Abstract – In Joseph Conrad’s short story ‘Amy Foster’ (1901), the frame narrator makes a passing reference to ‘some German fellow’ who has claimed that ‘without phosphorus there is no thought’ (1983: 97-98). The ‘German fellow’ is the nineteenth century scientific materialist, Jakob Moleschott, who believed that ‘both intellectual and political progress directly depends on the quality of the food that people eat’ with ‘elements and substances such as phosphorus and proteins’ being ‘the primary agents for the proper functioning of the brain’ (Meneghello, 2017: 135). Without phosphorus, an individual would become dull and slow-witted. In a letter to his aunt, Madam Poradowska in 1891, Joseph Conrad writes, ‘I have absolutely nothing to say to you. I am vegetating. I do not even think – therefore I do not exist (according to Descartes). But another individual (a scientist) has said: “without phosphorus, no thought”. From which it seems I am still there, but the phosphorus is missing. Yet in that case I would exist without thinking, which (according to Descartes) is impossible’ (CL1, 1983: 99). Conrad’s mention of phosphorus both in the letter to his Aunt and in his short story, ‘Amy Foster’ promotes a discussion about diet, scientific materialism and the quality of Romney Marsh soil, the area in which ‘Amy Foster’ is set. It also draws upon the work of Ludwig Feuerbach and the importance of phosphorus in discriminating between a ‘human being’ and a ‘natural being’ and helps solve the paradox of the mind/body split which ails Conrad.

Keywords: Phosphorus, scientific materialism, imagination, diet, soil, eating, existence, mind, body, guano.