

## ELIZABETH PERKINS

### THE LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE OF *THE GENTLEMAN'S RELISH*

Thirteen minutes past two and awake from a nightmare. Dropped by Bread and Vegemite out of Uneasy Conscience. A dingo howling and curlew crying, an atavistic antiphone, and a mopoke very close, soft and urgent. Xavier Herbert country certainly. But *Poor Fellow My Country* is too heavy to read in bed. A lectern is necessary for such lectures.

So: to finish off the scrag ends of reading on the table beside the bed. N.F. Simpson with Mrs Gantry in *One Way Pendulum* coming in by the week to eat up the leftovers in the Groomkirby's larder: *If you were to do your proper share of the eating between you, instead of leaving it all to me, I shouldn't have to have Mrs Gantry in anything like so often*, says Mrs Groomkirby.

The last ten pages of Patrick White's *The Vivisector: That winter, as they sat in the grey asbestos kitchen, amongst the broken eggshells she hadn't yet gathered up, the picked-at bacon rinds, the pots of Gentlemen's Relish and Cooper's Oxford Marmalade . . .* and so on to the artist's happy oblivion and that singleness of purpose without which neither god nor man is fit to be.

No more, no more, that way lies madness. What is the next course? The Dennis Cannan play of course, of course. Alas, its name is *Dear Daddy* and we are in the English counties somewhere. Someone suspects that Dear Daddy is the playwright. And why not, so was Strindberg the father when he wrote *The Father*. A far cry this from *The Ik* and *US* and it is a cry and it travels far. Beneath this not easily recognised as deathless dialogue lies: . . . *B. This Camembert's not ripe. M. There's Wensleydale and mousetrap. Will you all stay to tea? I've got some crumpets. B. Ah, crumpets! What's happened to muffins? Why do we never have muffins? (B. repeats the muffin question) M. Ask the supermarket. It's bad enough getting your Gentleman's Relish, and then watching it go mouldy because you don't eat it.*

What is the dramatic intention of that interchange? Right. B is daddy, concealing pain and tension under flippant complaints about Camembert and muffins. He is also financially embarrassed and must ask his children to sign back to him monies he'd transferred to them years ago to avoid taxation. This explains his interest in Camembert, muffins, The Gentleman's Relish and similar essentials. He's middle class England, you see. M is B's second wife, and thereby more patient, but she's starting to

crack as you can tell by her morbidly watching the Gentleman's Relish gather mould. The Gentleman's Relish is not a green slimy stuff made from gherkins, but it is a high quality anchovy paste. Anchovies almost fished out in Mediterranean waters, and all, the species *Ergraulis encrasicholus*, that is. Typically, the species in American waters, *Engraulis mordax* in the Pacific, and *Anchoa hepsetus* in the Atlantic, are still plentiful. Wouldn't that be so? The Americans still have plenty of everything.

But if *Ergraulis encrasicholus* is in short supply there is rather a lot of Gentleman's Relish in this bedside reading. (P. White says Gentlemen's but doubtless he refers to the same product.)

Meditate upon the significance of the Gentleman's Relish in literature since 1970. Define our parameters and there is material here for a thesis.

Compare Hurtle Duffield the boy eating rancid dripping on page 54, and Hurtle Duffield the artist among the pots of Gentleman's Relish on page 632. Compare Bernard asking for Gentleman's Relish in the counties and Mary watching it go mouldy. Compare Jerzy Kosinsky's starving migrant in *Steps*, stealing little pots of black caviar from New York supermarkets and hiding them in his matted Siberian wolf skin coat.

Compare the insanity of Hurtle Duffield and that of August Strindberg.

Intimations of bourgeois literature, that is what we have. And the bourgeoisie is turning rancid, it is broken eggshells and bacon rind, it is going mouldy. It will find god and dingoes too late, mark these words o ye prophets, and god won't be muffins or indigoes. God will be a crumpet of a different colour, o white men.

Compare the guilty insomnia of an Australian academic with vegemite aspirations struggling with the Gentleman's Relish of creative artists.

And look out for Mrs Gantry paid by the hour to eat up the scrag ends, and the Polish migrant in the matted Siberian wolf skin coat.

Rain begins to fall and silences the mopoke and the curlew and the dingo.