

Making Aliens of Us: Self-Serving Vegetarianism in Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'A Vindication of Natural Diet' and Desmond Stewart's 'The Limits of Trooghafft'

Ella Metcalfe 

Percy Bysshe Shelley was enthusiastically engaged with his contemporary philosophies from a young age, and his 'A Vindication of Natural Diet' (hereafter, 'Vindication') comes upon a support of vegetarianism by foundations in the philosophical and scientific questions of his time. Desmond Stewart's 'The Limits of Trooghafft' (hereafter, 'TLOT') is a very different piece of writing; it is fiction, not philosophy, and narrates an alien occupancy of Earth drenched in the typical irony of the postmodern short stories written a hundred and fifty years after Shelley's own work. Nonetheless, the vegetarianism found within Stewart's story shares many of its features with Shelley's very famous 'Vindication' and, for example, perhaps the most expected of which is the association between eating meat and immorality. Across both texts, too, it becomes apparent that the meat diet is not the natural one of the meat eaters. Shelley speaks passionately of a humanity that was fundamentally innocent and free of suffering, one that abided by the rules of a body designed to eat plant matter only. Then he just as ardently describes an ancient mistake, a disastrous path forged away from nature's diet, leading only to immorality and disease, and thus the human being was corrupted. TLOT, on the other hand, disturbs the manner of human existence by turning us into the livestock of a conquering alien race, the Troogs. As humans are now the eaten not the eaters, this article works upon the understanding that Stewart's alien-human relationship is a cutting mirror of the contemporary human-animal one. Therefore, when the Troogs begin their own contemplations of meat eating, bearing remarkable resemblance to the vegetarianism exemplified by Shelley, it can stand for human-made philosophising. Though there is little information available on Stewart, I consider the ironies and anthropocentricisms in postmodernism, the short story genre, and science fiction to suggest that 'TLOT' uses its reflection of Shelley's vegetarianism to condemn it; it is more fundamentally a meditation than an actionable movement, he argues, and its major intent is settling the nineteenth century pre-Darwin anxieties of human nature. Thus aiming

to raise the human condition and uninterested in that of other animals, Shelley draws a border around his species and the rest of the environment, and walks himself further away from the natural path that he is so desperate to find.

The consumption of meat is treated unfavourably in both texts. Shelley was against it strongly enough in the early 1810s ‘to write two different pamphlets on the subject ... both [making] moral, nutritional and even what would be recognized today as environmental claims for vegetarianism’ (Oerlemans 531). I will focus on the moral arguments in his and Stewart’s work; for both, eating meat is an unnatural diet and becomes associated with immorality. The end of ‘Vindication’ exclaims ‘NEVER TAKE ANY SUBSTANCE INTO THE STOMACH THAT ONCE HAD LIFE’, by which he means animal life, and, of this ‘system of a simple diet’, Shelley boldly claims ‘it strikes at the root of all evil’ (82, 89). Both directive and statement are loud in their own way; the capitalisation and simplicity of the order are matched by a totalising statement that is similarly and, for its grand claim, strikingly simplifying. A relationship between meat eating and immorality is therefore impressed upon Shelley’s readers with an authoritative clarity. Jones tells us that Shelley dreamt a world ‘in which human beings are in closer harmony with nature (and one another) rather than assuming dominion over other species and the “right” to kill and eat them’ and ‘in which we do not feed upon a diet of violence that whets our appetite for more’ (7). We can see what Shelley is arguing against when he writes ‘let the advocate of animal food ... tear a living lamb with his teeth, and plunging his head into its vitals, slake his thirst with the steaming blood’ (80). The detail is vivid in this dramatized depiction of meat consumption and, as Jones directs our attention to the brutality of this diet, we can see Shelley’s conception of immorality come to mean ‘violence’. Returning to Shelley’s dream world, however, also shows us that he believed an omnivorous diet went against nature, visible when he suggests ‘at some distant period man forsook the path of nature, and sacrificed the purity and happiness of his being to unnatural appetites’ (Shelley 77). Shelley makes clear what it means to have an ‘unnatural’ diet with reference to a ‘path’, showing us wandering beyond the route and actions set by nature. Stewart’s own meat eaters, the Troogs, articulate these same ideas rather concisely. To eat flesh, they say, ‘is unnatural to us’; ‘our corruption shows in new diseases ... it shows in our characters. We quarrel like our quarry’ (Stewart 5). The main character of this section sits down to read these words and provides us with the Troog’s direct speech. As such, the pronouns used force us to partake in this corruption, not only emphasising the idea of it by its new proximity but also extending the unnatural corruption from Trooghaft to humanity like an infection. The Troog’s literature, reminiscent of Shelley’s own philosophical text, also holds that meat eating is an unnatural diet, and in its corruption of character, an immoral one.

Stewart and Shelley, however, part ways in their reasoning for the association between meat eating and immorality. To Shelley, it is a matter of causation; eating meat sets into play a pattern of events that eventually leads to evil. The vivid image of a human tearing into a living lamb is followed by a call to be able to admit that ‘nature formed me for such work as this. Then, and then only, would he be consistent’, the horrible depiction ensuring that no such claims can be made (Shelley 80). This quotation rounds off the end of a paragraph, leaving this observation lingering on the air and repetition of ‘then’ implies the search for a settling finality. The quotation, by its concluding word, reveals consistency to be the ultimate goal of such reflection. Indeed, this idea of a consistency of form is a reoccurring motif. Shelley later argues that ‘the structure of the human frame then is one fitted to a pure vegetable diet’, and, earlier, ‘he was not formed to be’ the way we now see him (79, 80). There is a preoccupation with the coherency of human form, and its rupturing by an unnatural diet. Jones also considers a ruptured humanity caused by eating meat when he notes Shelley’s argument that ‘only the wealthy ... can “indulge the unnatural craving for dead flesh”’, and so identifies a hunger, an ““avarice of commercial monopoly” that has made the gap between the rich and poor “wider and more unconquerable”” (6). Where Jones locates a fissure down the middle of human society, I believe it is the human being itself that becomes incoherent. Shelley’s ‘Vindication’ holds that ‘tyranny, superstition, commerce, and inequality, were then first known, when reason vainly attempted to guide the wanderings of exacerbated passion’ (78). It uses metaphor and personification to draw readers’ attention to the exact relationship between reason and passion, using ‘vainly’ and ‘attempted’ to signal a problem great enough to be positioned before the relationship, defeating it before we even learn of it. In Shelley’s time, there was a general idea that eating meat could strengthen passions through a kind of symbolic osmosis (Oerlemans 534). Using ‘exacerbated’ becomes telling, speaking of aggravation and therefore unsettled existence, and of passion pushed *too* far; the incoherent human being finds itself so because its components are out of balance. The disproportionate weight of human passion leads to immorality being ‘first known’. Indeed, the only person who can resolve upon ‘real crime’, Shelley says, ‘is a man of violent passions, blood shot eyes, and swollen veins’ (82). In tracking inflated passions through their physical manifestations, readers can more clearly see their capacity to alter our state, and the causal relationship is evidenced by our own encounters with such things. Shelley, ‘a voracious reader of philosophy from a variety’ of sources, was well capable of weaving between different theories in his own thinking to construct something new (Howe 100). Shelley has here identified some separate ideas that he links together in a causal relationship to eventually bind meat eating and immorality together; diverting from nature’s prescribed nutrition disrupts the originally

coherent human design, causing an imbalance between their reason and passion, allowing violence and evil to overwhelm the human.

Stewart's link between meat eating and immorality is much simpler; eating meat is immoral in itself. "TLOT" takes time setting its stage for the plot, talking of the humans bred for eating: 'Capon were naturally preferred when young, since their bones were supple; at this time they fetched, as "eat-alls", the highest price for the lowest weight' (Stewart 3). Attacking the most vulnerable of humankind, we feel horrified at the idea of a creature killed for the suppleness of its bones. The narration is detailed enough to have an impersonal matter-of-fact aura, and just personal enough to suggest that these facts are 'natural' conclusions, each not allowing for the validation of the horror we feel at the facts themselves, worsening our disquiet. Into the plot, the Troog first considers vegetarianism when 'I looked. I saw. Hanging from iron hooks—each pierced a foot-palm—were twenty she-capons, what you call women. Each neck was surrounded by a ruffle to hide the knife-cut; a tomato shut each anus. I suddenly shuddered' (Stewart 6). We, like the Troog, gaze upon the spectacle of flesh and are struck with the depravity of those that could reduce a living being to meat. We, however, have the advantage of shared species with the carcass to truly impress upon us the violence of eating meat. Gilles Deleuze theorises 'the body insofar as it is flesh or meat' as 'a *zone of indiscernibility or undecidability* between man and animal', that is, that our shared fleshy material with the non-human animal can create a space where one type of being cannot be distinguished from another (16, original emphasis). But where, in the high-brow theories of Deleuze and the paintings of Francis Bacon about which he is talking, 'meat is not just dead flesh' and so this shared experience can be a positive one, Stewart's hanging carcasses cannot. Familiar to our eyes, they draw on a much more conventional conception of meat in order to project the common experience of non-human animals onto the human body so that we might more vividly understand the brutality of eating their dead bodies. Portrayed as horrible, meat eating becomes immorality. This is never more visible than when Blake, our human protagonist, 'speculate[s] along the most hazardous paths, in the direction, for example, of the precipice question: might not the Troogs have something akin to human consciousness, or even conscience?', hoping for salvation in this possibility and, indeed, this hope soon proves true (Stewart 5). But the postmodern short story is one pervaded by irony, and their human-like conscience makes for a poor vegetarian, and the circumstance that finds you near them is a hazardous one. The human effect on the other is contemplated and, because that effect tends to manifest as being violently eaten, shows the immorality of our diet.

These differences between the two authors' respective criticisms of meat eating are the start of many more, and I believe Stewart's "TLOT" is made in the image of 'Vindication' to better

explore these discrepancies. Stewart's Troog begins a philosophical soliloquy with 'Trooghaft, you are right ... was noble once' (5).

Then next morning: '...What is natural to carnivores is unnatural to us. We never ate flesh before the Nova; nor on our journey. We adopted the practice from reading the minds of lower creatures, then copying them. Our corruption shows in new diseases; earlier than in the past, older Troogs decompose. It shows in our characters. We quarrel like our quarry. Our forms are not apt for ingesting so much protein. Protein is what alcohol was to humans. It maddens; it corrupts. Protein, not earth's climate, is paling our ... *complexion*' (Stewart 5-6, original emphasis).

This note bears so much resemblance to the points in Shelley's famous 'Vindication', symbol of nineteenth-century vegetarianism, as to convincingly be a deliberate, condensed version of it (Jones 1). Beyond setting the stage for comparison, its narration, printed onto paper like the philosophical works in the library surrounding it, begins pointing to a vegetarianism existing primarily in the mind (Stewart 5). To Shelley, vegetarianism seems to be 'an initial and necessary step to positive and radical reform', and we can see an actable vegetarianism in the closing capitalised directive already considered (Oerlemans 531). In Stewart's work, however, 'Blake recognised that his Troog was soliloquising', a word that defines his resolve against eating meat more by its words than its actions (7). Of postmodern short stories, Marshall writes 'sometimes the point of the story is just achieving an epiphany', and 'because you usually put an epiphany in near the end of the story, you can't really show how an epiphany results in your character actually changing his life' (76). In Stewart's genre, conclusions are come to for the conclusion's sake, and the causal link between theory and practice is stalled. Stewart defines the version of vegetarianism in 'Vindication' as inactive and theoretical, which we can identify ourselves when he writes 'the story of Prometheus, is one likewise which, although universally admitted to be allegorical, has never been satisfactorily explained' (Shelley 78). This is the beginning of a paragraph and signpost of his intentions, and thus the underlying framework of a voice intent on satisfactorily understanding the world reveals this text's primarily theoretical purpose. Stewart writes against this inactive vegetarianism at the pivotal moment of his story, made explicit that 'this was the moment for his Troog to incarnate pity and save his woman', and the philosopher's inaction is made clearer still (Stewart 7). This painfully emphasised failure of execution not only defines Shelley-like vegetarianism by its inaction but shows that Stewart's own version must be grounded in action.

By exposing the philosophical nature of Shelley's vegetarianism, Stewart also identifies an original motive for the writing of his 'Vindication' separate from the promotion of meat-abstinence; it contemplates diet from within contemporary philosophical discourse, which held its dominant concern to be locating humans' proper place within the natural order. By its second sentence, 'TLOT' takes from humans the ability to self-diagnose their place. After conquering the planet, 'being hierarchal in temper, the Troogs segregated *homo insipiens* into four castes' (Stewart 3, original emphasis). Stewart's use of italicised Latin nods to the scientific system of species classification, a reminder of our own attempts to define the human against the backdrop of the Troogs' imposition of their own categorisations of our nature. Stewart feels free, however, to challenge our classifications, and we go from being homo-wise to homo-senseless, from being in a position of intellectual superiority to being locatable by our intellectual inferiority, and the Troog's ability to completely subvert our authoritatively Latin definitions casts humans adrift in their place in the world. This accurately picks up on a dominant concern of Shelley's day that questioned 'the place of humankind in nature. It concerns, that is, a pre-Darwinian examination of how and where we are rooted to the natural world' and can therefore expose when Shelley is attempting to address it, rather than the immorality of eating meat (Oerlemans 525). Shelley's own second sentence begins 'the origin of man, like that of the universe of which he is a part, is enveloped in impenetrable mystery' (77). He continues by elaborating on the theme and then by saying 'it is perfectly unimportant to the present argument which is assumed', so why would he mention it (77)? It starts just after Shelley's first proposal of the idea of unnatural diet, and the immediate digression suggests his theory almost subconsciously evokes the all-consuming philosophical question of his time. Indeed, when Stewart's Troog is first shocked by the idea of eating meat, his first question is not about its immorality but instead "'was this," I asked in sudden repugnance, "Trooghaft?"' (6). 'Trooghaft' is to 'Troog' as 'humanity' is to 'human', and so the most striking impact of their diet is its implications upon the nature of their species. It focuses the concern about placement in the proper order of things upon their 'corrupted' form, and therefore whether its shape can fit back into its natural position. Some of Shelley's most metaphorical arguments appear in the idea of forsaking 'the path of nature', and striking 'at the root of all evil' (77, 82). It conjures the image of a spatial, branching road of human development that can therefore be traced back to its root to locate humans' placement in nature, and so Shelley's concern with returning to a natural human diet reveals itself to be a tool for finding this place.

Having located the origins of Shelley's 'Vindication' in its search for humanity's place within nature, Stewart's story also reveals that the work's intended conclusion revolves around the

bettering of humans' existence, not the ones of the animals they eat. The part of Stewart's story most designed to horrify his readers revolves entirely around human experience.

We, too, have been reading, brother. We have studied one of their ways of cooking. *Place the lobster*—their name for a long extinct sea-thing—in warm water. *Bring the water gently to the boil. The lobster will be lulled to sleep, not knowing it is to be killed. Most experts account this the humane way of treating lobster* (original emphasis, Stewart 7).

The words of Stewart's contemporary society, preserved so carefully in printed form, speak through time and condemn us with our own immorality. The irony of the postmodern story exists not just on the surface but must also pervade aesthetic choices, and indeed, there is an intense irony in the very anthropocentric science fiction genre being used to express concern for non-human animal welfare (Marshall 69). In the genre, the human species is focused on self-improvement; it writes of 'the imperfectability and disunity within humans and their collective struggle to take remedial action' with the power of science and reasoning (Pordzik 142). Therefore, even when humans are decentred from the narrative voice as they are here, Stewart's genre cannot help but emphasise the human experience. As I have already suggested, the human victim better impresses upon us the immorality of eating meat, but here, where our own words are parroted back to us and affect our demise, the emphasised implications of this immorality are those that affect humans and their nature, not non-human animals. This anthropocentrism is used to show the selfishness of a vegetarianism that is purely philosophical. It is law that human pets are killed if they become sick, and 'Troogs recognised the wisdom behind this rule for they too disliked the sound of coughing', and the disparity between crime and punishment feels ludicrous, not rational (Stewart 3). On the other hand, the theories of the vegetarian Troog are relegated to those of a 'moral dilettante' (Stewart 6). Whether for or against the death of inferior animals, the concept of philosophical wisdom is devalued, presented as something entirely deployed for the gratification of the wise. The Troogs were 'noble once' and wish to return to this state, and Shelley's philosophical vegetarianism is also selfishly purposed for the improvement of the human condition (5). Shelley addresses himself to, amongst others, 'the young enthusiast: the ardent devotee of truth and virtue; the pure and passionate moralist, yet unvitiated by the contagion of the world. He will embrace a pure system' (88). For the traits Shelley calls upon, morality and virtue and truthfulness, readers, particularly those contemporary to Stewart, expect his focus to be like those didactic tales emphasising the importance of kindness to the other. Shelley, however, had at this point been moving between different dogmas for years, always becoming alienated from them if he thought

them inadequate to human aspirations (Howe 103). The grandiose language of this quotation therefore focuses upon the ‘moralist’, ‘enthusiast’, ‘the ardent devotee’; in other words, he uses the space of his ‘Vindication’ to raise up the human subject with a focus on the self just like that exemplified in science fiction.

The vegetarianism within Shelley’s work, therefore, is designed to elevate humans back to their original glory, and Stewart demonstrates this as a roadblock to truly placing humans back into the natural order. Deleuze explains his zone of indiscernibility between humans and other animals, created by our shared material, to be ‘the common fact: the common fact of man and animal’ (16). To Val Plumwood, who once experienced being the prey of a crocodile, ‘when [large predators] are allowed to live freely, these creatures indicate our preparedness to coexist with the otherness of the earth, and to recognize ourselves in mutual, ecological terms, as part of the food chain, eaten as well as eater’ (Plumwood). To both, emphasis on the shared nature of our status as meat is what allows us to share a habitat with non-human animals, the desired habitat to Shelley being ‘nature’. In Shelley’s examinations of anatomy an echo of Plumwood’s and Deleuze’s ideas can almost be heard. He says ‘the orang-outang perfectly resembles man both in the order and number of his teeth. The orang-outang is the most anthropomorphous of the ape tribe, all of which are strictly frugivorous’ (80). It considers what human bodies share with those of other animals, using the similarity to argue for the vegetarianism that will plant us back into our roots and into the natural world. Grounding us down into our natural place, however, seems also to elevate humans to greatness: ‘No sane mind in sane body resolves upon a real crime’; our natural body is one of ‘innocence’, but ‘omnipotence itself could not save them from the consequences of this original and universal sin’ (Shelley 78, 82, 83). The absolute causal relationship between eating meat and human immorality absolves the natural human being, existing in its proper place, of all guilt. Stewart problematises Shelley’s ability to simultaneously locate humans within nature and raise them to excellence at the same time. Stewart’s Troog realises that ‘not one tongueless woman moves, upside-down, towards the throat-knife, without trembling’ (6). Ostensibly, it is a shared emotional experience that makes claims to similarly place humans, as symbolised by Troogs, back into nature alongside non-human animals. Multiple commas, however, slow the pace and make a heavy epiphany out of this obvious fact, and so attention is drawn to the moral credit the Troog affords itself for acknowledging its similarity to its food. It therefore elevates itself with the high ground of morality, and that of the pitier. Having thus actually raised itself higher than, and therefore further from, its prey, it suggests ‘we can never be equals with *homo insipiens*. But we can accept our two species as unequal productions of one universe’ (Stewart 6). Even now, it tries to share space with animals, and so Stewart demonstrates that the two aims of philosophical

vegetarianism, to simultaneously raise humans above nature and place them within it, are incompatible and paradoxical.

Both Shelley and Stewart associate the practice of eating meat with immorality, and spend time considering the practice of its alternative, vegetarianism. As, in its most fundamental manifestation, being a vegetarian means abstaining from eating animals, one might assume that its main concern is for the continued existence of those animals. Stewart, however, places similar arguments to Shelley's within the context of science fiction, a very anthropocentric genre, revealing that his 'Vindication' revolves around the human experience instead. Such intense focus on the human encircles and separates humanity from the rest of the natural world, leaving them free to enjoy a vegetarianism constructed solely for the purpose of improving the human condition. Therefore, although the refusal to use non-human animals as food seems the perfect place to show a respect for the non-human animal that acknowledges the equal importance of human and non-human animal life, an examination of Stewart's work shows their value, as understood by humans, is in fact pushed further apart by the type of vegetarianism theorised in the texts.

Works Cited

- Deleuze, Gilles. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith, Continuum, 2005.
- Howe, Anthony. "Shelley and Philosophy: On a Future State, Speculations on Metaphysics and Morals, On Life." *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, edited by Madeleine Callaghan and Michael O'Neill, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 100–16. *Oxford Handbooks Online*. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199558360.013.0007. Accessed 14 Dec. 2021.
- Jones, Michael Owen. "In Pursuit of Percy Shelley, 'The First Celebrity Vegan': An Essay on Meat, Sex, and Broccoli." *Journal of Folklore Research*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1–30, doi:10.2979/jfolkrese.53.2.01. Accessed 13 Dec. 2021.
- Marshall, Dan. "Writing the Postmodern Short Story." *Terminus Magazine*, vol. 4/5, 2004, pp. 69–76. *Humanities International Complete*, web-p-ebshost-com.uoelibrary.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=4403fc50-5bd5-4a97-b7db-219578efdf12%40redis. Accessed 14 Dec. 2021.
- Oerlemans, Onno. "Shelley's Ideal Body: Vegetarianism and Nature." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 34, no. 4, 1995, pp. 531–52. *JSTOR*, jstor.org/stable/25601140. Accessed 13 Dec. 2021.
- Plumwood, Val. "Prey to a Crocodile." *The AISLING Magazine*, 2002, aislingmagazine.com/aislingmagazine/articles/TAM30/ValPlumwood.html. Accessed 15 Dec. 2021.
- Pordzik, Ralph. "The Posthuman Future of Man: Anthropocentrism and the Other of Technology in Anglo-American Science Fiction." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2012, pp. 142–61. *Project Muse*, muse.jhu.edu/article/474287. Accessed 15 Dec. 2021.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "A Vindication of Natural Diet." *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, edited by E. B. Murray, Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 77–91.
- Stewart, Desmond. "The Limits of Trooghaft." *Encounter*, Feb. 1972, pp. 3–7. *The Unz Review*, unz.com/print/Encounter-1972feb-00003/Contents/. Accessed 9 Nov. 2019.