, which turned out to be a blessing by default for the Spaniards, emerged the term “cannibal”. Scrutinising the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* entry for the term “cannibal”, Hulme casts doubt over the manner in which the history of the word is chronicled. Deriving from the Spanish word “canibales”, it is one of the ethnic names for the “Carib” or “Caribes”, a fierce nation of the West Indies, who are “recorded to have been anthropophagi”. Pointing to the phrase “recorded to have been”, Hulme discredits its historical accuracy as an ethnographic account. More telling is his observation that the notion of cannibalism was suggested by Arawak Indians to describe their traditional enemies to Columbus, whose own knowledge of the Arawak language must have been six weeks old at the time. What is even more astounding to Hulme is that Columbus’s journal disappeared in the “middle of the sixteenth century” (1986: 17), and what we have is a “transcription of an abstract of a copy of the lost original” (p. 17). It must be noted that at the time Columbus made his daily entries, his ideas were shaped by the twin discourses of Marco Polo who had written about the Grand Khan of Cathay, and Herodotus who had written about Greece’s barbarian neighbours. Although Hulme does not mention this, it is also possible that when the Arawaks described the Caribs to Columbus as having “one eye in the forehead” (p. 16), the discourse of *The Odyssey*, which features the one-eyed giant Polyphemus, must have played no small role in the construction of the cannibalistic other. The phonetic correspondence of the term “Canibales” whom Columbus would have assumed to be the people of the “Grand Khan” of Cathay, would have strengthened the impression of these people being a ferocious tribe of

anthropophagi. Thus, concludes Hulme, Columbus's *Journal* became a "beginning text" (p. 17) for the word "canibales" in a European text. Henceforth, argues Hulme, the term was

adopted into the bosom of the European family of languages with a speed and readiness which suggests that there had always been an empty place kept warm for it. Poor "anthropophagy", if not exactly orphaned, was sent out into the cold until finding belated lodging in the nineteenth century within new disciplines seeking authority from the deployment of classical terminology.

(Hulme 1986: 19)

Ania Loomba (1998: 73) contends that whilst the older term "anthropophagy" referred to savages eating their own kind, the term "cannibalism" indicated the threat that these savages could turn against and devour Europeans. Cannibalism therefore became a signifier that designated whatever lay outside Europe. Commenting on the writings of James Cook, Gananath Obeyesekere notes that "cannibalism is what the English reading public wanted to hear. It was their definition of the savage. Thus in the many places Cook visited, the inevitable question he asked was about cannibalism" (1992: 635).

3 The Trope of Cannibalism in Conrad's "Falk"

Cannibalism, like incest, negatively defines society. According to Douglas and Spicer (1975: 2), the imaginary states of primitive promiscuity and savage cannibalism define the boundary between nature and culture – terms that are endemic to colonial discourse and postcolonial deconstruction. The story of Captain Falk in Conrad's short story/novella "Falk", subtitled "A Reminiscence", provides a unique opportunity for the exploration of the shaping nature of discourse on the prejudices and preconceptions of society. The focus of this paper will not be the moral aberration of Falk, as the Hermann family and the narrator who represent society perceive it, but rather the vexed postcolonial discourse surrounding the subject of cannibalism and how this relates to and impacts on the "othering", or ostracising, of Falk by society.

"Falk", which Richard Ambrosini describes as Conrad's first story of passion between a white man and a white woman (1991: 201), has traditionally been viewed as the story of a monopolist whose intense desire for the passive but comely niece of Hermann, parallels his strong instinctual desire for food and survival, which precipitates his recourse to cannibalism on a ship adrift in becalmed waters. John Lutz, who views the story in terms

of patriarchy, hunger and fetishism, conjoins the idea of hunger with the politics of economy: “Although Falk himself appears to deviate from normative behaviour in the consumption of human flesh, on a metaphorical level, his behaviour remains entirely consistent with the competitive logic of monopoly capitalism” (Lutz 2000: 178). Albert Guerard, who has described this story as one of the author’s “lesser short novels” (1958: 62), focuses on the hesitant if not equivocal attitude of the narrator towards Falk’s major crime of the sea – cannibalism on a drifting ship. Tony Tanner, who has also used the tropes of eating and consuming as a point of departure, moves beyond this paradigm to comment astutely on the role of discourse in shaping perceptions: “In these and many other ways, all the main characters are involved in different kinds of hunger, different kinds of devouring and assimilating, different kinds of telling and listening” (1976: 22).

In his “Author’s Note” to *Typhoon & Other Stories* (hereafter abbreviated as *TS*) in the Dent Collected Edition ([1903]1950: vii), Conrad tells us that the story offended the delicacy of one critic at least by “certain peculiarities of its subject”. Conrad declares that the “unusual experience” (*TS*: viii) is not the subject of the tale, but rather the fact of Falk’s attempt to get married “in which the narrator of the tale finds himself unexpectedly involved both on its ruthless and its delicate side” (*TS*: viii). Notwithstanding this disavowal, the “unusual experience” of cannibalism becomes the cataclysmic moment in the story and the point of departure in the construction of Falk’s subjectivity.

Despite the ambivalent attitude of the writer and the narrator towards the character of Falk, with the latter even showing some understanding of Falk’s social aberration, typical responses to the story until the last decade or so have ranged from perfunctory dismissals to serious engagements with the tension in the story emanating from the protagonist’s crime. Jocelyn Baines (1959: 261-265) typifies the latter kind of critic whose perceptive comment has direct relevance to a reading of the story in our century. In response to Douglas Hewitt’s claim that the story undermines the values of the narrator, Baines remarks: “The story does not undermine values in which Conrad believed; it shows only that there are situations in which certain values may not apply” (pp. 264-265). Leo Gurko’s assessment is typical of most approaches to the story. He writes pithily: “[Conrad] deals with the florid conception of a man who has eaten his way out of the human race through cannibalism and wishes to win his way back to it through love” ([1962]1979: 210). An important observation by Gurko, which will be examined later, is that Falk is inarticulate like the girl he desires and neither speaks the other’s language. Albert Guerard, who tends to valorise Conrad’s mature work to the exclusion of the early ones, can only see the writer “groping toward his central subject and conflict” in a story that is “diffuse

and otherwise uninteresting” (1958: 20). Norman Page (1986: 152) is redolent of previous scholars who have replicated images of Falk as an elemental, semi-human being, in short, a centaur. His contribution is to shift the perspective of “Falk” so that it is not a story of survival or cannibalism but of innocence and experience, “especially an innocence so armour-plated that the truth cannot penetrate it” (p. 152). The image of armour-plated innocence aptly describes Hermann and his wife, but especially the former, whose genteel bourgeois world is shattered by the reality of Falk’s experience.

On the subject of stereotyping, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism, Homi Bhabha posits that the concept of fixity is central to the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity as a sign of cultural, historical or racial representation is a paradoxical mode of representation that connotes “disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition” (1994: 66). Likewise the stereotype – which Bhabha regards as a major discursive strategy – depends for its efficacy on the repetition of an idea for its perpetuation, so that

“the *same* old stories of the Negro’s animality, the Coolie’s inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish *must* be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying and terrifying each time” (p. 77). If skin colour, or hair texture, or culture is set up as the usual signifier of alterity, then with Captain Falk, the “dark navigator” (*TS*: 239), it is his act of eating human flesh to survive *in extremis* that imparts to him the image of otherness with its connotations of savagery and degeneracy.

The narrative centres round the enigmatic figure of Falk, who, unlike the rest of the Europeans that frequent Schomberg’s eatery, hires, according to the latter, a “Madras cook ... who [is] not fit to cook for white men” (*TS*: 174-175) to boil his rice and cook his fish – seemingly his only means of subsistence. It is Schomberg’s theory that Falk is “after Captain Hermann’s niece” (*TS*: 163). Indeed, Falk makes regular visits to the Hermann family housed on the vessel *Diana*. (Almost every commentator on this story has noted the irony of this classical name within the context of Falk’s pursuit or “hunting” of Hermann’s niece, thus suggesting his predatory nature.) There he sits the entire evening without so much as uttering a word. So infatuated is he with the unnamed, orphaned niece of Hermann, that he becomes jealous of the narrator, also a regular visitor of the Hermanns. When the narrator assures him that he is not a rival for the girl’s affections, Falk declares his intentions towards the girl and even asks the narrator to be his go-between. On the evening when Falk appears before the family of the girl to make his intentions known, the narrator bears witness to the events. In a passage of Free Indirect Discourse (FID) the narrator reports:

And suddenly I heard Falk's voice declare that he could not marry a woman unless she knew of something in his life that had happened ten years ago. It was an accident. An unfortunate accident. It would affect the domestic arrangements of their home, but, once told, it need not be alluded to again for the rest of their lives.

(TS: 217)

It is at this climactic moment that Falk confesses to an act of cannibalism. It would be instructive to examine closely the reaction of the company on the vessel. As soon as Falk has uttered the climactic words "Imagine to yourselves ... that I have eaten man" (TS: 218), the narrator ejaculates "Ah!", whilst Hermann, "dazed by the excessive shock" murmurs "Himmel", soon after which he "rumple[s] his hair and shriek[s] just one word, 'Beast'". It is interesting to observe that the girl remains mute in this electrifying scene as she does in the rest of the story. Her only reaction later, apart from her incessant sewing, is to weep silently after Hermann has "harangued the two women extraordinarily" (TS: 220). Hermann's rage is quite predictable. It is the stock response of someone whose sense of propriety has imploded. He accuses Falk of violating the sanctuary of his cabin where his wife and children live (TS: 218-219). Several times the narrator catches the words "Mensch" and "fressen" uttered by Hermann, only to discover later after consulting his dictionary that the latter word means "devour". When the narrator attempts to introduce some logic into this insane story by considering the "circumstances", Hermann will have none of it. "According to his ideas no circumstances could excuse a crime – and certainly not such a crime. This was the opinion generally received" (TS: 221). Hermann, secure in his bourgeois value system, is quite content with received opinion. He also has his own unswerving sense of logic: "The duty of a human being was to starve. Falk therefore was a beast, an animal; base, low, vile, despicable, shameless, and deceitful" (TS: 221). Such is Hermann's simple syllogistic reasoning which defies any kind of further or deeper interrogation.

Referring to the use of Free Indirect Discourse elsewhere in Conrad's work, Jeremy Hawthorn maintains that this device enables us to recognise not only what the writer is interested in revealing, but also from what standpoint he or she wishes the reader to experience this revelation (1990: 1). The use of FID by Conrad in this climactic scene in "Falk" acts as a distancing device to separate Hermann's views from the author's as well as the narrator's. The shock of Falk's confession triggers off a train of FID in which Hermann conjures up images mostly associated with "devour[ing] human flesh", "unclean creature", "eater of men", and finally, reaching a climax with the image of "a common cannibal". This is the first time since Falk's disclosure that the word "cannibal" has been used. But before this

word is uttered, a passing remark reveals the hollowness of Hermann's sense of morality. "Why tell? Who was asking him?" (*TS*: 222). In common with the rest of humanity, it would seem that Hermann cannot bear too much reality. The ironic point about Hermann's reaction can be captured in the common parlance: what the eye does not see cannot hurt. It is a measure of Hermann's own hypocrisy that he passes judgement on Falk, but he is not prepared to understand him. When Hermann's discourse switches to direct speech, he ends with the words "Horrible! Horrible!", to which the narrator makes the neat, sardonic rejoinder, "You are too squeamish, Hermann" (*TS*: 222). The narrator sums up Falk's actions as most critics have since done: "He wanted to live There is in such a simple development a gigantic force, and like the pathos of a child's naive and uncontrolled desire He was a child. He was as frank as a child, too. He was hungry for the girl, terribly hungry, as he had been terribly hungry for food" (*TS*: 223-224). The insistent image of a "child" juxtaposed with phrases such as "uncontrolled desire" and "hunger for food" echoes one of the most vibrant chords of postcolonial critique. Along with other terms such as "noble savage", "savage beauty" and "elemental being", the image of a child juxtaposed with diction evocative of uncontrolled desire constitutes an important dimension in the rhetoric of colonial discourse in the construction of the Other. Although the idiom of colonial discourse is usually deployed in the construction of the non-Western world, it also provides a discursive space for the exercise and expression of power over the Other. Jo-Ann Wallace (1994: 173) affirms that in the Enlightenment discourse on childhood, the child represented potential as well as a subjectivity and corporeality in need of discipline.

In his study *The Rhetoric of Empire* ([1993]1999), David Spurr undertakes to identify certain common tropes that are used in Western discourses about non-Western peoples. These myths, symbols, metaphors and rhetorical procedures in Spurr's opinion, constitute a kind of repertoire for colonial discourse available for purposes of representation (p. 3). In similar fashion, it may be argued that Falk and his future wife are constructed as the Other through a constellation of images which emphasises either their less attractive dimension, or their primitive sensuality. We are told early in the story that "Falk was a Dane or perhaps a Norwegian At all events he was a Scandinavian of some sort, and a bloated monopolist to boot" (*TS*: 161). The narrator has no qualms about blurring Falk's national identity at the expense of foregrounding his negative trait. That the narrative voice in Conrad's work in general can be notoriously unreliable is borne out in texts such as "Heart of Darkness" and "Under Western Eyes". While the narrator often represents the conventionalised, stereotypical view held and valorised by society, the authorial

position is more problematic. It is this feature of Conrad's writing that appeals to a critic such as Abdul JanMohamed who places Conrad's colonialist work in the "symbolic" realm (as opposed to the "imaginary" one), which enables the writer to break out of the "manichean allegory" (1985: 66) of good versus evil and the binaries of "us" and "them". This reflexive temperament is antithetical to the "imaginary" colonialist literature which fetishises a fixed opposition between the self and the other. Representing the normative view of society, the narrator describes Falk and the girl in images which highlight their animal sensuality, thus excluding them from the mainstream of civilised conduct:

They were a complete couple. In her gray frock, palpitating with life, generous of form, olympian and simple, she was indeed the siren to fascinate that dark navigator, this ruthless lover of the five senses. From afar I seemed to feel the masculine strength with which he grasped those hands she had extended to him with a womanly swiftness.

(TS: 239)

Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, quoting Beneviste, insists that it is through language that man constitutes himself as a subject (1999: 104). Having made this point, she avows that Falk's lack of language is a defect in his character: "The monopolist, the ultimate survivor, is totally inarticulate, conducting both his courtship and his business deals in silence, communicating with others by sighs, grunts, and nods" (p. 107). In making this observation about Falk, Erdinast-Vulcan echoes Leo Gurko ([1962]1979: 210) who comments that Falk and the girl are inarticulate. However, instead of viewing this lack of language as a defect in Falk's character, it is my conviction that the grammar of barbarism and cannibalism embedded in the colonialist discourse of people like Hermann, combined with the overwhelming evidence of Falk's parsimony and rumours of a previous courtship, all conspire to render him inarticulate, with the status of the outcast or the Other. Just as Friday in J.M. Coetzee's deconstructive novel *Foe* is rendered inarticulate by the lack of a tongue, Falk is portrayed as being linguistically handicapped. It is only through the narrator's gauche interrogation that the "unusual experience" to which Falk was "sensitive enough to be affected permanently by" ("Author's Note" to *Typhoon* & *Other Stories*: viii) that his past is "re-memoryed", a key concept used by Toni Morrison in *Beloved* (1988: 36) to reconstruct the history of a community of slaves. It is worth taking a closer look at this process of unravelling Falk's past.

The question which initiates the interrogation by the narrator is, "Where was it that this shipwreck of yours took place?" which is followed by "And what was the name of the ship?" (TS: 225). Falk's reply is:

“*Borgmester Dahl*,” ... followed by “It was no shipwreck.” Surprised at this reply, the narrator adds, “Not a shipwreck? What was it?” (TS: 226). The unexpected answer is “Break down”. The narrator then reports, “I had till then supposed they had been starving in boats or on a raft – or perhaps on a barren rock” (TS: 226). The word “supposed” is the clue that unravels the entire discourse that has shrouded the incident of Falk’s cannibalism. The following narratorial reflection testifies to the habits of mind that characterise our assumptions:

Remembering the things one reads of it was difficult to realise the true meaning of his answers. I ought to have seen at once – but I did not; so difficult is it for our minds, remembering so much, instructed so much, informed of so much, to get in touch with the real actuality at our elbow. And with my head full of preconceived notions as to how a case of “Cannibalism and suffering at sea” should be managed I said – “You were then so lucky in the drawing of lots?”.

(TS: 226)

Once again the narrator is to be sharply corrected by Falk whose rejoinder is, “What lots? Do you think I would have allowed my life to go for the drawing of lots?” (TS: 226). What the above exchange serves to underscore is that Falk’s subjectivity has not only been based largely on hearsay and assumptions, but that these assumptions are the result of the ways in which society is conditioned by grand narratives about self and other, savage and civilised. That the narrator had assumed that Falk had been shipwrecked or marooned, and that they had drawn lots on the ship, is reflective of the overdetermined narratives that accompany the subject of cannibalism, which is superbly emblematised in the narrator’s phrase in the foregoing quotation, “Cannibalism and suffering at sea”.

Going back to Falk’s confession on the *Diana*, the alacrity with which Hermann seizes upon the idea of eating humans endorses Hulme’s comment about the warm place reserved for the word “cannibalism”. The disgust it evokes is a stock response which overshadows its denotative meaning, which is a practice that is associated more often with primitive rituals and pathological conditions rather than habitual widespread culinary habits. One might say that the confession was a catastrophe waiting to happen, because it must be remembered that Hermann had every reason to think the worst of Falk, the man who had damaged his boat in an act of outrage. Leela Gandhi, adducing Foucault, proclaims that the rhetoric of otherness extends to cover criminality, madness, disease, foreigners, homosexuals, strangers, and women (1998: 40). In a society where a person like Hermann, despite his hypocrisy, is seen as the norm, Falk must of necessity be viewed as antithetical to it. He is the “other” whose identity has to go through the eye

of the needle of Hermann and the narrator before it can be constructed. He speaks a foreign language, behaves strangely for a white man by not eating meat (It is Schomberg who utters, ““A white man should eat like a white man Ought to eat meat, must eat meat” [TS: 174]), conducts his courtship in an unconventional way, and above all, becomes a criminal by breaking the ultimate societal taboo on the eating of human flesh. In Hermann’s estimate he must be mad “for no sane person ... would own to having devoured human flesh” (TS: 222). The ironic twist here is that Hermann does not seem to view Falk’s cannibalism as morally deviant, but rather the act of owning up to it. It is a telling commentary on his sense of morality and double standards.

The story “Falk” is subtitled “A Reminiscence”. By its very nature a reminiscence is not an authentic source of knowledge. It is a narrative that is coloured by the teller’s subjectivity as much as it is at the mercy of the teller’s memory. As a mode of representation it is fraught with blind spots, silences and authorial selectivity. The character of Falk has been further constructed by the literary discourse that has surrounded it from the time his cannibalism was first mentioned by a critic. Falk’s cannibalism has been regarded as a given, generating critical opinions from moral and ethical perspectives. What Conradian scholarship seems to have ignored is the role of the discourse on cannibalism in which this story is embedded. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin maintain that the emergence of the word “cannibal”, in place of “anthropophagy”, was an especially powerful and distinctive feature of the rhetoric of empire. In replacing a descriptive term, it became an ontological category (1998: 31). A postcolonial reading enables a deconstruction of this discourse so that Falk’s identity is liberated from the fixed narratives of the past.

If a reminiscence is an act of remembering, then, as Homi Bhabha reminds us in his Foreword to Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, remembering “is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” ([1952]1986: xxiii). This is akin to Toni Morrison’s formulation of “re-memorying” in her novel *Beloved* (1988: 36) in which the traumatic past of the slaves is remembered by the force of will. Remembering Falk’s past requires an active interrogation of the attitudes of those like Schomberg and Hermann who have ostracised him on the basis of hearsay and rumour. Such an interrogation entails an examination of language and its relation to reality, a theme that finds expression in Conrad’s later works. It requires a deconstruction of the discourse that has shaped Falk’s subjectivity in order that we see Falk not simply as a “centaur” but someone who painfully “re-members” his dismembered (no pun intended) past.

4 Coda

Marianna Torgovnick (1990: 22) observes that Africans and other groups have often been imaged as cannibals despite the fact that scholarly research suggests that cannibalism was never a uniform practice in Africa or anywhere else. Yet, according to Torgovnick, this has “not prevented the invocation of the African cooking pot in various popular representations of Africa (including the Tarzan novels)” (1990: 258). Although evidence from recent research by molecular biologists supports the theory that prehistoric humans might have been cannibals (Stoneking 2003: 3), in the Western imaginary cannibalism has always been associated with the other outside Europe. Since the voyages of discovery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, cannibalism has been a predominant motif in Western representations of others in drawings and engravings. A well-known example of a sixteenth-century engraving, reproduced by Peter Hulme (1986) and Anne McClintock (1995) in their texts, is that by Theodore Galle, based on a drawing by Jan van der Straet (ca. 1575). It represents Amerigo Vespucci’s encounter with America, emblematised in the figure of a naked woman who welcomes the stranger. What is of greater import to this article is what is happening in the background. The activity represented here is not much different from the typical Sunday barbecue except that this is a casual, cannibal feast. Anne McClintock epitomises this scene as “a document both of paranoia and of megalomania” (1995: 27). Such routine representations of anthropophagy have become a fetish in the explorers’ fervid imaginations and expanded the visual lexicon to fixate Europe’s image of its savage others. The narrative of savagery, argues Gareth Griffiths (1994: 72), reveals a process of complicity in which the masquerade of terror unveils the mask of the savage as the face of the coloniser.

The Greeks had coined the older term “anthropophagy” for purposes of designating their enemies as barbarians and thus to legitimise war and conquest. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998: 30-31) declare that the superseding of “anthropophagy” by “cannibalism” was not a simple change in description but the replacement of a descriptive term with an ontological category. In this sense the term came to play an important part in the moral justification for imperial rule. Djelal Kadir (1992: 117), who refers to cannibalism as an “intricate phenomenon in the value-laden discourse on the New World”, maintains that those who practised it were “unquestionably enslaveable”. Whilst the concept came to be used as an essentialising category to include whole tribes and nations in the colonial imaginary, the actual practice of anthropophagy seems to have been spotty, straddling

cultural and racial divides as modern history attests.

If anything, these isolated incidents of anthropophagy serve to remind us of the horrifying reality of the dark “other” of our selves. If the Greek term “anthropophagi” was replaced by the West Indian derived “cannibales” to denote the savage Caribes during Columbus’s peregrinations in the Caribbean, then the following historical account written in 1535 by a conquistador is a graphic instantiation of what Djelal Kadir (1992: 118) refers to as the Spanish “cannibalizing the cannibals”:

Upon arriving there ... a few Christians, seeing themselves in extreme hunger, killed an Indian they had captured and roasted the entrails and ate them; and they put a goodly part of the Indian to stew in a large pot in order to have something to take along to eat in the ship’s boat in which those who did this were travelling.

(Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo quoted in Kadir 1992: 118)

This historical document functions as a contrapuntal reading of the phenomenon of anthropophagy which, together with tropes such as savagery, primitiveness and blackness, has been a signifier of otherness and a crucial nexus in colonial discourse to justify not only conquest, torture and slavery but also proselytisation to the creed of the conqueror. The extent to which cannibalism insidiously becomes a fetish in the colonial imaginary has been memorably captured by Frantz Fanon in his study, *Black Skin, White Masks* ([1952]1986: 80), where the little white boy, seeing the Negro shivering with cold, mistakenly thinks that he “is quivering with rage” whereupon he throws himself into his mother’s arms and utters: “Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up”. Stereotyping, Homi Bhabha reminds us, is not the setting up of a false image, but it is an ambivalent act of projection and introspection which masks and splits the “official” and phantasmatic knowledges of the other (1994: 81-82). The stereotype of the other, as savage, black and cannibalistic, whether located in the New World or Africa, has not only served the idiom of colonial discourse to justify conquest and genocide but also reveals another side of our human nature – its cannibalistic other.

Geoffrey Sanborn, in his study of the sign of the cannibal in Melville’s work, writes: “[S]tories of shipwreck cannibalism offered their readers an image of humanity shrunken to its smallest possible scope” (1998: 41). In Conrad’s “Falk” we witness a recuperation of the shrunken humanity of the protagonist, a European, driven *in extremis* to eat the uneatable. As a work of fiction, “Falk” represents a rupture in the monolithic discourse on cannibalism in which Western man (woman), like Defoe’s Crusoe, postulates the image of the other in non-human(e) terms as a self-serving gesture to underscore the human subjectivity of the Western, civilised self in

relation to the savage, cannibalistic other. In his presentation of Captain Falk, Conrad has overturned the stereotype of the savage to universalise the phenomenon of anthropophagy – to return to its pre-Columbian terminology.

* This article is based on a paper read at the AUETSA-SAVAL-SACLALS Congress, 5-7 July 2004, University of KwaZulu Natal, Durban.

References

- Ambrosini, R.
1991 *Conrad's Fiction as Critical Discourse*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ashcroft, B, Griffiths, G. & Tiffin, H.
1998 *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Baines, J.
1959 *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Bhabha, H. K.
[1952]1986 Foreword: Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition. In: Fanon, F. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto, pp. vii-xxv.
1994 *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Conrad, J.
[1903]1927 "Youth" and Two Other Stories. New York: Doubleday, Page.
[1903]1950 *The Nigger of the "Narcissus" and "Typhoon" & Other Stories*. Collected Edition. London: J.M. Dent.
- Defoe, D.
[1719]1965 *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, edited with an introduction by A. Ross. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Douglas, M. & Spicer, A.
1975 The Cannibal Sign. *Royal Anthropological Institute News* (8): 1-3.
- Erdinast-Vulcan, D.
1999 *The Strange Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad: Writing, Culture, and Subjectivity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fanon, F.
[1952]1986 *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Markmann. London: Pluto.
- Gandhi, L.
1998 *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Griffiths, G.
1994 The Myth of Authenticity: Representation, Discourse and Social Practice. In: Tiffin, C. & Lawson, A. (eds) *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*. London: Routledge, pp. 70-85.
- Guerard, A.J.
1958 *Conrad the Novelist*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Gurko, L.
[1962]1979 *Joseph Conrad: Giant in Exile*. London: Macmillan.
- Hari, J.
2003 Oh, Show Us the Way, Papa Joe. *The Sunday Independent*, March 09, p. 13.
- Hawthorn, J.
1990 *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Hulme, P.
1986 *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*. London: Methuen.
- JanMohamed, A.R.
1985 The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature. *Critical Inquiry* (12): 59-87.
- Kadir, D.
1992 *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth: Europe's Prophetic Rhetoric as Conquering Ideology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Loomba, A.
1998 *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Lutz, J.
2000 Centaurs and Other Savages: Patriarchy, Hunger, and Fetishism in "Falk". *Conradiana* 32 (3): 177-193.
- McClintock, A.
1995 *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*. London: Routledge.
- Morrison, T.
1988 *Beloved*. London: Picador.
- Motohashi, T.
1999 The Discourse of Cannibalism in Early Modern Travel Writing. In: Clark, S. (ed.) *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*. London: Zed, pp. 83-99.
- Murphy, C.
2003 Cannibalism: A Modern Taboo. 1-4. BBC News.
Online:
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3254074.stm>>.
Accessed on 16 May 2004.
- Obeyesekere, G.
1992 "British Cannibals", Contemplation of an Event in the Death and Resurrection of James Cook, Explorer. *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer): 630-654.

- Page, N.
1986 *A Conrad Companion*. London: Macmillan.
- Peires, J. B.
1989 *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Sanborn, G.
1998 *The Sign of the Cannibal: Melville and the Making of a Postcolonial Reader*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Spurr, D.
[1993]1999 *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Stoneking, M.
2003 Widespread Prehistoric Human Cannibalism: Easier to Swallow. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 18(10): 489-490.
- Tanner, T.
1976 "Gnawed Bones" and "Artless Tales": Eating and Narrative in Conrad. In: Sherry, N. (ed.) *Joseph Conrad: A Commemoration*. London: Macmillan, pp. 17-36.
- Torgovnick, M.
1990 *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wallace, Jo-Ann
1994 De-Scribing "The Water Babies": "The Child" in Post-Colonial Theory. In: Tiffin, C. & Lawson, A. (eds) *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*. London: Routledge, pp. 171-184.