

# EATING, DRINKING AND RE-THINKING: MARGUERITE DURAS'S *MODERATO CANTABILE* (1958)

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## ABSTRACT

Re-thinking food, drink and appetite offers new ways of exploring subjectivity, self-Other relations and textual production. Like language, food and drink are human necessities which always carry surcharges of meaning. Moreover, there is an untapped convergence of theoretical approaches related to appetite. This article draws on a range: structuralist (Barthes and Lévi-Strauss); post-Marxist (Bourdieu); feminist (Beauvoir and Cixous); post-Freudian (Lacan); poststructuralist (Derrida), and socio-anthropological (Fischler). It explores their potential by analysing representations of food and drink in Duras's *Moderato cantabile*. Stimulating critical appetites anew, surprising leftovers of realism are identified, and new readings of the novel reveal class and gender constructs. The discussion then examines how the appetitive is intertwined with tensions bound up in desire, lack and repressed trauma as well as the incorporation of food and drink, in turn elucidating the anxieties and ambivalence inherent in the constitution of the self, power relations and representational practice.

*Keywords:* food; drink; incorporation; Barthes, Roland; Beauvoir, Simone de; Bourdieu, Pierre; Derrida, Jacques; Duras, Marguerite; Lacan, Jacques; *Moderato cantabile*

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FOOD AND DRINK – like language – are basic human necessities which always carry surcharges of meaning. Eating and drinking play important structural and symbolic roles in fiction. Yet they also exceed those functions, opening up further interpretative possibilities. Indeed the potential of literary representations of food and drink has yet to be fully exploited, despite the extraordinary wealth of post-War French thought that concerns, or is suggestive for, questions of appetite, eating and drinking. This article takes as a case study Marguerite Duras's *Moderato cantabile* (1958),<sup>1</sup> a novel associated with the anti-realist experimental writing which marked the post-War French literary field. The discussion brings to bear on this well-known text a diverse range of critical perspectives involving eating and drinking to demonstrate how re-thinking representations of food and drink can stimulate critical appetites anew. Exploring the potential of a range of such theoretical approaches by drawing on them to analyse representations of food and drink in *Moderato cantabile* identifies some of the multiple functions of

appetite – material, figurative and textual – and the meanings (and ambiguities) bound up with them.

As well as giving life by responding to hunger and thirst, eating and drinking serve complex cultural, political and psychological functions and are part of a weave of more or less unacknowledged tensions and repressed experiences. As forms of cultural production, the preparation and choice of food and drink (and their withdrawal, prohibition and regulation) perpetuate ideologies and play important parts in establishing and shoring up gender and class constructs. Seeking to assuage physical hunger by the incorporation of foodstuffs simultaneously involves inside and outside; the possibilities of pleasure and of mortal danger; the assertion of subjectivity; and the breaching of the subject's integrity. Appetite is also inextricable from desire, lack and sexuality. Moreover, food and drink are at once material and inseparable from the imaginary, and eating and drinking parallel and invite questions of the relationship between self and Other; conscious and unconscious; past, present and future; and ideological constructs and cultural production. A surprisingly wide range of post-War French thought explores or is legible through eating and drinking. In fact appetite, food and drink are intrinsic to many recent theoretical attempts to grapple with the complexities of power relations, subjectivity and language. And bringing together diverse critical approaches to eating and drinking can demonstrate the implications of appetite, food and drink for questions of ideology and difference; of the unconscious, desire and trauma; and of signifying practice.

Such questions are the very meat of literary analysis, and this article explores and demonstrates the critical potential of re-thinking through eating and drinking. The discussion begins by considering *Moderato cantabile* in terms of the roles played by eating and drinking in the structure and symbolism of the text, revealing surprising leftover aesthetics of realism, whereby food and drink continue to satisfy readers' hunger for coherence in an ostensibly *avant-garde* work. The investigation of foodstuffs in *Moderato cantabile* continues by exploring how alimentary choices contribute to ideological constructs including class and gender distinction (and how resulting inequities may be perpetuated rather than effectively challenged, at once by Duras's implicitly critical representations of them and by structuralist, post-Marxist and feminist criticism). Drawing on post-structuralist and post-Freudian thought provides the opportunity to examine further such double binds, and then to identify instances where the appetitive is intertwined with desire and lack as well as with the return of repressed traumas and the play of the signifier. After demonstrating the potential for literary analysis of these insights and their intersections with socio-anthropological perspectives on incorporation, the conclusion explores the tensions bound up in the consumption of food and drink and the fascinating ways in which they reflect those inherent in selfhood and cultural production. Throughout, the analysis draws on intersecting critical perspectives to re-think appetite, food and drink and offer new readings of Duras's novel, as well as insights into subjectivity, self–Other relations and representational practice.

*Realist leftovers*

It is well known that food is central to the nineteenth-century French novel. As Jean-Pierre Richard famously asserts in his essay *Littérature et sensation*: ‘On mange beaucoup dans les romans de Flaubert.’<sup>2</sup> Critics have considered images of eating and drinking in realist fiction as means of precipitating action and characterization; as reality effects, metaphors and metonymies; and in terms of their phenomenological and sociological connotations.<sup>3</sup> Whilst Duras rejected the labelling of her novel as a *nouveau roman*,<sup>4</sup> and, unlike the *nouveaux romanciers*, did not publish a manifesto situating her writing as a radical departure from nineteenth-century realism, *Moderato cantabile* is widely considered to be an anti-realist text. Indeed it has become a commonplace to regard Duras as seeking to eschew an ‘appetitive’ model of reading in which the narrative tempts readers onwards in the interests of a final satiety.<sup>5</sup> Yet eating and drinking (and simultaneously constrained and unbridled appetites) play key roles in *Moderato cantabile*, inviting re-thinking of the novel.<sup>6</sup>

*Moderato cantabile* revolves around a crime of passion: a man murders his hard-drinking lover outside a café beneath the room where Anne Desbaresdes is listening to her recalcitrant son’s piano lesson. This precipitates her series of encounters in the same café with Chauvin, one of Anne’s husband’s ex-workers. Over swiftly-drained glasses of *vin ordinaire*, the two obsessively reconstruct the crime and develop a sexually-charged relationship. After what transpires to be their penultimate meeting, Anne returns home late to a dinner party, drinks copious amounts of Burgundy and rejects the rich dishes prepared by nameless women in the kitchen and consumed by nameless bourgeois guests. The narrative shifts between those who consume and those who prepare the meal; their judgement of Anne (and of one another); Anne’s thoughts of and hunger for Chauvin, who is outside the house; and his for her. The meal over, she vomits copiously at the foot of her child’s bed, and her husband looks on in silent disapproval. Chauvin and Anne drink in the café a final time before breaking off their relationship, whereupon Anne is described as symbolically dead.

Structurally and symbolically (and, as will be discussed later, in many more, more-or-less knowing and incidental ways), the culmination of Anne’s insatiable drinking at the dinner party draws attention to the importance of appetite, food and drink in *Moderato cantabile*. Despite the ostensible absence of narrative bearings, red wine provides the *fil rouge* for Anne and Chauvin’s illicit meetings. Whilst clock and calendar time are absent, temporal markers are provided by successive glasses of wine and the constraints of meal times. The growing intensity of Anne and Chauvin’s sexually-charged obsession is marked by the rate of their wine consumption. Appetite is key to the characterization of Anne (insofar as she is ‘characterized’), and her appetite for wine, inversely mirrored by her lack of appetite for food in the penultimate chapter, clearly connotes her desire. In what could be described as a dinner party set piece, issues around the consumption of food and of wine engineer a *dénouement* (such as there is): an

ominous shift in Anne's relationship with her husband, and the end of her relationship with Chauvin, along with that of her hope of assuaging her sexual appetite. Meanwhile the details of the rituals of the café and dinner party, including the preparation of the salmon (*en sauce verte*), duck (*à l'orange*) and ice cream (mocha), are the equivalent of reality effects, providing some grounds for suspension of disbelief in the absence of psychological motivation for, or physical descriptions of, protagonists.

So, as well as indicating the enduring power of the bourgeoisie in swiftly modernizing post-War France, the meal evidences the remainders of realist aesthetics. There is even an intertextual link to Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*,<sup>7</sup> in which characterization, symbolism and implicit critique of bourgeois mores are also bound up with representations of an excessive formal meal (Emma and Charles's wedding feast) and the fatal appetite of a bourgeois wife. In a further nineteenth-century echo, the Desbaresdes' menu follows the conventions of bourgeois *haute cuisine*, epitomized in the prescriptions of Auguste Escoffier, with their roots in pre-Revolutionary excess and its corollary of hunger.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, re-thinking the novel in terms of food and drink reveals surprising structural and symbolic leftovers of realism,<sup>9</sup> leftovers that suggest that even in a text wherein Duras no doubt intends the dinner party to highlight the anachronism of bourgeois eating and narrative conventions, such representations of food and drink continue to respond, at least partially, to readers' appetites for a minimum of textual coherence. It appears, then, that in *Moderato cantabile*, as in the realist novel, feeding is ever necessary for reading.

#### *Questions of class, gender and critical appetite*

The works of Duras's contemporaries Roland Barthes, Simone de Beauvoir, Pierre Bourdieu and Claude Lévi-Strauss exemplify just some of the intersecting post-War French theoretical perspectives which seek to make sense of cultural constructs, and involve or are legible through the lenses of food and drink. Structuralist anthropologist Lévi-Strauss establishes food as a tool for reading culture, arguing that differentiations between the raw and the cooked (and between various modes of cooking) reflect universal structuring principles found across human societies.<sup>10</sup> More obviously productive for literary criticism, Barthes's *Mythologies* uses food and drink as examples of the way ideological discourses are constructed and circulated. This structuralist analysis identifies how eating and drinking patterns conceal what he describes as secondary systems of symbolization that seem to go without saying.<sup>11</sup> Barthes argues that these make ideological connotations appear natural, such as the French nationalist ideals of virility and cohesion putatively inscribed in the wine of 'Le vin et le lait'<sup>12</sup> and the steak of 'Le bifteck et les frites'.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, from Bourdieu's post-Marxist perspective, choices of food and drink are powerful modes of distinction through which subjects express their own class and gender inclusion and exclusion.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, food preparation is considered by Beauvoir as a form of

domestic enslavement imposed upon women – but also chosen by them – in bad faith.<sup>15</sup>

New readings of class and gender in *Moderato cantabile* can be revealed by examining representations of eating and drinking from these converging theoretical perspectives. This opens up to readings which certainly exceed the ideological connotations Barthes adjudges to go without saying in French attitudes to wine, such as nationalism and virility, or the forgiveness of misdemeanours:

*savoir* boire est une technique nationale qui sert à qualifier le Français, à prouver à la fois son pouvoir de performance, son contrôle et sa sociabilité. Le vin fonde ainsi une morale collective, à l'intérieur de quoi tout est racheté.<sup>16</sup>

In Duras's novel, rather than functioning ideologically to promote a thirst for national cohesion and superiority, wine is a vector for value judgements based on class and gender. A bourgeois woman drinking in a workers' bar elicits the opprobrium of the woman running the café, and that of the other exclusively male, exclusively working-class patrons. Later, Anne's insatiable consumption of Burgundy attracts judgement at once from the kitchen staff and the guests (although the latter partake of the same wine, albeit within the constraints of implicit norms). Contrary to Barthes's argument that the connotations of wine in France construct a notion of national cohesion (an argument which omits to consider female drinkers), here its consumption underpins the differences between bourgeois and working class, and between men and women. Presumably Duras intends her representations to be implicitly critical of the misogynist notions that women should not drink, or express or respond to their own appetites and desires. Certainly, wine is the premise for judgement both between and within classes and genders at the dinner party:

Anne Desbaresdes boit de nouveau un verre de vin tout entier les yeux mi-clos. Elle en est déjà à ne plus pouvoir faire autrement. Elle découvre, à boire, une confirmation de ce qui fut jusque là son désir obscur et une indigne consolation à cette découverte.

D'autres femmes boivent à leur tour, elles lèvent de même leurs bras nus, délectables, irréprochables, mais d'épouses. (106–07)

If through the consumption (or not) of wine and food the women in the kitchen judge Anne, and the men and women around the table judge Anne and one another, all, in doing so, unwittingly entrench their differential social positions. *Moderato cantabile* therefore chimes with Bourdieu's theory of how the mechanisms of distinction can operate through food choices.<sup>17</sup> Thus in Bourdieusian terms, the kitchen staff and the guests alike accept and consolidate the constraints of their *habitus* via their different choices in relation to drinking and eating.

In other ways, too, gender and class in the novel are marked out by relationships with food and drink and by the expression and regulation of appetite:

Habillé de noir, ganté de blanc, un homme le porte [le saumon], tel un enfant de roi, et le présente à chacun dans le silence du dîner commençant. (99)

Des femmes, à la cuisine, achèvent de parfaire la suite, la sueur au front, l'honneur à vif, elles écorchent un canard mort dans son linceul d'oranges. (100)

Un homme, face à une femme, regarde cette inconnue. (100)

Le saumon repasse dans une forme encore amoindrie. Les femmes le dévoreront jusqu'au bout. (103)

Here the emphatic positions of 'des hommes', 'des femmes', 'un homme' and 'une femme' mark power relations between men and women. This gendered emphasis is supplemented by the foregrounding of class-distinguishing relationships with the meal: the *maître d'hôtel* ranks more highly than the women in the kitchen, but the personified salmon seems to be more highly valued than he, who meanwhile is portrayed as subservient to the guests (who, nonetheless, are not individualized). At once by metonymy and by their voiceless imprisonment in the kitchen, the female domestic staff are presented as victims, like the duck about to be consumed: 'Deux femmes, dans un mouvement alterné et complémentaire, préparent le deuxième service. L'autre victime attend' (105). So if Lévi-Strauss aligns cooking with culture, at the Desbaresdes' dinner party it emerges as an ostensibly civilized form of barbarism.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, here these patriarchal bourgeois modes of consumption appear to be enduringly powerful and exploitative, despite the appetite for social change articulated by Bourdieu and Beauvoir (and arguably implicitly by Duras).

In fact Duras's representations of appetite, food and drink highlight how misogyny prevails across the social sphere, apparently untouched by post-war modernization and the according of the vote to (some) women in 1944 (or by Beauvoir's 1949 *Le Deuxième sexe*). Working-class women remain faceless and exploited, whilst bourgeois women are represented as units of consumption: 'Les femmes sont au plus sûr de leur éclat. Les hommes les couvrirent de bijoux au prorata de leurs bilans. L'un d'eux, ce soir, doute qu'il eût raison' (103). Here bourgeois mores are represented as seeking to reduce Anne's transgression of alimentary rituals to a calculation weighing up the relative value of the women, who, in turn, are compelled to regulate their appetites as considered to benefit their position, and are described in terms of the corporeal and symbolic capital they are perceived to deliver to their husbands:

Leurs épaules nues ont la luisance et la fermeté d'une société fondée, dans ses assises, sur la certitude de son droit, et elles furent choisies à la convenance de celle-ci. La rigueur de leur éducation exige que leurs excès soient tempérés par le souci majeur de leur entretien. De celui-ci on leur en inculqua, jadis, la conscience. Elles se pourlèchent de mayonnaise, verte, comme il se doit, s'y retrouvent, y trouvent leur compte. Des hommes les regardent et se rappellent qu'elles font leur bonheur. (103)

Now, in *Le Deuxième sexe*, Beauvoir would see such misogyny not simply as a matter of oppression, but also as one of individual choice, such that the women

in the kitchen and the dining room are all imprisoned, not only by patriarchal and bourgeois bad faith, but also by their own *mauvaise foi*. Here Duras's representation parallels what Beauvoir describes as choosing to play a role. The women attending the dinner party are playing the role of being a wife, whilst the women in the kitchen are playing the role of being a servant. In Beauvoir's terms, then, the bourgeois women and the kitchen staff alike are fleeing their existential responsibility by choosing to be domestic prisoners. Beauvoir also portrays women as constrained by shopping and cooking, but does not offer a viable alternative for her female readers to choose. Meanwhile, in *Moderato cantabile*, Anne's life may be represented as 'free' of such domestic drudgery, and she may appear to seek to break out of her gendered and class constraints, yet Duras's protagonist nonetheless chooses to attend the dinner party and, ultimately, to conform to bourgeois conventions by renouncing her drinking sprees, and hence the possibility of consummating her relationship with Chauvin.

Thus, beneath the rich sauces and rituals, food and wine bring with them what Duras no doubt intends as implicit critiques of bourgeois conventions of exploitation, consumption and narration. However, whilst instances of eating and drinking in *Moderato cantabile* may seek to confront unequal gender and class power relations, Duras's representations do not effectively challenge these ideological constructs. Instead, because she foregrounds bourgeois conventions – albeit negatively – their importance is paradoxically shored up. So food and drink remain vehicles for misogynist and bourgeois ideology in the novel, arguably perpetuating the very values Duras appears to seek to bring into question. The same might be said of the uses of food and drink in the afore-mentioned critical theories of Barthes, Beauvoir and Bourdieu, which are caught, like Anne's would-be transgressive behaviour, in the double bind of highlighting the inequities they may seek to challenge.

#### *Signification, incorporation, desire and trauma*

Such questions of co-implication also resonate with poststructuralist and psychoanalytical concerns. Indeed, poststructuralist and post-Freudian approaches also recurrently (if less overtly) figure appetite (and its leftovers), offering yet more critical potential. Jacques Derrida's notion of *restance* – that which cannot be subsumed into a structure – evokes the idea of the leftover (figurative and alimentary) intrinsic at once in language and all forms of cultural production. Intersecting with remainders, Derrida's figure of the trace opens up to contingent readings of haunting remainders that cannot be digested.<sup>19</sup> Nourishment is fundamental to the post-Freudian psychoanalytical theories of Jacques Lacan. For Lacan, desire originates in the fulfilment of the need for the mother's milk, and individuation occurs as a result of severance from the breast, on entry into the Symbolic, into language: the beginning of lack, a hunger for oneness that can never be fulfilled.<sup>20</sup> Language cannot be separated from appetite, and representational practice operates like an inextricable weave of traces also bound

up with nourishment (and thus lack). And just as lack cannot be resolved by returning to the perceived union with the mother, so equilibrium after trauma can never be achieved. In Lacan's analysis, the return of the repressed has inescapable leftovers. Whereas Freud figures screen memory as displacing a trauma which may nonetheless be discharged through the talking cure,<sup>21</sup> for Lacan, repressed trauma will always return in symbolic form, precipitated by another trauma at once linked to but different from the original one. In these terms, then, the repressed trauma may return, imperfectly, in representations of a related traumatic area,<sup>22</sup> so the originary trauma of severance from the breast may return in representations of conflictual relationships with food and drink. Meanwhile, breast milk and female alimentary nurture are central to Hélène Cixous's figuring of modes of female specificity to be celebrated as both different from and resistant to patriarchal structures.<sup>23</sup>

Claude Fischler's socio-anthropological study of alimentary habits resonates productively with poststructuralist and post-Freudian thought, further opening up the critical potential of eating and drinking. Hitherto unexploited as a critical lens for representational practice, Fischler's thought offers fresh perspectives on the tensions and uncertainties involved in the incorporation of food and drink, and on the ways in which they may tellingly parallel and thus shed new light on those inherent in language, subjectivity and self-Other relations.<sup>24</sup> He describes incorporation as involving taking on the symbolic value of foodstuffs as well as their nutritional value. For Fischler, incorporation is predicated on tensions between nutritional requirements and constraints. The omnivorous need for alimentary diversity means that new foods all bring with them at once the possibility of nourishment and that of mortal danger, resulting in the simultaneous urge to seek novelty and variety and the fear of new foodstuffs. Such tensions necessitate systems of classification of that which is deemed edible or inedible; systems which involve value judgements but nonetheless can never identify exactly what foodstuffs are or how they are incorporated. So eating and drinking are inescapably ambiguous processes, and all the more so in that food and drink cross perceived boundaries of outside the body and inside the body. Thus Fischler argues that incorporation entails breaches of individual integrity which are bound up with further external processes: breaches which result from internalizing foodstuffs, and also from adopting collective eating patterns, whereby the individual's identity is subsumed into that of the group. Incorporation may constitute identity, then, but eating and drinking – like language and subjectivity – also bring anxiety and uncertainty.

Supplementing analyses of gender and class, the thought of Cixous, Derrida, Fischler and Lacan as it relates to eating and drinking can open up further approaches to fictional representations of food and drink. Examining eating and drinking in *Moderato cantabile* from these intersecting perspectives highlights how the double binds of the novel also bespeak the tensions inherent in subjectivity, alterity and representational practice. Accordingly, Duras's deployment of the trope of alcohol stoking an uncontrollable sexual appetite pre-empts Cixous's

celebration of fertility, maternity and nurturing, but at the same time, in linking female sexuality to witchcraft, this image perpetuates the anachronistic misogynist representation of female desire as threatening: ‘Anne Desbaresdes prend une nouvelle fois son verre qu’on vient de remplir et boit. Le feu nourrit son ventre de sorcière contrairement aux autres’ (109). Meanwhile, when Anne’s post-dinner vomiting is considered from Fischler’s perspective, her behaviour can be read as an attempt to resist being subsumed into a social group: ‘elle vomira là, longuement, la nourriture étrangère que ce soir elle fut forcée de prendre’ (112). Despite her attempt to avoid the breaching of her integrity by refusing food, Anne’s minimal ingestion of the food – albeit unwilling and symbolically rejected – and vast consumption of wine entail incorporation into the community. Anne cannot extricate herself from the bourgeois constraints that her drinking appears to transgress, and likewise Duras’s implicit challenge to such conventions – social and narrative – underscores their enduring power. Thus, whether Duras intends it to or not, the end of the novel suggests that although Anne has sought to reject the mores symbolized by the rich food, she remains constrained by that which she has internalized. Here, just as realist conventions remain in an ostensibly *avant-garde* narrative, so the class and gender inequalities illustrated – albeit with implicit criticism – are perpetuated by representations of alimentary rituals and judgements which in the end remain unchallenged.

At once exceeding and opening up the interpretative potential of the text, re-thinking instances of eating and drinking in *Moderato cantabile* from these intersecting socio-anthropological, poststructuralist and psychoanalytical perspectives also reveals traces of meanings and desire – within and beyond words. Whilst Anne’s vomiting marks the end the possibility of consummating transgressive desire, she is nonetheless left with enduring yet hopeless yearning. Appetite in *Moderato cantabile* is at once inextricably the same and other; physical and symbolic; bespeaking lack and carrying multiple, interwoven traces of meanings, supplementing the previous discussions of class and gender power relations, as, for example, in this previously quoted passage: ‘Le service du canard à l’orange commence. Les femmes se servent. On les choisit belles et fortes, elles feront front à tant de chère’ (107). ‘Chère’ here simultaneously connotes feasting and expense, and at once the cost of providing the rich meal and fine wine; the cost perceived by the husbands of maintaining the women’s wifely ‘value’; and the cost to the women of fulfilling their role. ‘Chère’ also evokes the emotional cost of the meal and the constraints it symbolizes for Anne. And ‘chère’ and ‘chair’ are homophones, linking food and flesh; the incorporation of the flesh as food into the flesh of the eaters: as well as food, ‘chère’ evokes the women’s bodies and their symbolic value.

Likewise, if Anne’s unquenchable thirst for wine may appear to differentiate her from her guests, the act of comparison highlights how that same wine links them all. Anne and her bourgeois guests are relative terms in an infinite textual weave. The Burgundy circulating at the dinner party at once marks *convives*’ sameness and difference. Moreover, for Anne, this wine links to that which she

has shared with Chauvin, momentarily distancing her from the guests, but simultaneously both linking her to and differentiating her from him: 'Anne Desbaresdes boit, et ça ne cesse pas, le Pommard continue d'avoir ce soir la saveur anéantissante des lèvres inconnues d'un homme de la rue' (105). The wine here is the same and other,<sup>25</sup> reflecting how, likewise, desire, signification and subjectivity always already carry traces of meaning, exceeding the bounds of text, self and Other. Indeed throughout *Moderato cantabile*, appetite, food and wine evoke the play of linguistic traces,<sup>26</sup> the unknowable imbrication of past, present and future representations, coming in and out of focus, ever incompletely. Anne's husband and her guests cannot make her out, whilst as a protagonist she likewise eludes the reader's grasp. Anne disrupts the rituals of the meal, reflecting how the production of food, like all representational practice, is marked by traces of the excess at once of the signifier and of desire. So whilst Duras may not have intended it of her fictional construct, the protagonist of *Moderato cantabile* performs the slipperiness of the signifier, and hence that of textual production.

Meanwhile, wine-fuelled desire circulates around and beyond the *dîner mondain*, beyond reason and beyond boundaries:

L'une d'entre elles contrevient ce soir à l'appétit général. Elle vient de l'autre bout de la ville, de derrière les môles et les entrepôts à huile, à l'opposé de ce boulevard de la Mer, [...] où un homme lui a offert du vin jusqu'à la déraison. Nourrie de ce vin, exceptée de la règle, manger l'exténuerait. Au-delà des stores blancs, la nuit et, dans la nuit, encore, car il a du temps devant lui, un homme seul regarde tantôt la mer, tantôt le parc. Puis la mer, le parc, ses mains. Il ne mange pas. Il ne pourrait pas, lui non plus, nourrir ce corps tourmenté par d'autre faim. (104)

Here the binary opposition of the social worlds of the portside café and the house on the boulevard de la Mer is disrupted by desire. Desire is at once present and absent, unbounded and thwarted: 'Sa bouche est desséchée par d'autre faim [*sic*] que rien non plus ne peut apaiser qu'à peine, le vin' (107). In fact throughout *Moderato cantabile*, Duras evokes desire which cannot be circumscribed by the pleasure principle and the death drive, instead pre-empting desire as Lacan goes on to figure it: impossible to circumscribe by language.<sup>27</sup> From the outset, wine links desire and death in the *crime passionnel* outside the café which stokes Anne's and Chauvin's morbid appetites. Reflecting the inexorable tension of desire and lack, in *Moderato cantabile* wine is, of course, fatal to the woman shot, but it also evokes other traces of death as the narrative continues. Desire bound up with death recurs amidst threatening culinary and vinous excess, in, for example, the 'totale disparition' (100) of the salmon and the twice-repeated description of duck in its funeral shroud (100 and 102). Moreover, from Lacan's perspective of the return of the repressed, the wine-red blood of the traumatic opening scene (tellingly shed within sight of the Arsenal) returns in the wine that saturates the novel. It is a fictional trauma that also, perhaps, precipitates the return of those linked to

recent bloodshed: of the Second World War, and of the contemporaneous Algerian War of Independence being waged as Duras wrote.

Thus the deadly serious linguistic play of wine in *Moderato cantabile* culminates in and exceeds the dinner which at once shifts between and links the dining room, the grounds and the portside bar; Anne and Chauvin's insatiable desire; and mortally-constraining bourgeois mores. Eating and drinking trouble ostensible distinctions between internal and external, and perform the intersecting but inextricable tensions between desire and death, as well as the insatiable appetite of lack, the play of the signifier and the multiple ambivalence of incorporation. The Desbaresdes' dinner party is therefore much more than a set piece resonant of nineteenth-century realism. Instead, looking at instances of eating and drinking in *Moderato cantabile* by drawing on the insights of Cixous, Derrida, Fischler and Lacan offers productive ways of exploring the desire, lack and repressed trauma inscribed in subjectivity and self-Other relations, as well as in representations of food and drink.

#### *Eating, drinking and re-thinking textual practice*

Analysing eating and drinking in *Moderato Cantabile* demonstrates how, even in an ostensibly *avant-garde* text, feeding keeps us reading for the plot. Whilst Duras's use of wine to evoke the intoxication and sensuality of a sexually-charged, transgressive relationship is powerful, her deployment of tropes of eating and drinking is often surprisingly conventional: food, drink and appetite continue to provide structure, symbolism, characterization and reality effects. Indeed, the novel remains in a surprisingly productive tension with realism, less through the rejection of realist conventions than through the enduring (and no doubt unintentional) use of them. Nonetheless, representations of food and drink nourish the narrative, and satisfy – albeit minimally – readers' hunger for narrative coherence. At the same time, with more or less implicit criticism, representations of food and drink and constrained and transgressive appetites are vehicles of, or betray the mechanisms of, bourgeois and misogynist ideology. If Duras's deployment of eating and drinking reveals the enduring inequities of gender and class power relations, her representations (like those, arguably, of Barthes, Bourdieu and Beauvoir) do not effectively destabilize or challenge those constructs.

Re-thinking *Moderato cantabile* through a hitherto unexploited convergence of theoretical approaches related to eating and drinking also offers other ways of re-thinking textual practice, in terms not only of the paradoxes of Duras's text in particular, but also of those of signifying systems in general (and, by extension, the ways in which humans conceive of themselves and of others). In *Moderato cantabile*, representations of (not) eating and drinking demonstrate eloquently (if not intentionally) how desire and language cannot be circumscribed within a body or a text, but concomitantly open up interpretative possibilities. Simultaneously, Duras's figuring of appetite, eating and drinking in

*Moderato cantabile* evokes the tensions between desire and death, pleasure and danger, individual and collectivity, and appetite and lack – all of which are, of course, also inherent in the production and consumption of narrative.

Indeed, Anne's concurrent rejection of conventional eating patterns and adherence to them articulate what happens with narrative in *Moderato cantabile*: plot, character and symbolism are simultaneously present and absent, destabilized but not abolished, the same and other. So analysing representations of appetite, eating and drinking in Duras's novel reveals at once realist leftovers, returning trauma, and multiple, shifting, interlinked but evanescent traces of meaning. Introducing Fischler's figuring of the ambivalence and tensions of the determining but indeterminate processes of incorporation alongside Derrida and Lacan further elucidates how, just as Anne, her husband, guests, staff and lover can never fully know what they eat, so – like all subjects – they can never fully know or represent who or what they are. Thus, provisionally, but fruitfully, re-thinking Duras's representations of eating and drinking exemplifies new ways of exploring the potentialities and ambivalence not only of *Moderato cantabile*, but also of the fictions of self, of constructs of ideology and of the textual practice of which Duras's novel is but one example.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marguerite Duras, '*Moderato cantabile*', suivi de '*Moderato cantabile et la presse française*' (Paris: Minuit, 1958). All citations are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre Richard, *Littérature et sensation* (Paris: Seuil, 1954), p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century: Writing the City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Lillian R. Furst and Peter W. Graham (eds), *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University of Press, 1992); and Lillian R. Furst, 'The Role of Food in *Madame Bovary*', *Orbis Litterarum*, 34:1 (1979), 53–56.

<sup>4</sup> 'Je ne fais pas partie de ce groupe,' Duras quoted in Bettina L. Knapp, 'Interview avec Marguerite Duras et Gabriel Cousin', *The French Review*, 44 (1971), 653–66 (p. 659). For discussions of similarities with, and differences from, the *nouveau roman*, see for example Barbara Bray, 'Marguerite Duras: Le Langage comme événement', *La Revue des Lettres modernes*, 94–99 (1964), 75–82, and Gennie Luccioni, 'Marguerite Duras et le "roman abstrait"', *Esprit*, 26 (1958), 73–76.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Rare analyses specifically dedicated to food and drink in the novel address them in terms of Anne's rejection of bourgeois constraints and questions of gender, but not through lenses related to food or distinction. See, for example, Sanford S. Ames, 'Mint Madness: Surfeit and Purge in the Novels of Duras', *SubStance*, 20:6/7 (1978), 37–42; Alfred Cismaru, 'Salvation through Drinking in Marguerite Duras' Short Stories', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 19:4 (1973–74), 487–95; and Dina Sherzer, 'Violence gastronomique dans *Moderato Cantabile*', *The French Review*, 50:4 (1977), 596–601.

<sup>7</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857). Although not discussed in terms of food and drink, the intertext and one to Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927) are noted in David Coward, *Moderato Cantabile* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Auguste Escoffier's *Le Guide culinaire* (1903) was the Bible for professional and domestic French cooks until the advent of *nouvelle cuisine*. It consecrated and updated the *haute cuisine* of Antoine Carême, pre-Revolutionary gastronomic sage whose surviving disciples replaced cooking for the aristocracy with setting up restaurants or seeking work (and spreading *haute cuisine*) overseas.

<sup>9</sup> What are described as classical echoes of Racinean tragedy and *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) are also identified in Lloyd Bishop, 'Classical Structure and Style in *Moderato Cantabile*', *The French Review*, 6 (1974), 219–34, available online at <[www.jstor.org/stable/487550](http://www.jstor.org/stable/487550)> [last accessed 28 March 2013].

<sup>10</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques I: Le Cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964); 'Le Triangle culinaire', *L'Arc*, 26 (1965), 19–29; *Mythologiques II: Du Miel aux cendres* (Paris: Plon, 1966); *Mythologiques III: L'Origine des manières de table* (Paris: Plon, 1968).

<sup>11</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74–77.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77–79.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, pp. 189–222.

<sup>18</sup> Lévi-Strauss, 'Le Triangle culinaire'.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967).

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Le Séminaire sur la lettre volée', *La Psychanalyse*, 2 (1957), 15–44, available online at <<http://www.litt-and-co.org/psychanalyse/lacan-freud.htm>> [last accessed 28 March 2013].

<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by A. A. Brill (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'L'Instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient, ou la raison depuis Freud', *La Psychanalyse*, 3 (1957), 47–81, available online at <<http://www.litt-and-co.org/psychanalyse/lacan-freud.htm>> [last accessed 28 March 2013].

<sup>23</sup> See Hélène Cixous, 'Le Rire de la Méduse', *L'Arc*, 61 (May 1975), 39–54.

<sup>24</sup> Claude Fischler, 'Présentation' and 'Gastro-nomie et Gastro-amomie', *Communications*, 31 (1979), 1–3 and 189–201; 'Food, Self and Identity', *Social Science Information*, 27:2 (1988), 275–92; and *L'Homnivore* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1993).

<sup>25</sup> See Vincent Descombes, *Le Même et l'autre: Quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933–1978)* (Paris: Minuit, 1979). Descombes charts changes in the twentieth-century French philosophical field and its discourses, from the dialectical to the destabilizing multiplicity of poststructuralist and post-modern thinkers including Derrida, Deleuze and Lyotard.

<sup>26</sup> Whilst for Derrida in *De la Grammatologie* 'traces' elude definition, the sense in which traces may perform *différance*, the multivalent, haunting past, present and future remainders that are the immanent critique always already within language, is suggested in Chakravorty Spivak's preface to her English translation, 'Translator's Preface', in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. ix–xc (p. xvii).

<sup>27</sup> Lacan, 'L'Instance de la lettre'.