

Irish men and French food

LUCY McDIARMID

The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious.

(Mary Douglas, *Purity and danger*)¹

The official police list of all the property found on Roger Casement when he washed up on Banna Strand contains a number of items that are mentioned in all the biographies: a ticket from Berlin to Wilhelmshaven, 'envelope containing pieces of two maps', 'pieces of paper (code)', and so forth – but also one rarely referred to. It says, 'piece of paper in which sausage was found'.² It is not clear whether the police found the sausage but decided the paper was more important, or whether Casement had eaten the sausage but saved the piece of paper so as not to leave indications of his presence. But either way, that sausage, the classic sign of the German spy, offered evidence of Casement's temporary German enculturation. He had been eating German food, riding German trains and communicating a bit in the German language, for a year and a half; and now he was back to Irish food and trains (briefly), and then English food and trains, as he passed through cultures on his way to the Tower of London.

The obtrusive foreignness of the German sausage in an Irish context opens up questions of how food is constructed as native. In 'Food as a Cultural Construction', Anna Meigs lists some of the 'food rules' of the Hua people of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. One of these is that 'No Hua person may eat food produced, prepared, or served by a person who is a stranger (that is, a person with whom she or he does not share *nu* through coresidence or common birth)'.³ *Nu* is 'the source of nourishment and growth; it is *the* substance of nurture'. Children 'feed of the *nu* of their parents,' and the animals people raise 'contain the people's *nu*'.⁴

Although Irish food discourses do not, it seems, have a similar concept, they manifest, like all aspects of Irish culture, a strong sense of the boundaries between the friend and the 'stranger', the native and the foreign. Some of the dominant Irish food discourses focus on the dynamic of intercultural food exchange, especially the notion of food as a cultural boundary-marker. Eating constitutes a particularly sensitive register of enculturation because it is so intimate: through digestion, a foreign culture

¹ *Purity and danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 115. ² Handout distributed at the Royal Irish Academy's Casement Symposium, May 2000. ³ Anna Meigs, 'Food as a cultural construction', in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (eds), *Food and culture: a reader* (New York and London, 1997), p. 101. ⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 98–99.

is immediately – and literally – incorporated into the self. The myth of Persephone exemplifies the way foreign foods – that is, foods in a place to which one is not native – may permanently change the nature of identity. The same dynamic may be found in Irish fairy legends where the person who eats too much fairy food must remain in the Other World. See, for instance, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poem *An Bhatráil* ('The Battering'), in which she rescues her child from the *lios* just in time, after two out of 'three wet-nurses' have 'already suckled him'. In the Paul Muldoon translation, 'had he taken so much as a sip from the third / that's the last I'd have seen of him'.⁵

The great historical example of ingestion as a threat to identity is soupierism; but similar threats occur long after the Great Famine. The intimacy and ideological control implicit in feeding determined the passionate and hostile response to the 1913 'Save the Dublin Kiddies' campaign: Archbishop Walsh objected to a socialist plan to feed the strikers' children in England because such feeding would, he purported to believe, make the children English (and Protestant).⁶ Sinn Féin objected to the foodships sent earlier by British trade-unions for the same reason. The way to assert power against a feeder is, of course, to *resist*, as hunger-strikers do, and, on a different level altogether, as did the many people throughout Irish history who refused to toast the English king or queen. It is swallowing the beverage – not just echoing the toast – that has ideological implications.⁷

There is an alternative Irish intercultural food discourse associated with France. It is not defined in terms of guarding the body's boundaries, but of making them permeable; it is not a matter of control and resistance, but of license and liberation; not punishment, but reward and pleasure. Irish eating in France generates a food discourse in which somatic and linguistic; national boundaries give way, voluntarily, to the absorption of a foreign culture. The records of such diverse cosmopolites as Wolfe Tone, Oscar Wilde, and George Moore reveal the way French food is culturally constructed by Irish men as redemptive and compensatory, judged in relation to bad food, or the absence of food, of some other country (usually England or Ireland). French food takes on the qualities of whatever is wanted from France: armies, sex, beauty, pleasure, abundance. It is a food that rescues the Irish eater from some previous unpleasantness; it is revitalizing. Looking at Tone's journals, Wilde's letters and a playful newspaper controversy provoked by Moore, this essay will demonstrate how the consumption of French food is associated with the larger transformation of the writer's culture, and how all three men have participated in and extended the Irish discourse about French food. To study Irish men eating French food is to see

5 Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *The Astrakhan cloak* (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1992), pp 24–5. 6 For an analysis of the 'Save the Dublin Kiddies' campaign, see Lucy McDiarmid, *The Irish art of controversy* (Dublin, 2005). 7 Caroline Walker Bynum's analysis of the way medieval women used 'food-related behavior – charity, fasting, eucharistic devotion, and miracles' as a 'way of bypassing ecclesiastical control' is relevant to Irish forms of resistance to food and drink. See Bynum, 'Fast, feast, and flesh: the religious significance of food to Medieval women', in Counihan and Van Esterik (eds), *Food and culture*, p. 148. See also Maud Ellmann, *The hunger artists: starving, writing, and imprisonment* (Cambridge, MA, 1993).



I James Gillray, *Politeness* (1779). This image offers a catalogue of contrasting stereotypes of England and France. The two figures are framed by a joint of beef and a cluster of frogs, hanging on opposite sides of the wall. The caption reads, 'With Porter, Roast Beef, & Plumb Pudding well cram'd,/Jack English declares that Monsr may be D____d,/The Soup Meagre Frenchman such Language dont suit/So he Grins Indignation & calls him a Brute.'

the small steps by which they may become enculturated in a fantasy place where their wishes are granted.

WOLFE TONE

The revitalizing power of French food is nowhere clearer than in Wolfe Tone's journal entries about the meals he was served immediately after arriving in France in February 1796. The earliest entries list every food or drink he consumes. 'I am ashamed to say so much on the subject of eating', he remarks.⁸ As it turns out, he only dwells extensively on food for his first ten days in France. The moment he engages in serious political negotiations, the menus disappear from the text. Food features so prominently at the start because, immediately upon arrival, Tone begins fighting England through its nationalistic food discourses. Every French bite he takes

⁸ *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, compiled and arranged by William Theobald Wolfe Tone, ed. Thomas Bartlett (Dublin, 1998), p. 463.

becomes part of the larger ideological, political and military struggle. Even before he gets to Paris and meets Lazare Carnot (one of the five members of the French Directory), France has helped him against England by feeding him so excellently.

Tone arrived at Havre de Grace on 2 February, having spent thirty-one days on the voyage from New York. He spent that first night at the Hotel de Paix, and noted: 'Slept in a superb crimson damask bed; great luxury, after being a month without having my clothes off'. Here is the opening of his journal entry for 3 February:

Rose early; difficult to get breakfast; get it at last; excellent coffee, and very coarse brown bread, but, as it happens, I like brown bread . . . [then he goes out for a walk . . .] . . . went into diverse coffee houses; plenty of coffee, but no papers. *No bread* in two of the coffee houses; but pastry; singular enough! Dinner; and here, as a matter of curiosity, follows our bill of fare, which proves clearly that France is in a starving situation: An excellent soup; a dish of fish, fresh from the harbour; a fore-quarter of delicate small mutton, like the Welsh; a superb turkey, and a pair of ducks roasted; pastry, cheese, and fruit after dinner, with wine *ad libitum*, but still the *pain bis*; provoked with the Frenchmen grumbling at the bread; made a saying: *Vive le pain bis et la liberté!* I forgot the vegetables, which were excellent; very glad to see such unequivocal proofs of famine.⁹

This entry shows Tone's increasing excitement as the food turns into ammunition. The sequence makes it sound as if the consumption of the dinner leads to a new linguistic capacity. Eating it (it is 'excellent', 'delicate', 'superb'), he becomes enculturated and able to speak the language: 'made a saying: *Vive le pain bis et la liberté!*' Tone is flexing his cultural muscles; he says 'made a saying' because he is pleased with himself for putting words together in a foreign language. In the 8 February entry he complains 'that I cannot speak French', and quotes Sir Andrew Aguecheek: 'Oh that I had given that time to the tongues that I have spent in fencing and bear-baiting'. But here he attempts a little phrase: he takes a syntactic structure he understands ('vive' + a noun) and fills in words that are part of his slight French vocabulary.

More importantly, the words he fits into the structure offer a counter-discourse to the 'English culinary nationalism' analyzed in Ben Rogers' *Beef and Liberty*. That contemporary English food discourse linked 'beef' and 'liberty' is the visual argument of James Gillray's famous cartoon of *French Liberty, British Slavery* (1792). The overweight John Bull starts to eat a huge side of beef complaining that his government is overtaxing and 'starving us to death'. That is 'British Slavery' – no slavery at all, of course, when he freely eats such a hunk of meat. The skinny Frenchman, in rags that were once effete courtier-like clothing, with a skeletal face and long cissy hair, chews on scallions and says 'Vat blessing be de Liberte! No more Tax! No more Slavery! How ve live! Ve swim in de Milk and Honey!'¹⁰ But Tone's meal has demonstrated

that you do not need a monarch to provide good and plentiful food. Although the Frenchmen complain about the brown bread, Tone enjoys it ('as it happens'), and, with its linkage, his little saying intervenes in and revises the English food discourse. In addition, the Latin phrase for the amount of wine poured – *ad libitum*, at your pleasure, as much as you want – combines with the length of the list, the sense of a great accumulation of foods, and the varieties of excellence, to suggest a wondrous plenitude.

Tone's intervention includes commentary on the production as well as the consumption of food. The profound political and spiritual intensity of that first dinner – the bread of liberty, wine to one's heart's desire, a vision of abundance – reappears in Tone's view of the rural landscape. As he rides from Havre de Grace to Paris on 10–12 February, Tone admires the landscape especially for its cultivation. Between Havre de Grace and Rouen, he notes:

Every foot of ground seems to me under cultivation, so there will be no starving, please God, this year . . . an orchard to every cottage, besides rows of apple trees, without intermission, by the road side. Why might it not be in *other* countries, whose climate differs but very little from that of *Normandy*?
*Think of this!*¹¹

Moving southeast from Rouen, he sees 'table land cultivated as before, that is to say, *without one foot of ground wasted*'. He adds, 'I could wish John Bull were here for one half hour, just to look at the fields of wheat that I am passing. It is impossible to conceive higher cultivation: I have seen nothing of a corn country like it in England.'¹²

England turns out even to be responsible for the bad and overpriced meals Tone eats in France. When, after spending the night in the small village of Magny, Tone receives a 'most blistering bill for supper' the night before, John Bull is to blame: 'See here it is! For a cold fowl, six eggs and 2 bottles of poor wine – 32 francs, equal to – £1.6s. Damn them!' His linguistic ability deserts him: 'In great indignation, and the more so, because I could not scold in French. Passion is eloquent, but all my figures of speech were lost on the landlord.'¹³ The same thing happens at Pontoise, where he has breakfast (the ragout is 'execrable'), and then he figures out why: 'This comes of riding in fine carriages, with blue velvet linings! We are downright *Milords Anglais*, and they certainly make us pay for our titles.'¹⁴ The French expense is blamed on the appearance of English aristocracy; but the richness of the landscape restores his good mood and jolly irony:

An uninterrupted succession of corn, vines, and orchards, as far as the eye can reach, rich and *riant* beyond description. I see now clearly that John Bull will be able to starve France.¹⁵

A few sentences earlier he used the phrase 'the smiling appearance of the country', but he is clearly trying to practise his French with that *riant*.¹⁶

Tone's last detailed account of food describes the first meal he eats in Paris, at the *Maison Egalité* ('formerly the Palais Royale'). He apologizes for harping on 'the subject of eating, but I have been so often bored with the famine in France, that it is, in some degree, necessary to dwell upon it'. Each sip and each bite constitute the prandial dimension of the continuing political argument:

Our dinner was a soup, roast fowl, fried carp, salads of two kinds, a bottle of Burgundy, coffee after dinner, and a glass of liqueur, with excellent bread – (I forgot, we had cauliflowers in sauce) – and our bill for the whole, wine and all, was 1,500 livres . . . What would I have given to have had P.P. [Thos. Russell] with me! Indeed we would have discussed another bottle of the Burgundy, or by'r lady, some two or three . . . How he would enjoy France, not excepting even her wines! I wish to God our bill of fare was posted on the Royal Exchange, for John Bull's edification. I do not think he would dine much better for the money, even at the London Tavern, especially if he drank such Burgundy as we did. The saloon in which we dined was magnificent, illuminated with patent lamps and looking glasses of immense size . . . every thing wore a complete appearance of opulence and luxury.¹⁷

It is clear that Tone not only wants to bring France to Ireland, to have orchards and vineyards there in as great abundance as they are in Normandy, but to bring Ireland to France, to have Thomas Russell join him: every time he drinks an excellent wine he longs for Russell. The taste of the meal creates an intercultural configuration: as Tone and his new friend D'Aucourt dine in Paris, they are joined by 'John Bull', who would be edified by seeing how well Tone is eating in Paris, and of course Russell, who would 'discuss' a few more bottles of Burgundy.¹⁸

¹⁶ p. 15. A common eighteenth-century trope, as in Pope's phrase 'laughing Ceres'. ¹⁷ *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, p. 462. ¹⁸ The way Tone talks about eating when he is in Ireland confirms the distinct Frenchness of this hedonistic discourse. In Ireland Tone mentions drinking quite often, but there is more emphasis on drunkenness than on the quality of the wines. On the night of 1 November 1792, Tone dines with other United Irishmen in Dublin, Hamilton Rowan among them. Referring to himself in the third person, Tone says: 'Very much surprised, on looking down to the table, to see two glasses before him; finds, on looking at Hamilton Rowan, that he has got four eyes; various other phenomena in optics equally curious . . . every thing about him moving in a rapid rotation; perfectly sober, but perceives that every one else is getting very drunk . . . Fine doings! fine doings!' (*ibid.*, p. 168). And then, the next morning, 'Sick as Demogorgon'. In August 1792, at Murphy's Inn in Rathfriland, the landlord 'will give us no accomodation! . . . He has cold beef and lamb chops, and will give us neither, but turns off on his heel' (*ibid.*, p. 143). In October of the same year, he has bad food outside Athlone ('victuals bad; wine poisonous; bed execrable' [*ibid.*, p. 160]) and the next day at breakfast, 'the waiter brings us beefsteaks, fried with a great quantity of onions; nice feeding, but not to my taste'. The next morning, he writes,

OSCAR WILDE

Jack: He seems to have expressed a desire to be buried in Paris.

Chasuble: In Paris! I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last.

(Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*)

For Oscar Wilde, as for Tone, the value of food in France derives from its function as an ideological counterpart to English food and politics. But it is more than the 'good' term in a binary opposition: the act of consuming it leads to a profound joy and exhilaration, a spiritual experience inseparable from a list of delicacies. The detail and the punctuation ('!!!') in Wilde's description (in a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas) of a party he hosted in France only a month after his release from two years of hard labour show an excitement as great as Tone's. On 23 June 1897 Wilde gave a 'Jubilee Garden Party' at the Hotel de la Plage in Berneval-sur-Mer, five miles from Dieppe. The guests were fifteen 'gamins' from the neighborhood and (according to Ellmann) some 'local worthies'¹⁹ such as the curé, the postman, and the schoolmaster:

My *fête* was a huge success: fifteen *gamins* were entertained on strawberries and cream, apricots, chocolates, cakes, and *sirop de grenadine*. I had a huge iced cake with *Jubilé de la Reine Victoria* in pink sugar just rosetted with green, and a great wreath of red roses round it all. Every child was asked beforehand to choose his present: they all chose instruments of music!!!

6 accordions

5 trompettes

4 clairons

They sang the Marseillaise and other songs, and danced a *ronde*, and also played 'God Save the Queen': they said it was 'God Save the Queen', and I did not like to differ from them. They also all had flags, which I gave them. They were most gay and sweet. I gave the health of *La Reine d'Angleterre*, and they cried '*Vive La Reine d'Angleterre*'!!!! Then I gave '*La France, mere de tous les artistes*', and finally I gave *Le Président de la République*: I thought I had better do so. They cried out with one accord '*Vivent le Président de la République et Monsieur Melmoth*'!!! So I found my name coupled with that of the President. It was an amusing experience as I am hardly more than a month out of gaol.

They stayed from 4:30 to seven o'clock and played games: on leaving I gave them each a basket with a jubilee cake frosted pink and inscribed, and bonbons. They seem to have made a great demonstration in Berneval-le-Grand, and to have gone to the house of the Mayor and cried '*Vive Monsieur*

'Breakfast, more beefsteak and onions;' and that evening, 'Dinner very bad' (ibid., p. 161).

¹⁹ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London, 1988), p. 509.

le Maire! Vive la Reine d'Angleterre! Vive Monsieur Melmoth!' I tremble at my position.²⁰

Ellmann says Wilde was 'no doubt pining for his sons', but there was a national as well as a family politics at issue here – an allusion to a recent experience in England.

On 17 May, the day before Wilde left Reading Gaol, he paid the fines of three small children imprisoned for snaring rabbits, thereby freeing them. Wilde wrote to warder Thomas Martin: 'If I can do this by paying the fine, tell the children that they are to be released tomorrow by a friend, and ask them to be happy, and not to tell anyone.'²¹ Martin gave a sweet biscuit to one of the children, who was crying; the warder was (therefore) dismissed from his post at the gaol. On 27 May Wilde wrote a long letter to the *Daily Chronicle* about the dismissal, describing at length the 'terror' (Wilde's word) that children feel in gaol. He then writes:

The second thing from which a child suffers in prison is hunger. The food that is given to it consists of a piece of usually badly-baked prison bread and a tin of water for breakfast at half-past seven. At twelve o'clock it gets dinner, composed of a tin of coarse Indian meal stirabout, and at half-past five it gets a piece of dry bread and a tin of water for its supper . . . [T]he child is, as a rule, incapable of eating the food at all. Anyone who knows anything about children knows how easily a child's digestion is upset by a fit of crying, or trouble and mental distress of any kind . . . In the case of the little child to whom Warder Martin gave the biscuits, the child was crying with hunger on Tuesday morning, and utterly unable to eat the bread and water served to it for its breakfast. Martin went out after the breakfasts had been served, and bought the few sweet biscuits for the child rather than see it starving. It was a beautiful action on his part, and was so recognised by the child, who, utterly unconscious of the regulation of the Prison Board, told one of the senior warders how kind this junior warder had been to him. The result was, of course, a report and a dismissal.²²

The Jubilee party was given only twenty-six days after this letter was written, and it seems clear that the French setting, the French food, and even the French language participated in the same intercultural discourse present in Tone's journals. The pleasures of the Jubilee party were redemptive and compensatory. French food offered qualities that had been lacking in England: abundance, beauty, sweetness, and tolerance. Wilde could do in France what he – and what the warder – could not do in England.

Although we know from James Murphy's *Abject loyalty* that the Irish people liked Queen Victoria more than was officially acknowledged among nationalists at the end

²⁰ *The complete letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York, 2000), pp 906–7. ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 831. ²² *Ibid.*, p. 850.

of the nineteenth century, it looks nevertheless as if there is a disconnect here.²³ It is one thing to give a party in France and feed children chocolates and cakes, strawberries and cream, as Wilde could not have done anywhere in England, let alone in Reading Gaol; but why celebrate the queen whose laws sent him to Reading Gaol? Why praise la Reine d'Angleterre as he is celebrating his liberation from Angleterre's gaol and narrow-minded society?

To answer that question, consider the way Wilde described Victoria the day after the party, when he was asked if he had ever met her. He 'replied that he had, and described with admiration her appearance ("a ruby mounted in jet"), her walk, and her regal behavior'.²⁴ This ruby mounted in jet is not a symbol of the state, not the queen of Reading Gaol, but (with her jewels, rich colours, and theatricality) an aesthetic queen, a 'nineties queen, a queen of camp. She is a queen fit for a cake of pink sugar and red roses, a Titania, a fairy queen of decorations, sweets, flags, strawberries and cream. The glory of the party, for Wilde, was not the taste of the food, which he never mentions, but its richness, its elegance, its visual display, and the pleasure of distributing toys and sweets to so many children. The party was a magic world constructed by its festive materials. The monarch's title in French – *la Reine d'Angleterre* – exoticizes her a bit, and incorporates her into the delights possible for Wilde only in France. It is interesting that he invokes France as a gendered nation, emphasizing its maternal nature: *mère de tous les artistes*. Victoria takes on some of that maternal quality too, when she is toasted in French. Wilde's moments of French joy, expressed through the toasts, are reminiscent of the joy in Tone's '*vive le pain bis et la liberté*': in both cases, the man newly arrived in France seems to have found there his heart's desire.

When the children immediately link his name with the President's, he is gallezified, reborn in French, not only because he is *M. Melmoth*, but because he has become acceptable – indeed more than acceptable: a superior public personage, worthy of association with the head of state. In their post-prandial excitement the children kept on calling out in joy – '*Vive Monsieur le Maire! Vive la Reine d'Angleterre. Vive Monsieur Melmoth!*' Because the occasion of the fête was a national one, and because officials like the curé and schoolmaster were present, the party participated to some extent in the public sphere. The linking of names in the toast joined the private and pseudonymous M. Melmoth with the English monarchy and with French national and local politics. What sphere, then, did the party occupy? A theatrical array of beautiful materials transformed the little garden that could only hold six (but that day held fifteen) into a magic space where the reasonably clear categories 'public' and 'private' did not apply. In a kind of festive hilarity, cultures were mixed and identities obscured: Wilde's proper name and nationality were neither known nor mentioned, England became *Angleterre*, all speech was in French, the former prisoner was host to civic dignitaries and ritually linked with two heads of

²³ James H. Murphy, *Abject loyalty: nationalism and monarchy in Ireland during the reign of Queen Victoria* (Washington, DC, 2001). ²⁴ Ellmann, pp 509–10.

state, and only dessert was eaten. As Wilde says, it was 'an amusing experience' for someone barely a month out of gaol, a redemptive, compensatory one, and also, of course, a fantasy created and sustained by French pastry and fruit. It was as great a joy as Tone got from his first French dinner.

GEORGE MOORE

He dragged the policeman into the dining-room and said, 'Is there a law in this country to compel me to eat this abominable omelette?'

(Moore, as quoted by Yeats in *Dramatis personae*, 1896-1902)

The culinary revolution that Wolfe Tone might have wanted to bring to Ireland, had things gone differently, was attempted on a smaller scale by George Moore, who tried to introduce a single fish, once tasted in France, to Irish cuisine. In his revenge on Moore for *Hail and Farewell*, Yeats claims that in spite of Moore's 'French, his knowledge of painting', and general air of sophistication, 'nature had denied to him the final touch: he had a coarse palate';²⁵ that deficiency was unknown to Moore himself. On 4 February 1910, the *Irish Times* published a letter from Moore telling the story of his introduction to this fish in Henri's restaurant in Paris in '1894 or 1895'. The *maitre d'* told him that the fish was called *le bar*, and fourteen years later, so he says, he at last learned that the wonderful fish he had eaten in Henri's was a grey mullet. He wrote to the paper in order to create a demand for the fish, so that Dublin fishmongers would carry it, and also to elevate taste generally:

Grey mullet will be appreciated here, I feel sure of that, for notwithstanding all efforts to suppress civilisation in Dublin there are many amongst us who will find it at least as delectable as turbot. Others of finer taste will discover in it a still rarer delicacy.²⁶

The mullet becomes part of the French-inspired cultural revolution that Moore had been trying to bring to Ireland for years, especially in the form of French painting and French attitudes to sex, morality, and religion. A year after the mullet letter, having done his damage, Moore left Dublin for London, so the campaign to introduce this final mark of sophistication to Ireland was either a parting shot or a parody of all the other shots. The entire correspondence amounted to almost 8,000 words printed in the *Irish Times* between the 4th and 15th of the month.

The general tendency of the correspondence is to de-exoticize and *gaelicize* the fish that Moore had *gallicized*. Moore had placed Paris in the centre of the universe, and Dublin on the remote periphery, a sad place where the grey mullet is not marketed. In the many letters that respond to Moore's, his geopolitics is reversed: Ireland takes centre-stage, and France falls almost altogether out of view, as the corre-

25 W.B. Yeats, *Dramatis personae, 1896-1902: the autobiography of W. B. Yeats* (New York, 1965), p. 297. 26 George Moore, Letter, *Irish Times*, 4 February 1910.

spondents say precisely where on the *Irish* coast the fish may be caught. The letter columns of the *Irish Times* fill with mullet-lore, to such a great extent that each letter competes with previous letters in its display of knowledge. The accumulation of expertise, all of it quite detailed, constitutes an implicit rejection of Moore's distinction between French sophistication and Irish ignorance.²⁷

Moore's letter is written in the dry, witty, man-of-the-world voice of *Hail and Farewell*, which he was perfecting at the time. The tone itself becomes inseparable from the grey mullet and from the cosmopolitanism associated – by Moore – with European cuisine and culture. The excessive length of the letter, its leisurely, detailed and digressive style, clearly derive from the kind of person who has the time to write lengthy letters to the newspaper about the gustatory aspects of fish. Money is no object to him: the availability of the fish is more important than its price. Moreover, all the people invoked and quoted in the letter have no other object in life but to satisfy the desires of George Moore.

The opening vignette – and the letter is a series of vignettes – presents a wealthy, passive, gentlemanly consumer waiting to be fed:

It must have been in 1894 or 1895 that the *maitre d'hotel* in Henri's restaurant wheeled a dumb waiter to where I was sitting, and lifting a cover showed me a large fish, some four or five pounds in weight, and in shape resembling a salmon. It had just come from the pot, and a slight vapour curled amid the white napkins. When he cut it I noticed that its flesh was white, and, not recognising the fish, I asked its name, and he said *le bar*. I had never heard the words before, and asked him how this was, and he told me that the fish was coming into fashion. But he could not tell me what *le bar* was called in England, nor could the cook who had been to England, nor any of the waiters. For the next few days I consulted my friends and the dictionaries, without being able to discover the English words for *le bar*.²⁸

All the physical activity belongs to others here: the *maitre d'* wheels and lifts, whereas Moore just sits. The image of the vapour curling 'amid the white napkins' suggests the hedonistic leisure of the customer. Then, implicitly, the *maitre d'* walks off stage to consult the cooks and waiters about the fish's English name. Moore consults his friends (who are not designated by job titles, like the others in the story) and his dictionaries – notice the plural. This is a man with access to many books. Still unable to discover the *provenance* of the fish, he advised his friends 'to seek it out when they went to Paris' (all of his friends are rich travellers also). Moore finally learns the name from a 'genial Jew' in London,

a man who can give information upon all subjects. He can tell one where the last pair of embroidered braces worn by the last king of Poland are lying, how

²⁷ The 'grey mullet' controversy continued in the *Irish Times* on 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 February 1910. ²⁸ Moore, Letter, 5.

much you will have to pay for an egg of the great auk, and what statues are likely to be discovered in the buried cities of Turkestan.²⁹

This one-man search engine is clearly used to being questioned by people as idle and eccentric as Moore. Asked about *le bar*, he explains that grey mullet is 'a most excellent fish' and 'coming again into fashion in Parisian restaurants'. Moore's extensive staff – his fishmonger Mr McCabe, and McCabe's London correspondent Mr William E. Chitty – both oblige with more mulletana, which Moore includes in his letter. They appear to agree with one another that the fish is caught off the coasts of Devon and Cornwall but is not widely available in London or Dublin. Moore lets his readers know that these represent a small part of his total correspondence on the grey mullet. Mr Chitty (could he be an invention of Moore's?) ends his letter by remarking, 'I have no doubt a discussion in the Irish papers re this intensely interesting matter would arouse a wide world sensation'. Moore says he does not want a sensation, just a large popular demand for the fish, so it will appear on the market in Dublin. He finishes with a recipe for boiled grey mullet with *sauce hollandaise*.

The letters that pour in to the paper in response to this eccentric hedonism echo Moore's tone to some extent: they are dry and almost academic in their presentation of mullet-lore; but they repatriate the grey mullet (in Ireland). The very echo of Moore's tone in missives contradicting what he says makes knowledge of the mullet a touchstone of cultural sophistication. People write in with fancy names ('Ichthyophagist' et al.) and drop terms like the Latin *mugil capito*, the Irish *muleid*, *murleat*, or *lanach*, the French *mulet* or *umbrine*, the Italian *corvo*, and the Greek *labrax*. Many others write in saying that the fish Moore was served at Henri's restaurant was not a grey mullet but some other kind of fish: white salmon, bass, umbria, pike and barbel are among the suggestions (the Larousse confirms the claim of many correspondents that *le bar* is bass).³⁰ They also recommend the French *langouste* (crayfish) and offer recipes for all sorts of fish. The formality of a letter signed 'Ichthyophagist' responds to the tone even as it reverses the geopolitics. The response begins, 'The letter of Mr George Moore relative to the "grey mullet" deserves public encomium, as it displays his patriotic desire to render popular one of the most delicate of our Irish food fishes'.

According to the collective wisdom of the letters, the grey mullet can be caught on the coasts of Louth, Derry, Donegal, Sligo, Galway, Mayo, Kerry, Cork, and Waterford. Several people claim to have seen it caught in the Liffey. Quite a number point out that the grey mullet feeds on 'the garbage of the foreshore', and that whatever taste it has derives from whatever it has consumed. Some correspondents who have seen it eat garbage say they will never eat it. Others explain how best to catch the grey mullet. 'Epicurus' recommends a series of nets joined and stretched across the mouth of an inlet. Mr Barron of Waterford recommends 'hairy bait on a small hook'. '*Pecheur d'Irlande*' (the French style of this Irish identity shows how sophisti-

29 Ibid. 30 The Larousse also offers the translation 'sea-dace'.

cated Irish fishers can be) says he saw a small boy catch one by hand. 'Piscator' recommends that they be caught by the Royal Irish Constabulary 'with tackle, which, in the hands of an ordinary angler, would be entirely useless'. Mr Henry of Sligo claims to have *shot* a grey mullet on the shore. Mr Hackett of Ventry catches them 'a very few yards from my house'. The cumulative effect of the letters is a privileging of the local against the cosmopolitan and the Continental. The letters collectively construct a native discourse of angling masculinity around the grey mullet, cancelling out the effete French scene of consumption in Moore's original letter.³¹ The boundaries of the island are reasserted.

EATERS & FEEDERS

To return to Casement and his sausage paper: when Casement walked inland from Banna Strand, he walked into an Irish food discourse different from the intercultural ones discussed in this essay. Contrary to popular opinion in the rest of Ireland, Casement was not 'betrayed' by the people of Kerry. According to North Kerry folklore, he spent most of his thirty hours there eating and drinking. The poor man 'must be starved with hunger', they thought, and he was given tea, steak, more tea, eggs, and milk, and was grateful to the people who took him in and fed him.³² This higher abundance, especially in the domestic site, is typical of the tradition of Irish hospitality – 'higher' because the hospitality often seems to be impractical or in violation of some law. So St Brigit gives butter, bacon, or milk to poor dogs, or poor people, or druids, because 'everything she put her hand to used to increase', and she breast-fed Christ.³³ So 'vast quantities of meat and drink' were served at wakes, 'whiskey, white wheaten loaves and tobacco' even when the hierarchy forbade 'such odious, pernicious, and detestable practices'.³⁴ So Mrs Kearney of Tralee, wife of Constable Kearney at the Tralee barracks, where Casement was imprisoned, cooked a steak for the prisoner even though it was Good Friday.

Folklore and myth have long shown the way national, cultural, and spiritual matters may be involved in the eating and feeding practices of one or two people: foreign languages pass through the body as foreign foods do. As Ireland now in large-scale, official ways opens up to Europe in treaties and currency, or closes itself off to other nationalities in new legislation and definitions of citizenship, it remains valuable to study the small-scale and unofficial ways in which single individuals became routes of exchange, conduits between the native and the foreign.

31 I am grateful to Mary S. Pierser for letting me know of Moore's poem (in French) about 'le bar'. See John Eglinton (ed.), *Letters from George Moore to Ed. Dujardin 1886–1922* (New York, 1929), pp 105–6. The poem was written in 1920. **32** See Lucy McDiarmid, 'Secular relics: Casement's boat, Casement's dish,' in *Textual Practice*, 16:2 (2002), 285. **33** Lady Gregory, 'Brigit, the Mary of the Gael,' in *The Blessed Trinity of Ireland* (Gerrards Cross, 1985), p. 9. **34** Patricia Lysaght, 'Hospitality at wakes and funerals in Ireland from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century: some evidence from the written record', in *Folklore*, 114 (2003), 408, 410.