

FOOD AND PLEASURE IN MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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by  
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**ABSTRACT**

*Food and Pleasure in Modern American Literature* is a study of the dynamics of pleasure in literary scenes of food, eating, and hungering in American poetry and novels from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. From infamous poetic instances of plums and memorialized moveable feasts in the early twentieth century to present-day preoccupations with overdetermined foods and bodies, food scenes in literature help develop character, play out cultural or social dynamics, or dramatize appetite and desire. In many instances, pleasure (or its absence) is what gives such scenes weight and dimension. I apply tools and concepts from both structuralism and phenomenology to explore the tensions between seemingly opposing ideas introduced in food-focused texts, which have been selected from a broad range of genres and eras.

Chapters 2 through 6 focus specifically on poetry, which offers the opportunity to explore specific structuralist and phenomenological concepts within the space of a few lines, for closer attention. Chapters 7 through 10 examine fiction and non-fiction prose at lengths which permit many more layers of conflict and desire in regard to food and pleasure. The culminating chapters examine contemporary food writing and recent novels that shed light on the food issues of the present day.

In honor of my mother, who supported and encouraged me in every possible way, and  
without whom this dissertation would simply not exist.

In memory of my father, who told me long ago that my worth was so much greater than  
my academic merits.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### FOOD AND PLEASURE IN MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

*Food and Pleasure in Modern American Literature* is a study of the dynamics of pleasure in literary scenes of food, eating, and hungering. From infamous poetic instances of plums and memorialized moveable feasts in the early twentieth century to present-day preoccupations with overdetermined foods and bodies, food scenes in literature help develop character, play out cultural or social dynamics, or dramatize appetite and desire. In many instances, pleasure (or its absence) is what gives such scenes weight and dimension. The enjoyment of eating is a private, subjective experience, yet it is also deeply influenced by culture, class, and other social bonds. Hunger for such enjoyment can be a metaphor for power or a sign of vulnerability. To yearn for a particular food is one of the world's most ancient stories—consider the apple—but the factors that shape desire and enjoyment of any food are complex and subtle enough to enrich the most allusive poem.

In the subsequent chapters, I will examine literary instances of food, eating, and hungering in American poetry and novels from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. This wide-ranging selection of literary texts is intended to show the applicability of my primary claim across a range of genres and eras within the last century; the meaning of food necessarily changes in different contexts, but certain patterns emerge which may be productively examined for more depth. In particular, many of the texts I include introduce a tension between seeming opposites: pleasure and disgust, appetites of the

mind and hungers of the body, individual tastes and cultural customs, and so forth. I apply tools and concepts from both structuralism and phenomenology to explore the contradictions, interconnections, and ambiguities of each set of opposing concepts.

### **Relevant Literature in Food Studies and Literary Studies**

In the last ten years, the importance of food economics, politics, and culture has grown increasingly visible in mainstream media. The White House planted an edible garden. Books and documentaries about farming, cooking, and eating have catapulted to bestseller lists and critical acclaim. Diets and food fads come and go, but many of those in recent years—going gluten-free, eating like your ancestors, and so forth—demand greater levels of food literacy than the nutritional supplements and weight loss products of yore. Meanwhile in academia, dozens of graduate programs in food studies have cropped up in accredited universities, and monographs that propose an explanation of how and why we eat certain foods—the secret lives of this or the oral histories of that—are packaged to appeal to general audiences as well as scholars. We appear to have reached a cultural agreement that food and food practices may be read and interpreted like texts.

Despite this, the staunchest advocates of food studies have operated in disciplines outside of literary studies. Some of the earliest and most influential of these emerged from anthropology; in the introduction to *Food and Culture: A Reader*, editors Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik suggest that this is because anthropology is by definition a holistic discipline which merges materialist, interpretive, and evolutionary

approaches in its study of human behavior (Counihan 1). One could argue that food studies itself necessitates that interdisciplinary approach, but it might also be fairly stated that eminent anthropological studies of food set the tone for interdisciplinary methods in food studies of the last few decades. For some examples: *The Raw and the Cooked* and *The Origin of Table Matters* by Claude Lévi-Strauss examined food practices of indigenous tribes but drew heavily on linguistic and semiotic systems to establish something of a grammar of food—although though this approach was critiqued by anthropologist Mary Douglas, who demonstrated that an exhaustive grammar of food would be, well, exhausting (Douglas 37). *Sweetness and Power* by Sidney Mintz continues to be a formative work in food studies: to make an anthropological study of sugar consumption in the present, Mintz draws on the history of sugar processing and the popularization of sweets in the last two centuries. In addition, many of the anthologies, monographs, and theories I consulted in my research were sociological at base but interdisciplinary in practice: from *Food and Culture: A Reader* to Pierre Bourdieu's broad-ranging survey of French consumers to the interview- and magazine-based *Foodies* by Josee Johnston and Shyon Baumann. Perhaps the study of how and why we eat certain foods—just as universal and meaningful as it is utterly personal and inconsequential—necessarily begins with observing or interviewing human beings, but it's worth noting how many of these social science studies swerve into a literary territory of language, grammar, and metaphor.

Philosophy too has a long and complicated history with the subject of food, but within that field food has most frequently been considered a topic beneath scholarly notice. Despite this (or perhaps because of it), some of the most persuasive food studies

I've read have been philosophical in origin. The work of Carolyn Korsmeyer, from her monographs to her edited collections, offers a substantial contribution to food studies: genealogies of food philosophies, exploration of the phenomenology and aesthetic experience of eating, and a compelling defense for revaluing food as a scholarly subject. Korsmeyer's work, cited in several of my chapters, was vital in helping me contextualize and understand phenomenological approaches to food.

Food studies is fundamentally an interdisciplinary pursuit: what and how we eat is so deeply connected to who and where we are, and so it becomes nearly impossible to do an ethnography without dipping into history, or to research the economics of food without considering the politics of food distribution, or to understand the rise and fall of food trends without examining the popular discourse that shapes how we imagine and value different foods. But of all of the interdisciplinary food studies that have flourished in the last few decades and especially in the last few years, only a handful explicitly make literary analysis the central method or purpose of their study. Many of those that do are cultural studies, focusing on specific ethnic or regional populations within a shared language: for example, *Eating Identities* by Wenying Xu and *Hunger Overcome* by Andrew Warnes examine instances of eating, food, and cooking within Asian-American and African-American literature respectively in order to better draw out themes common to each respective subset of American literature. Along similar lines, feminist theory (another necessarily interdisciplinary study) provides a framework for books like *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* by Sarah Sceats, *Writing the Meal* by Diane McGhee, and *Scenes of the Apple* edited by Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran: these books focus on literary texts written by women to highlight the ways food

practices have been historically and culturally gendered. There exist a few monographs which examine food through the lens of philology or linguistics: two surprisingly accessible examples include *Words to Eat By* by Ina Lipkowitz, which explores the quirky Anglic etymology of words like *meat* and *fruit*, and *The Language of Food* by Dan Jurafsky, which applies linguistic principles to the recalcitrant texts of menus, Yelp pages, and snack food branding. Few monographs make a study of the literary or aesthetic qualities that are unique to textual representations of food, but those that do tend to make poetry their study: *The Poetics of Spice* by Timothy Morton interprets 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry in light of the particular ekphrastic experience of reading *spice* along with the political and commercial context of that period; *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption* by Michael Delville focuses narrowly on early modernist avant-garde to elucidate a pattern of what he calls “literary still life.”

These literary studies each added a meaningful dimension to my own research, whether by suggesting technique for dismantling symbolically rich food poetry, or by providing the historical and cultural context for certain texts or food practices, or simply by demonstrating a thematically coherent approach to the frequently messy and complicated subject of food. Yet, literary studies are unlikely to show up on syllabi in one of the universities that now offers a degree in food studies (with the possible exceptions of Jurafsky and Lipkowitz, whose work has been featured in mainstream publications like *Psychology Today* and the *New York Times*). Nor do literary studies make much of a showing in purportedly interdisciplinary anthologies like *Food and Culture* or *A Taste Culture Reader*. This is a puzzling omission, since the rituals and exchanges of food in any culture are so intimately entwined with the language used to

describe, explain, and imagine food that it is impossible to fully examine any one angle—politics, economics, sociology—without considering how language shapes our behaviors and expectations. Literary approaches to food culture can only extend and deepen the field. This project will engage with (and emphasize the literary elements of) anthropological, philosophical, and contemporary cultural studies in order to support and complicate my literary analyses, but my hope is that this interdisciplinary approach may help make a case for further literary studies in the still-evolving amalgamation of food studies.

### **The Epistemological Possibilities of Pleasure**

I may not have a theory of why literary studies aren't more present in food studies, but one can hypothesize why food studies have likewise been somewhat scarce in the literary field until recently. Reading about food—and enjoying it, or feeling the stir of appetite in response to it—will draw attention to the body and the senses rather than the supposedly more abstract and elevated activities of the mind. In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo observes the frequency with which Western philosophy casts the body as an “animal,” a “deceiver,” or a “prison of the soul and confounder of its projects”—casting the body as both an unreliable tool and questionable subject of scholarship (Bordo 3). In *Making Sense of Taste*, Carolyn Korsmeyer critiques the classical division between the senses that are thought to be more objective—namely, sight and hearing—and those that, in her words, “direct our attention inward to the state of our own bodies” (Korsmeyer 103). She cites some philosophers, like Schopenhauer, who feel that paying too much

attention to the bodily senses can lead down the path of moral degradation. Others, like Kant, simply disregard the senses because the objects of their philosophical investigations are universal, abstract principles.

Kant, for example, would not argue that food is aesthetically meaningful. The ability to judge food, he writes in *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, is impaired by hunger; one eats to satisfy and gratify the organs of taste, so the only way to exercise unbiased aesthetic judgment on food is to eat when already satiated—a truly unappetizing proposition. Failing that, taste in food is among the preferences Kant calls *taste of sense*: everyone has his own taste of sense, Kant writes, and it is pointless to argue over it. (Kant 55). Gustatory pleasures are dismissed in pursuit of a universalized standard of the beautiful—a very specific kind of aesthetic judgment that requires very specific conditions, including the exercise of free will and the freedom from the biases of need, which prioritize the useful and the agreeable. The beautiful supposedly surpasses all bias, a lofty and objective standard that tautologically proves that human judgment is meaningful, because if everyone has individual and subjective tastes for all things, then nothing could be judged good or best (Kant 56).

I introduce Kant as an example of undervaluing food and senses of taste in philosophy—so it may be surprising that I frequently reference Kant as a foundation for why tastes of sense *do* matter. In the process of ruling out the forms of interested or biased preference, Kant describes the aesthetic experience of pleasure—and how pleasure is a kind of knowledge, if not an objective or platonic ideal of knowledge. When a person likes or dislikes a taste, a color, or a sound, Kant writes, that feeling of preference does not belong to the object (as, say, a color or a quality might belong to the object). Rather,

it is “a feeling which the subject has within itself;” or, as he phrases it elsewhere, liking is the sensation of the subject “feeling itself.” (Kant 44). The Kantian subject is mind that knows itself through its own movement, but the mental movement in question is feeling preference (particularly pleasure). Thus, even if liking the charming, the agreeable, or the useful does not lead to Kant’s ideal of objective beauty, the contemplation of which is its own reward, preference still seems to give way to a kind of self-knowledge.

If so, the experience of eating, which is never a disinterested act and which nearly always solicits the eater’s acute pleasure or displeasure, must always be an occasion for the mind to feel itself, and to acquire a kind of knowledge.<sup>i</sup> You taste, therefore you are. Pleasure and distaste—or even disgust—are essential elements of experience as well as knowledge gained by experience. From the aesthetic judgment of Immanuel Kant to the theory of abjection by Julia Kristeva, pleasure and displeasure of the senses are integral to how we define and exercise our senses of self. Eating and enjoying food allows the subject to assert his or her sense of self, a complicated experience during an act that is in many respects shaped by cultural, historical, and social factors. In literary texts, scenes of pleasure or disgust in eating can be a step on the journey toward a poem’s argument or a plot’s progress; taste can be a catalyst to bring characters into a sense of belonging, or self-possession, or other self-knowledge.

Beyond the personal rewards of taste as an aesthetic experience, these same pleasures or judgments can bring a person greater knowledge about her surroundings as well. In her essay “Delightful, Delicious, Disgusting,” Carolyn Korsmeyer argues that

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<sup>i</sup> Food that gives no pleasure frequently borders on disgust: the words we use to describe an absence of good flavor (bland, underseasoned) or pleasing texture (spongy, tepid, flaccid) are themselves unpleasant.

although aesthetic philosophy usually concerns itself with pleasure gleaned through the “objective” or “intellectual” senses of sight and hearing, “our pleasure responses to taste are themselves highly complex cognitive responses that hold highly complex symbolic recognition” (“Delightful” 218). That symbolic recognition might be social or cultural, like the tacit rules that inform what and how we eat in groups or the increasingly visible calculus of buying food that reflects your political beliefs. It might appear to be purely sensual, as in the case of fine wine or artisanal cheese appreciation, which urges the consumer to tease out complex aesthetic judgments of different tones or notes of taste, but which is itself a practice deeply bound with social and economic distinctions. Counterintuitively, the exaggerated and simple pleasure of junk food, though it often represents a rejection of complex aesthetic experience, is just as much enmeshed in social and cultural meanings that makes the experience of enjoying it a deeply complex one.

### **The Poststructuralist Gourmet**

My literary analyses lean most heavily on two theoretical frames that have sometimes been considered fundamentally antithetical, although I find these divergent approaches constructive when taken together. On the one side there is Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu: the classifiers, the seekers of underlying structure. Edmund Leach wrote that human beings are, by virtue of how our neurological and sensory organs operate, predisposed to comprehend sensory stimuli by segmenting it into recognizable patterns, sequences, or classifications; the object of structuralism, therefore, is to reveal those patterns as they emerge in the cultural products we generate

by similar processes of classification (Leach 15-16). Thus, the tools they put into writing— Lévi-Strauss's culinary triangle, the myths pursued by Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, Bourdieu's four-quadrant taxonomy of food preferences—are extremely useful for breaking down the vast, varied, and mutable landscape of food practices into comprehensible, generalizable patterns.

Offering an alternate point of view are the writings of Immanuel Kant, Aurel Korai, and their modern interpreters (which arguably include Barthes and Bourdieu): theorists of perception and consciousness. Phenomenology is also concerned with how sensory stimuli are understood by human consciousness, but from a first-person perspective: how the mind experiences art, for example, and how the mind experiences itself experiencing art. Phenomenology is a particularly useful branch of philosophy for interpreting aesthetic experiences, and when we discuss food in literature we are discussing aesthetic experience on multiple levels.

When it comes to the subject of food, and particularly representations of food, I find it constructive to use both the tools of empirical categorization and the narratives of subjective experience. Choosing, preferring, and enjoying food are utterly subjective aesthetic experiences; there is no accounting for taste, as the conventional wisdom goes. But that same conventional wisdom tells us that we are what we eat—a dilution of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are"—which may be taken to mean that we are well aware of certain cultural and symbolic structures that shape the choices we make. Besides, although the emergence of structuralism in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was frequently positioned in opposition to phenomenology, there is arguably substantial common ground between the two. Lévi-

Strauss is sometimes criticized for his universalist approach to food, but he was also interested in the life of the mind. Barthes resisted and Bourdieu outright critiqued Kant's transcendental epistemology, but they both use Kantian terms in their respective projects of reconciling structures and systems with variable contexts such as historical era, social position, and gender. Further, as I will highlight whenever I introduce those theories to the text, they all lend themselves to literary approaches. The structuralist concepts I reference lean heavily on the idioms of grammar and metaphor, and what is phenomenology but a narrative of interiority, a plot arc that connects external stimulus and internal response?

What will be consistent throughout this study is the comparison of two or more different values in each chapter: raw compared to cooked and rotten compared to cooked; pleasure compared to disgust; inside and out; self and other. That any of those categories defies rigid categorization is exactly the point: they only have meaning in context, as Mary Douglas might argue. Critical of Lévi-Strauss's search for a "pre-coded, pan-human message" in food (Douglas 37), Douglas argues that if we apply the conceit of grammar to food then each unit—menu, meal, helping, or mouthful (which she calls a "gastronomic morpheme")—must be seen in relation to other units in its given context, like syntax in a sentence. She hypothesizes a codex of gastronomic morphemes and observes that the syntax of a meal requires contrasts, such as hot and cold or bland and spiced, but that the meaning of those contrasts depends on their relation within a larger sequence of menu or occasion. "The rules of the menu are not in themselves more or less trivial than the rules of verse to which a poet submits," she concludes (Douglas 53).

As Douglas proposes, the binaries or dialectics I use to uncover patterns in literary texts will shift and change depending on context: for an early example, in the poems I analyze to discuss the representations of pleasure and disgust (in chapter 2), a somewhat disgusting description of squid in a poem about cooking may also provoke a pleasurable thrill, particularly when the slippery, glistening squid parts merge with an allusion to sexual pleasure. Such a dialectic, slippery as a squid itself, may not reveal a fixed “pan-human” code but is nonetheless useful for exploring the poem’s meaning, as it’s the tension between pleasure and disgust that generates the conflict of the poem and heightens the sensation of reading it.

Further, since binary pairs usually carry with them a sense of conflict or tension, they make useful lenses for exploring the dynamics of power in certain texts. As Dan Jurafsky explains in *The Language of Food*, in binary oppositions such as happy/unhappy, good/bad, or honest/dishonest, one word in the pair tends to bear “a special linguistic status called *unmarked*” which is usually associated with positive or neutral meanings; the “marked” word of the pair tends to have negative connotations, at least in contrast with its unmarked opposite (Jurafsky 105-106). In that example dialectic of pleasure versus disgust, pleasure is obviously the “unmarked” word: it is a positive concept and arguably the default state of the aesthetic experience of eating, where disgust would be both a special case and a negative one. This dynamic will make itself most plain in chapters analyzing texts where there is a clear imbalance of power, such as when gendered and classed connotations of food practices are discussed.

## Chapter Synopsis

This project embraces a wide variety of texts, including both poetry and prose from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These texts are not arranged in order to make a claim about historical progression. Nor are the texts intended to stand as exemplars of a genre of food texts—indeed, aside from a few well-known poems, I have deliberately avoided texts that already have a strong association with food studies, such as recipe poems or essays and memoirs by renowned food writers, in the hope of offering subtler and less niche readings. Rather, the texts included in this study have been selected for semiotically rich scenes of eating which dramatize the particular duality examined in each chapter; the chapters are intended to build in complexity, until the final chapters pick up each theme that is explored in previous chapters.

The first few chapters focus specifically on poetry, which offers the opportunity to explore specific structuralist and phenomenological concepts within the space of a few lines, for closer attention. The first two chapters explore the sensory experience of reading a food poem, from the experience of synesthesia at the word level to short narrative poems describing food visually; in other words, the phenomenology of pleasure in ekphrastic food poems. The next two chapters use similarly short poems to demonstrate how complex social and cultural relationships can be conveyed merely by referencing food; these chapters introduce structuralist frameworks for understanding food itself as kind of language. The fifth chapter considers a longer poem as a kind of *memento mori*, which both tantalizes and rebuffs an appetite for gustatory pleasure—an

ascetic's pleasure in abnegation that haunts modern literature even in texts that celebrate food and enjoyment.

The last four chapters examine fiction and non-fiction prose at lengths which permit so many more layers of conflict and desire in regard to food and pleasure. Chapters 6 and 7 explore novels in which scenes of eating and hungering are deeply entwined with the dualities explored in earlier chapters (including social contracts and asceticism) as well as the performance of gender, which will be the focus of those readings. The last two chapters examine contemporary food writing and recent novels that shed light on the food issues that press us today.

## CHAPTER 2

## FOOD POETRY AND THE SENSES

“The word *plum* is delicious” begins Helen Chasin’s poem:

pout and push, luxury of  
self-love, and savoring murmur  
full in the mouth and falling  
like fruit (Chasin 1-5)

In sensuous language, Chasin describes the literal movement of the mouth around the word *plum*, an enunciation that in some ways mimics the movement of taking a bite: the outward thrust of the mouth, the dart and lick of the tongue; the closing of the lips, as if around a tender morsel. It could also be said that this mouthing imitates the shape of the fruit itself: rounded, contained, substantial enough to be experienced as a weight in the mouth. Chasin’s alliterative linguistic play illustrates the way that this word—a short plosive monosyllable—evokes its own specific associations, particularly the final *mmm* that reproduces a sound of satisfaction. The word *plum* is more than a signifier; it acts as a sort of one-word ekphrasis, simulating tactile and taste senses more viscerally than the mere idea of a plum.

Consider how the word *plum* operates in a more famous poem about the fruit:

“This is Just to Say” by William Carlos Williams.

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which

you were probably  
 saving  
 for breakfast

Forgive me  
 they were delicious  
 so sweet  
 and so cold (“This is Just to Say” 1-12)

In this oft-quoted, oft-parodied short poem, the narrator provides very little description of the plums: they are sweet, cold, and delicious, but that is pretty much the minimum expectation one might have of fruit that has been in cold storage. More linespace is dedicated to the foiled breakfast plans than to the appeal of these plums; whether they are round or oblong, red or yellow is left to the imagination. Yet the plums still seem to project themselves out from the poem. Sarah Garland describes the word “plum” in a similarly multisensory way in her essay “‘A cook book to be read. What about it?’: Alice Toklas, Gertrude Stein and the Language of the Kitchen.” “When William Carlos Williams writes that he has eaten the plums in the icebox in ‘This is Just to Say,’” she writes, “it’s the word ‘plum’ that vibrates on the page” (Garland 48). The word “vibrate”—pleasantly onomatopoeic when spoken aloud—seems to mirror that dynamic of the word “plum,” hinting at a sensory experience beyond reading from a page. Garland suggests in the same essay that food words like “plum” do more than signify; they provoke and allure, and when “dropped into a text,” they command attention because “experience and desire charge those words with a kind of magnetism” (Garland 48). As with the word “vibrate,” the suggestion that words like plum may be “dropped” into a text gives the word a sense of weight and palpability, a three-dimensionality that is

usually considered outside the purview of text—except in the study or practice of ekphrasis.

Ekphrasis is a term typically applied to literary texts which vividly describe visual art, which would normally be experienced spatially and visually. What differentiates ekphrasis from ordinary description is a slightly more tenuous distinction, but literary texts that are widely considered ekphrastic (such as John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”) are those that could be said to narrate the act of looking, showing the reader or listener how to view the object. Or, as Simon Goldhill puts it, ekphrasis “produces a viewing subject”: as readers, we seek out such vivid descriptions so that we might see. Likewise, we write ekphrasis so that we might show: in classical literature, Goldhill writes, the purpose of ekphrasis was deeply linked similar rhetorical strategies that demonstrate mastery over a listener’s perceptions, like the ability to provoke emotion or logically persuade. He quotes Longinus:

What then is the effect of rhetorical visualization? There is much it can do to bring urgency and passion into our words; but it is when it is closely involved with factual arguments that as well as persuading the listener, it enslaves him. (Goldhill 4)

This idea—that vivid rhetoric can *enslave* a listener—suggests that the ability to evoke sensory pleasure (or disgust) through literary description creates a kind of intimacy or shared experience between author and reader: words can breach our inner walls, conjure phantom sensations, feed imagined appetites—but that’s precisely why we might hunger for such textual encounters.

Thus, the concept of ekphrasis provides an opportunity to examine the ways even the mere mention of food can evoke sense and memory, and consequently pleasure (or displeasure). This impression is effected in part by the components of the word itself—the “pout and pull” of speaking or subvocalizing the word *plum*, for example, provokes a kind of synesthesia—but also the tension between concrete, localized sensation and abstract conceptualization.

### **Synesthesia and sensory fantasia**

In addition to the lush, pouty consonants explored in the first few lines of Helen Chasin’s poem, the softly rounded schwa at the center of the word *plum* also contributes to the sensory impression it makes. In *The Language of Food*, Dan Jurafsky explains how vowel sound can influence the connotation and even the denotation of a word: front vowels (made by holding the tongue high up in the mouth, as in the words *cheese* and *mint*) tend to be associated with “small, thin, light things,” while back vowels (made while holding the tongue far back in the mouth, as in *large* and *round*) tend to appear in words that describe “big, fat, heavy things” (Jurafsky 162).<sup>ii</sup> The mid central vowel of *plum* hums somewhere between.

It is notable here that vowel sound is associated with characteristics typically perceived by other senses: size, weight, even texture. Jurafsky chalks this up to a linguistic hypothesis that “we are all a little bit synesthetic” (Jurafsky 168). Synesthesia usually describes a condition of

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<sup>ii</sup> In *The Language of Food*, these vowel distinctions help Jurafsky and his researchers describe patterns in food branding. They learned that snack crackers tend to have brand names with front vowels (Ritz, Triscuit) while ice cream flavors frequently emphasize back vowels (jamocho fudge, rocky road). His hypothesis is that the high, tight front vowels evoke crispiness, while the round, low back vowels suggest softness and creaminess.

experiencing simultaneous sensory impressions in two sensory registers when only one is being stimulated: for example, Nabokov was famously synesthetic and perceived letters of the alphabet as specific colors; the main character of Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth* experiences a taste sensation in her mouth when she hears spoken words. But without minimizing those who experience synesthesia acutely, there are linguistic studies that demonstrate a moderate level of sensory association in everyday speech:

Something about our senses of taste/smell, vision, and hearing are linked at least enough so that what is smooth in one is associated with being smooth in another, so that we feel the similarity between sharpness detected by smell (as in cheddar), sharpness in touch or vision (like acute angles), and sharpness detected by hearing (abrupt changes in sound).

We can see this link between senses even in our daily vocabulary. The words *sharp* and *pungent* both originally meant something tactile and visual: something that feels pointy or subtends a small visual angle, but both words can be applied to tastes and smells as well. (Jurafsky 168)

Interestingly, those examples of *sharp* and *pungent* link up etymologically to the classical concept of ekphrasis: they are words that connote the thrust or invasiveness of a sensory experience, whether aural or olfactory or tactile.

In *The Poetics of Spice*, Timothy Morton applies the concept of ekphrasis to explore the role of spice—the word itself as well as its many definitions—in eighteenth-century literature:

“*Spice* functions as a kind of nasal ekphrasis,” he writes, “and if one considers its brilliant colors and powerful tastes, it engages the eyes and the tongue as well.” In the same way that ekphrastic descriptions mimic the act of looking, he argues that poetry that invokes spice is “language . . . trying to become fragrance and flavor” (Morton 34). Like Goldhill, Morton turns to the values of classical rhetoric to explain what he calls the “phenomenological process” of spice. On the one hand, the word *spice* creates a vivid

impression of color and scent, arguably with the kind of arresting immediacy that Longinus describes (Morton 130). At the same time, as a nonspecific noun *spice* invokes a sort of fantasy of spice: the Imaginary, the signified, the intangible associations of far and foreign places. Together, these impressions create a powerful sign that is simultaneously general and specific, concrete yet elusive. “While spice as ekphrasis roots is an ineffable here-and-now,” he writes, “spice as fantasia carries us away into a dreamlike state of endless figuration” (Morton 130).

Further, if vivid visualization allows an orator mastery over listeners by making them see, consider the rhetorical power of ekphrastic descriptions of foodstuffs that thrust smells and tastes and textures on the reader as well. Sensing food or summoning it to the imagination commands a response so immediate as to seem involuntary; Longinus would certainly see these pungent or appetizing descriptions as rhetorical enslavement, but to be mastered or overwhelmed by sense is not necessarily problematic for the individual.

Returning to the pout and pull of the word *plum*: Morton’s argument about the simultaneous materiality and abstraction of gastronomic ekphrasis make clear how those seemingly contradictory elements play into a reader’s enjoyment of the poem. Chasin models for the reader how to luxuriate in the sign of plum, pairing the word with physical mimicry of eating with a specificity that must surely stimulate appetite—or disgust, perhaps, if you hate plums and cannot abide an allusion to a mouthful of the fruit. Yet this corporeal, concrete invocation of the feel and fullness of a fruit is all the more sensuous for detail it does *not* include: what kind of plum? Is it tart or sweet? What sort of fruit is it that falls? It doesn’t matter that the specific nature of the plum is not minutely

drawn like Achilles' shield: the word *plum* signifies something sufficiently immediate and tangible that the reader's mind fills in the rest.

### **Literary still lifes**

From these classical definitions of an ancient literary technique we move to a more recent period of literary history that similarly valued the visual: Imagism, and the poets who were influenced by the movement, sought to make poetry meaningful and modern by way of crisp, concrete imagery and an economy of words. Conceived in reaction against discursive and decorative styling of nineteenth-century verse, Imagist poets valued the power of a precise and vivid visualization to convey and provoke—arguably an inherently ekphrastic project, as these precise images were intended to thrust themselves forth and into the new century. As Modernist poet Archibald MacLeish has it, “A poem should be palpable and mute/ As a globed fruit”—something that does not so much *say* as *impress*, or make itself felt. (Perhaps, too, a poem should be something that stimulates an appetite for pleasure, as the tantalizing vague image of a full-bodied fruit might.)

But in light of the way that the core concepts of ekphrasis can be applied in equal and perhaps even more interesting degree to the more intimate senses of smell and taste, it's fitting that food objects are a significant preoccupation of the poems of this period, from William Carlos Williams' icebox plums to the hearty dishes of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* to the seasonless variety of fruits across Wallace Stevens' oeuvre.

In *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde*,

Michael Delville locates these food-centric poems within a modernist preoccupation with the emerging artistic styles of their period, such as cubism. Wallace Stevens' "Study of Two Pears" provides a ready example of what Delville terms a "literary still life": divided up into six quatrains, each describing and re-describing the form and color of the two pears, this poem does seem to deliberately enact the Cubist method of examining an object from multiple perspectives, as though the intention is to "produce a viewing subject" (in Goldhill's words) or to make Cubism intelligible. The emphasis on surface and shape also contributes to the sense that this poem is making a visual object of the edible objects, as Delville argues.

Delville's argument about the ekphrasis in "Study of Two Pears" is grounded in the claim that this poem is written about a still life painting, and Stevens's painterly language would seem to bear this out. Stevens' words deliberately call to mind the deliberate fabrication of art: the pears are not merely shaped, they are "composed" and "modeled." For Delville, the painterly language here builds up the materiality of pears-as-aesthetic-object, perhaps in the way layers of paint build up a sense of three-dimensionality. Delville suggests that the components of the composition (perhaps paint, but at the very least color and shape) contribute to the weight of those heavy-bottomed fruits, not unlike the way the morphemes of *plum* contribute to the sense of roundness invoked by the word.

The tension of the poem seems to be between the will of the artist and the will of the aesthetic objects (pears), which resist interpretation. In Delville's words:

Stevens's "Study of Two Pears" insists on the object's resistance to the observer's gaze (the pears "are not seen as the observer wills") and precludes any attempt to read symbolic meanings into the text ("The pears are not viols, / Nudes, or bottles. / They resemble nothing else.") The colors that dominate Stevens's still life ("Yellow", "red", "blue", "citron", "orange", and "green") are abstracted from the fruit and turned into nouns (they are both substantivized and substantiated). (Delville 14)

Delville's argument insists that the poem describes a painting of pears rather than pears itself, although the poem is ambiguous on this point. If the poetic narrator describes the pears as "round" and "not flat surfaces" which "bulge" out into three-dimensional space ("Study" 11, 9, 7), it would seem that he is not making a distinction between a text representation of fruit and a text representation of a painting which persuasively represents fruit. In either case, Stevens is probing the problems of representation:

Opusculum paedagogum.  
The pears are not viols,  
Nudes or bottles.  
They resemble nothing else. ("Study" 1-4)

Of this first stanza, Delville writes: "Steven's 'Study of Two Pears' immediately proceeds to discuss what the pears are *not*, thereby emphasizing the unique, irreducible singularity of the object" (Delville 14). The phrase "irreducible singularity" seems to approach some of the particular appeal fruit has as a poetic or artistic subject: a fruit is self-contained, solid, and immediate. "Irreducible singularity" suggests a self-contained palpability like the bitten-off weight of the word *plum*, falling from the mouth as heavily as a ripened fruit from a branch. The pears curve out into space; they exemplify pear-ness by way of "resembling nothing else."

But Delville puts this irreducible singularity in conversation with Gertrude Stein—a pear is a pear is a pear—while this poem’s very set-up calls the pears’ singularity into question. For one, there are two. For another, the poetic narrator continually tries to deconstruct the pears into shapes and strokes, blobs and daubs. Further, the premise that the pears are so unlike anything but themselves is somewhat undermined by the comparisons; clearly, the pears do remind the poem’s narrator of these other appealingly curved forms. Despite the poem’s insistence on the singularity of these material objects, it also introduces inevitable layers of meaning and figurative language. The solid, palpable shape of the pears is accompanied by the surreal fantasia of imaginative associations, as with the spice described by Morton.

After claiming that the pears resemble nothing else and paradoxically comparing them to manmade objects, the poem concludes:

The shadows of the pears  
 Are blobs on the green cloth.  
 The pears are not seen  
 As the observer wills (“Study” 21-24).

What do we make of this final claim? The poem’s last two lines are usually taken as a comment on the thingness of the things asserting themselves over ideas about the thing—and this is Delville’s reading, too: the pears are seen as the pears will. But this idea is troubled by the associations throughout the poem: the pears remind him of bottles and viols whether he wills it or not, because those associations preexist this poem in visual and verbal culture. This poem seems to be grappling with the central thrust of Imagism, the reach for precision of image in language. It is particularly hard to be precise about the nature of fruit, because they evoke so many other appetizing senses: their

appeal is tactile and fragrant as well as gustatory. In this grapple, the poem dramatizes that contradictory play of presence and abstraction characteristic of ekphrasis. The pears assert themselves as pears and seemingly bulge out of the poem: “the pears are not seen/ as the observer wills” bears some similarity to Longinus’ claim that vivid rhetoric “sets out to make a slave out of you.” Perhaps the pears could be said to be seductive, not just because of their voluptuous forms but because they command attention to their sensory appeal with a kind of immediacy that the poet inevitably slows down by breaking up his description into segments. Further, in part due to the segments and pedantic asides (“Opusculum paedagogum”), the pears can only be perceived within a web of ideas, preferences, and knowledge about pears.

For an additional illustration of fruit both exemplifying and resisting representation in still life, compare these pears and another cluster of pears found in the poem “In the clear season of grapes.” The poem begins with the narrator reflecting on the unnamed sea and mountains that surround “our lands,” which leads him to comprehend the lands on a more human-sized scale:

When I think of our lands I think of the house  
 And the table that holds a platter of pears,  
 Vermilion smeared over green, arranged for show.

But this gross blue under rolling bronzes  
 Belittles those carefully chosen daubs.  
 Flashier fruits! A flip for the sun and moon,

If they mean no more than that. But they do. (“Grapes” 4-10)

In this poem, too, the pears are paintlike “daubs”: like the blobbed shadows of pears, these pears seem to lose their shape in bright colored smear. The palpability that is

evoked by the phrase “a platter of pears” (reinforced, Helen Chasin might claim, by the propulsion of p’s) is itself “smeared” by the lines that abstract shape and color. The ostentatious pears are nearly overwhelmed by the immense blue and bronze of the sea and mountains—perhaps no matter how carefully chosen the daubs are, these pears too won’t be seen as the observer wills. These “flashy fruits” might “mean no more than that”—than the contrast and vividness of their composition, than the irreducible singularity of pears on a plate—“But they do.” Like the pears in “Study,” these pears are palpable yet dynamic, not fixed; they are irreducibly solid bodies, yet may still be reduced to perspectives and daubs just as Chasin picked apart the pleasing sounds of the word “plum,”; and they “mean” more than their singular selves, as do the sea and mountains and surrounding lands. Surely the source of this poem is one of the modernist paintings that fascinated Stevens—the smears and daubs of this composition reminds me of Cezanne’s compositions of apples applied with heavy brushstrokes—but even if the poem is a representation of a representation of the fruit, it evokes the immediacy that is characteristic of ekphrastic food. The word pear makes a sound, a taste, and a memory in the mind of the poet as well as the reader, and in this poet’s mind the fruit is never merely fruit.

### **One-word ekphrasis**

In “The Word Plum” and “Study of Two Pears,” the title fruit is the main focus of the poem; accompanied though they may be by associative meanings and actions, the fruits command attention from first line to last. Fruit—or more specifically, kinds of fruit

such as apples or pears or plums—can evoke ekphrasis in one word alone. Timothy Morton suggested that the power of the word *spice* is that it not only summoned powerful sensory memories but that it symbolized trade, commerce, foreignness, and the exotic—indeed, if spices did not travel from faraway lands to the 18<sup>th</sup> century British poets studied by Morton, the word would have significantly less power. But fruit, even familiar and common types, bear a great deal of imaginative associations and cultural baggage. Some of this is physical: the plums and pears of the poems described in this essay, the apples and peaches of poems that will be described in later chapters, these are all fruits that are particularly palpable in that they are weighty and self-contained: these tree fruits possess an implication of unified, singular sweetness. They also, as I will explore in the next chapter, bear connotations of wholesomeness, naturalness, and simplicity; they grow sweet and edible without much human intervention, and appear to exist tantalizingly aloft from the muddying effects of language and civilization. Thus, the nature of plums and pears as fruit contributes to their rhetorical power as a presence in poetry: if ekphrastic descriptions of made goods produce a viewing subject, then the word plum can produce a sensing subject. The senses associated with food in enjoyment are muddling together: taste, feel, and smell must converge to create an imagined fruit, so perhaps it's not surprising that single words for fruit or spices can unfold that real-yet-surreal experience described above.

Some examples of one-word ekphrasis at work can be found in *The Fatalist* by contemporary poet Lyn Hejinian. Fruit is only one of many symbolic elements of this book-length poem and its appearances are only fleeting, but fruit allusions are woven throughout into anecdotes, philosophical musings, and seemingly surreal juxtapositions.

When fruits appear in this text, they arrive with a presence both concrete and ephemeral, and in this way play a vital, simple role in carrying forward the argument of the long poem.

One section of *The Fatalist* begins with a line that recalls the argument of “The word ‘plum’”: Hejinian writes, “The best words get said frequently—they are like fertile pips” (Hejinian 23). “Pip,” like “plum,” is a satisfyingly self-enclosed word: sharper than “plum”, the word “pip” evokes both the sound and image of an irreducible, solid singularity. But the word “pip” also denotes a seed or nut, something that contains the potential for growth and for spreading—as do “the best words,” presumably. This duality is perpetuated by the lines that immediately follow:

Apples fall heavily to the ground and lie in the sun, their scent  
abandoning them as a philosophy which cannot be further perfected. Love  
releases playful sensations even from serious things providing a life  
to think about. (Hejinian 23)<sup>iii</sup>

The apples most obviously embody the qualities of food words outlined in this chapter: they are both real and surreal, heavy and dropping while bearing an ephemeral and rising fragrance. Certainly they solicit appetite, in the same way that Chasin’s plum did: without knowing much about what the apples are like, we can vividly imagine their sugar-heavy ripeness and fragrance. Love reiterates the contrast, being itself a weighty monosyllable that “releases playful sensations.” Apples, sun, love, and life combine to evoke a sense of warmth and pleasure that is both physical and abstract.

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<sup>iii</sup> This edition is unnumbered; page numbers rather than line numbers are cited for ease of reference.

But this almost literal example of the poetic gravity of fruit is just a step Hejinian takes in unfolding the meaning from that “pip” with which she began the section. The subject of this section—introduced immediately after the lines quoted above—is a woman called “R” who writes “abundant, profligate, indiscrete” letters (Hejinian 24). She releases her writing about her own life into the world the way the apples release their philosophical scents. There is some playful association in this section between the material (apples, serious things, letters) and the ephemeral (scent, perfect philosophies, playfulness, a sense of who R is), and the agent that assists the transition between the two (the sun, love, R herself). This section could be said to play out the drama of transitional states: the familiar, legible images of apples and pips give way to a discussion of language, which in turn gives way to a tumult of less decipherable allusions to objects and authors, for one of whom R “would have released a flock of red canaries” (Hejinian 24). In the beginning of the section, the heavy (and plausibly red) apples are subject to gravity; at the end, the bodies of red birds are given to flight. This transition gives another perspective to Morton’s argument that ekphrasis invokes both sense and fantasia: in this section, the tension vibrates between what falls and what can be released, concrete versus ambient.

Towards the end of this long poem, Hejinian writes: “English nouns name/ products rather than processes, and you should know that/ it won’t save them from transitions” (Hejinian 54). In addition to re-articulating the theme that plays out graphically in the passage cited above, this line elucidates the “problem” posed in this study: saying the word “plum” is itself a transition, a sliding between the sensory response to a representation of fruit and the rich, variable associations that such a fruit

may have for a reader. Or, to borrow Heijinian's language: the word "plum" connotes both a product *and* a process. It signifies a solid, self-contained fruit which summons knowledge, memory, and associations of similar fruits. It is a single word which in its very enunciation teaches the reader or speaker how to experience its sensory qualities. Heijinian's apples are signs that, enmeshed in meanings both internal and external to the poem, instruct the reader how to experience R and her passions.

In many ways, the same could be said of poetry in general. Returning to that Modernist proposal that poetry should be palpable and mute, a poem is sometimes said to be a singular and irreducible form, the simplest and most concise composition necessary to convey a complex and diffuse cloud of meanings. Through soundplay and other sensory characteristics, a carefully constructed poem teaches the reader how to read it—both a product and a process—and aims to enslave the reader, compelling him or her to experience with immediacy what the poet has set down gradually. A poem is irreducible—taking a poem in parts would drastically change what it is—and it is singular, never the same for any two people. At the same time, the meaning of a poem unfolds in layers, and both the limits and extensions of its meanings are affected by context.

### CHAPTER 3:

#### PLEASURE, DISGUST, AND REPRESENTATIONS OF FOOD

“To a Poor Old Woman” by William Carlos Williams depicts a scene of eating from the perspective not of the eater but of an outsider watching her eat. In the vein of what Audrey T. Rodgers called Williams’ “snapshot” poems—short, sketch-like descriptions that capture “a single image of beauty or sordidness or despair or joy” (Rodgers 68)—the poem focuses on an old woman with a bag of plums. As the narrator observes her, he appears to fixate on the pleasure he imagines on her behalf:

##### **To a Poor Old Woman**

munching a plum on  
the street a paper bag  
of them in her hand

They taste good to her  
They taste good  
to her. They taste  
good to her

You can see it by  
the way she gives herself  
to the one half  
sucked out in her hand

Comforted  
a solace of ripe plums  
seeming to fill the air  
They taste good to her (“To a Poor Old Woman” 1-15)

Whether the author is also enjoying this observation—and whether the reader is supposed to—is less clear. On one hand, the old woman’s anticipated pleasure dominates the short poem, particularly where the narrator repeats “they taste good to her” with

different line breaks and emphases, as though rolling the phrase around in his mouth.

There is a decidedly sexual charge in this poem, as the woman sucks half of a plum and “gives herself” to the act of eating it, closely observed by the narrator.<sup>iv</sup> At the same time, the munching and sucking of the plum may be onomatopoeic, implying noisy, messy mastication. In either case, the woman’s private pleasure is quite public, perhaps indecent. So often the women of Williams’ “snapshot” poems are made objects of his visual pleasure, but this woman is no *Woman Walking* or *Young Housewife*; the title positions her as an object of pity rather than desire. Yet the narrator’s gaze seems to linger on her for the length of the poem, focusing on her apparent enjoyment as though either enthralled or repelled by it. As a reader, I feel both: the plum grabs my attention and the the narrator’s insistence that “they taste good to her” nearly persuades me, but I’m left feeling uneasy with the ambivalence, the voyeurism, the artless devourment of plums. To borrow Rodgers’ formulation, I’m not sure whether this snapshot is supposed to reveal beauty or sordidness. How could a poem be both?

In the introduction, I recapped some phenomenological approaches to pleasure and its aesthetic and epistemological significance; this chapter will examine the same approaches toward representations of pleasure. Disgust, in comparison to pleasure, is often considered a more immediate and visceral response; pleasure lends itself to extended philosophical debate, but at first glance disgust appears to be a mere physical response to the proximity of something repugnant. But exploring the phenomenology of disgust can shed light on some perspectives of pleasure that may be dismissed or

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<sup>iv</sup> A ripe opportunity to make the consumption/consummation pun that I will struggle to avoid for the rest of this chapter.

romanticized in philosophy; additionally, the line between pleasure and disgust can soften or blur when we are confronted with disgusting images of food or eating.

### **Disgust and abjection**

There are far fewer treatises on the nature of disgust, a kind of aesthetic judgment even more closely associated with base and bodily matters than the tastes of sense. One of the earliest philosophers of this sensation is Aurel Kolnai; in *On Disgust*, he traces a phenomenology of disgust which focuses on the sensory perceptions of the disgusting, rather than turning to psychoanalysis to interpret aesthetic judgment through the lens of neurosis. Kolnai is interested in classifying a form of disgust which is not rooted in fear or anger: according to him, a disgusting object is something that solicits the subject's attention by way of its repellent qualities (such as putrescence), but does not threaten danger or annihilation. Indeed, Kolnai defines disgusting objects in part by their proximity, as disgust is frequently raised by the prospect of being touched by something repellent, yet it is often necessary to touch such a thing in order to remove it from perception. (Think for example of a slimy mildew that must be scrubbed away, or a dead offering from one's pet that must be discarded.) This is what Kolnai calls an *intentional* feeling: our response to the disgusting is specific rather than generalized, and directed toward the object rather than toward ourselves (Kolnai 39).

Compared to the feelings of pleasure intimated in Kant's theoretization of the agreeable or an oenophile's contemplation of wine, perhaps disgust is a difference of

pitch rather than kind: as with liking, disgust allows the mind to feel itself; as with pleasures of taste or smell, the sensory characteristics of the disgusting absorb one's attention to the point that it may be hard to tell the two apart. In an introductory essay to *On Disgust*, Korsmeyer (with Barry Smith) writes: "the character of intentionality of disgust imparts a complex, Janus-faced feel to the emotion, one that almost savors its object at the same time that it is revolted by it" (Korsmeyer, Smith 9). Savoring disgust (incidentally, the title of a later monograph by Korsmeyer) might be considered another form of aesthetic judgment—which is perhaps strangely pleasurable, as an act of the mind "feeling itself," to borrow Kant's phrase.

One reason that it has historically been easy to dismiss pleasure and disgust as epistemologically interesting sensations is that they are usually so immediate as to feel involuntary—and if a feeling is involuntary or requires no thought, then it might be considered unintellectual and unsophisticated. This is particularly true of disgust, which is often accompanied by visceral sensations of discomfort or repulsion; the seemingly unthinking feeling of nausea is usually considered part and parcel of the experience of being disgusted. Biological theories of disgust usually consider that disgust is a mechanism designed to protect the body from harmful substances, a mere reaction against real or imagined bodily invasion.

Whereas for psychoanalytic theorists, like Julia Kristeva, the immediacy of disgust is deeply rooted in the part of the mind that is unmediated by language and social rules. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes an encounter with milk that has gotten a skin on top. She describes the experience as harmless, even pathetic, but when her lips touch it, her whole body refuses it. "I' want none of that element, sign of [her parents']

desire; ‘I’ do not want to listen, ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it. But since food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me’, who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself.” (Kristeva 3)

This formulation of disgust—or rather, abjection, which is a near cousin but not the same—interprets meaning in the involuntary refusal of the disgusting milk. Within the instantaneous reaction, there is an entire history of relationships and boundaries. Kristeva is clear that experiences like these are not the product of neuroses; abjection is a recurring process through which every subject must go, and the act of refusal carves out a space where ego can emerge.

Spitting out the milk is a vivid illustration of rejection—perhaps a less intentional feeling than Kolnai’s concept of disgust, more focused on the self than the offending skin—but like Kolnai, Kristeva explores ways in which the abject draws the subject’s attention.

“The abject has only one quality of object—that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.” (Kristeva 1-2)

So the abject, too, can cause the subject to not only (violently) feel itself, but to irrevocably examine the other. “Where meaning collapses” sounds like a Lacanian invocation of the Real, but if we (like Kolnai) wish to circumvent psychoanalysis in our interpretation of the experience, we might as well say that the abject draws attention to the place where meaning is yet to be made.

Where Kolnai's disgust might be considered a different pitch of aesthetic pleasure, Kristeva's abject might be considered its opposite—yet the rejection and opposition to the abject bears no small similarity to the ways in which aesthetic pleasure can give way to knowledge and meaning. It's clear that encountering the abject is an experience that fundamentally defines the self— the subject's very boundaries are defined by what it refuses—but the object of refusal must bear many implications on the subject's place and position in the world. I'm reminded of an anecdote recorded by Charles Darwin in *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*:

"In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his fingers some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty." (Darwin)

As immediately and involuntarily as the two men felt disgust, this anecdote makes very plain how much the experience of and response to disgust are built and continually revised by cultural practice. Indeed, as William Ian Miller writes in *The Anatomy of Disgust*: "Disgust for all its visceralness turns out to be one of our more aggressive culture-creating passions" (quoted in *Savoring* 31). A proliferation of rituals and mediating tools (to call back to Lévi-Strauss) cluster around sites of disgust in any given society: the disposal of refuse, the distinction of privacy, the care and maintenance of human bodies alive or dead. Culturally transmitted culinary practices taught the native to be suspicious of soft meat; a history of utensils and etiquette had previously spared Darwin the revulsion of seeing hands touch his food.

## Appealing and disgusting representations

That so much culture emerges from preventing or containing the disgusting should be sufficient motivation to study the way disgusting things are represented in art and narrative: such stories and images are artifacts of sociological interest. But disgusting images and texts are not merely reflections of cultural obsessions but can potentially be objects of disgust themselves. In *Savoring Disgust*, Korsmeyer notes that several philosophers—she cites Kant, Mendelssohn, and Lessing—have made observations along the lines of “feelings of disgust are always real and never imitations” (*Savoring* 46). Neurologically, there is no difference between being disgusted by visual or textual representations or disgusted by disgusting objects or actions: both responses activate the same centers of the brain. Perhaps because disgust is incited by sensory apprehension and is, as Korsmeyer puts it, “vividly focused on the sensory qualities of things one might ingest or touch,” it is difficult to distinguish between the shudder of revulsion directed respectively toward a crawling insect, a realistic depiction of a crawling insect, or something else entirely that is mistaken for a crawling insect. (*Savoring* 17). In this respect, all disgust takes places in the mind, and disgusting art can be as potentially threatening or reifying to the self as the congealed skin on Kristeva’s milk.

When reading about food, the body may respond to sensory descriptions just as it would if the food was actually present, seen, and smelled: the mouth may water and the appetite stir, or perhaps the mouth will exhale forcefully and the muscles will recoil. The lines between bodily and mental experience become blurry, as does the distinction

between physical objects that are experienced spatially and narrative representations that unfold temporally. Yet there is a difference: there's a distance in the perception, we're not actually afraid of the disgusting object getting on us. There is no direct fear of contact or penetration that requires removal, so the perceiver can safely remain and contemplate the disgusting sensory qualities of an object. This distance is arguably what makes it possible to enjoy gory or uncanny scenes in film and literature.

The same would be true of pleasure: one does not read of feasts to sate hunger, and though the body may respond positively to the imagination of appetizing dishes, the mind is free to contemplate the idea of a feast with pleasure. Perhaps not disinterested pleasure but free and meaningful pleasure nonetheless. So I do want to draw a distinction between a thing itself and the representation of a thing, and this will reintroduce Kant to my argument about meaningful aesthetic judgments. Despite the immediacy and involuntariness of the disgust reaction, there is actually a removal of the biases of need that cloud the objectivity of judgment in Kant's theory. The proximity or encounter with disgust takes place in the imagination, so in a manner of speaking, there is a little space between a disgusting story or image and the person who contemplates it. Then, too, pleasure and disgust can become particularly blurry in representation: certainly too much of anything pleasurable can cloy and revolt, and at the same time, there can be a certain satisfaction in savoring a disgusting poem, which exists at a safe distance and does not threaten to ooze or creep onto the reader.

I mentioned above that literary scenes of eating often invoke the enjoyment or distaste for food to illustrate a sense of self-possession—in other words, to command a sense of individuality and selfhood by way of rejection (Kristeva: “I spit *myself* out”) or

gratification (I enjoy feeling myself enjoy this deliciousness). Then, too, pleasure and disgust can speak volumes about our social bonds: the food a character enjoys or rejects may reflect politics, education and class, cultural belonging, and many other personal ties. Pleasure in particular is a powerful connector: consider that moment when a communal, collegial hush descend upon a shared meal, perhaps followed by murmurs and soft laughter; or those moments in an immersive sensory experience like a concert or a party when two people turn to each other and grin wordlessly; or countless moments of sharing pleasure when narrative becomes unnecessary because everyone is on the same page, so to speak. Consider, too, what could be more intimate than the author's power to evoke appealing and satisfying sensory experiences which then summon the reader's appetite or pleasure. Pleasure is necessarily experienced subjectively, personally, singularly—and yet it can give way to rare moments when an individual can just about “look at me from the place from which I see you,” to overturn Lacan's lover's lament.

To briefly return to “To an Old Woman:” the poem depicts the poetic narrator as fascinated with a scene of eating in a way that parallels Kolnai's description of the “intentional” object of disgust, although disgust may be too strong a word for this mild and ultimately sweet poem. If the narrator is disgusted, as his fixation on the scene and inclusion of detail that imply a messy, artless eating behavior, the scene is a transformative and ultimately transcendent one for him. Observing at a distance, the narrator comes to identify with the woman's pleasure: his identification with her enjoyment “they taste good to her” takes up half the poem as he imagines her “solace” filling up the space around them both. If pleasure and disgust are difficult to distinguish in this poem, perhaps it is because they play the same role for the reader as for the

narrator: as the scene of eating plums preoccupies the narrator's senses, as it causes him to identify with and appreciate the enjoyment he can only see from the outside, we too are brought through the motions of contemplating the scene. With the safety of distance from the actual scene, it may be satisfying to contemplate our own aesthetic response to it.

"Squid," by Michael C. Blumenthal, offers a scene that similarly blurs the responses of pleasure and disgust.

So this is love:

How you grimace at the sight  
of these fish; how I pull  
(forefinger, then thumb)  
the fins and tails from the heads,  
slice the tentacles from the accusing eyes.

And then how I pile the silvery ink sacs  
into the sieve like old fillings, heap  
the entrails and eyes on a towel in the corner;  
and how you sauté the onions and garlic,  
how they turn soft and transparent, lovely  
in their own way, and how you turn to me  
and say, simply, isn't this fun, isn't it?

And something tells me this all has to do  
with love, perhaps even more than lust  
or happiness have to do with love:  
How the fins slip easily from the tails  
how I peel the membranes from the fins  
and cones like a man peeling his body  
from a woman after love, how these  
ugly squid diminish in grotesqueness  
and all nausea reduces, finally, to a hunger  
for what is naked and approachable,

tangible and delicious. (Blumenthal 1-25)

These uncooked squid pretty much exemplify what Korsmeyer (drawing on Kolnai) would classify as a disgusting food: they share so few characteristics with humanity as to seem alien; they are slimy, and thus repellent to touch; they are not alive, but are also not very far removed from their living forms, still possessed of squidly fins and ink sacs—unlike calamari, for example, which resembles living squid in neither texture nor appearance (*Savoring* 63). Thus, the poem's lyrical assertion that "this is love" sits at odds with the poetic narrator's vision of viscera and tentacles, despite the susurrus of sibilant consonants that give the poem a whispering, tender tone. Yet the outlandishly gross description starts to transform into something sweeter and more pleasant: the piles of "silvery ink sacs" might be something precious, and the "soft and transparent, lovely" onions set a more palatable tone for the lovers' happy banter. Kolnai writes that disgust is best characterized by a strong desire to remove the disgusting object or at least create some distance between you and it; here, in the unfolding narrative of a poem, graced by a period of reflection, the brutish and unappetizing mess of squid begin to transform in the narrator's eyes (and, perhaps, his stomach). The grisly, physical activity of peeling fins and membranes is likened to the physical, messy experience of sex—and suddenly the squid don't seem quite so alien to the narrator. His disgust fades away, and what remains is a desire ("hunger," a little on the nose) for intimacy and pleasure.

In some ways, this poem dramatizes the process by which aesthetic experience can be epistemological. Through the narrator's very visceral encounter with the slippery, alien squid, he approaches a realization about a far more abstract encounter with love. Indeed, the final stanza stages a sort of meeting of two selves—"naked and

approachable”, echoing the image of sexual engagement. Although disgust may seem to be the opposite of pleasure, in poetry they may become one and the same.

The phenomenology of pleasure and disgust—and the occasional overlap between the two—will remain integral throughout the readings in subsequent chapters, and not only because judgments of taste may reveal meaningful insight into a character or lead the way to his or her development, as they do in the poems above. Beyond that, the relationship between sensation and knowledge will remain an enticing question for the phenomenology of reading about food as much as for eating it—for what is the pleasure of reading if not the enjoyment of imagined sensation? If I find squid disgusting and feel no interest in preparing them in my otherwise adventurous kitchen, what is the source of my pleasure in reading and rereading the messy story of “Squid”? Having established the intentionally but meaningfully subjective nature of enjoying such things as food and texts, the subsequent chapters will examine some of the factors that influence how pleasure in eating (or in reading about eating) is constructed through text. Sense and sensory description, however, are only part of perception and pleasure. The next chapters will explore how the experience of enjoying either real or imagined tastes is as much a function of knowledge, memory, and culture as it is of sense.

## CHAPTER 4:

### PLEASURE AND THE CULINARY TRIANGLE

Campbell McGrath's *Capitalist Poems* explore the landscapes of consumerism, from an innocent game of hide and seek among the burgeoning shelves of a big box store to the finite satisfaction of buying a 7-11 burrito every day after work. Mass-produced, individually packaged, or branded food is occasionally a part of this landscape, but comes to the foreground in "Capitalist Poem #38" (titled "Woe" in my anthology). But in describing the signature sandwiches of multinational chain and household name Subway, the poem calls into question whether these products should even be considered food.

Consider the human capacity for suffering,  
 Our insatiable appetite for woe.  
 I do not say this lightly  
 but the sandwiches at Subway  
 suck. Foaming lettuce,  
 mayo like rancid bear grease,  
 meat the color of a dead dog's tongue.  
 Yet they are consumed  
 by the millions  
 and by the tens of millions.  
 So much for the food. The rest  
 I must pass over in silence. (McGrath 1-12)

Subway's brand identity has always centered on the made-to-order sandwiches using purportedly fresh ingredients. Yet McGrath's doleful meditation describes food that has putrefied past the point of edibility, never mind what the tens of millions might think.

For contrast, consider the poem "Fall" by agricultural poet Wendell Berry, in which the fruit that is eaten may well be too good for consumption:

The wild cherries ripen, black and fat,  
Paradisal fruits that taste of no man's sweat.  
Reach up, pull down the laden branch, and eat;  
When you have learned their bitterness, they taste sweet. (Berry 1-4)

These wild cherries are the fruits of paradise, grown without human interference; indeed, between the absence of human labor and the title of the poem ("Fall") make a plain illusion to the allusion to the fruit of knowledge and consequent exile from Eden in Judeo-Christian mythology. More ambiguous is whether these fruits are even meant for human consumption. The "black and fat" qualities of the cherries suggests that they are ripe and should be sweet, but they are also bitter. Perhaps these wild fruits are an acquired taste, much less sweet than domesticated orchard cherries; perhaps these are fruits created precisely for human sustenance and pleasure and the bitterness refers to the loss of paradise. In either case, part of the appeal of the fruits is their pristine nature, untainted by human touch at least until they are eaten.

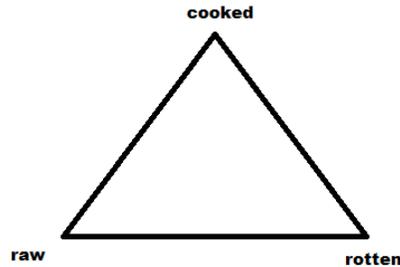
McGrath's decaying sandwich bar and Berry's unspoiled cherries represent two perspectives on how we determine which foods are good to eat. While which foods we *can* eat are obviously determined in part by biology, when we decide what and how to eat—several times a day if we're lucky, a hundred times in a month, thousands in a year—we very rarely take the time to base our decisions on empirical measures of biocompatibility or organic composition. Instead, the determination of what may be considered food and when it may be considered good to eat is largely a cultural distinction. Indeed, often enough "food" and "good to eat" are categories that can only be defined by pointing to what exists outside of them. That is the gist of the culinary triangle, a conceptual tool introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his series *Mythologiques*.

This chapter will use this structuralist approach to food as a way to tease out the way culture may shape individual judgment not only for what is considered food, but for what is considered enjoyable to eat. But structuralist approaches to eating and cooking (such as the triangle, or Mary Douglas’s “grammar” of foods referenced in my introduction) suggest that these distinctions are not only cultural but linguistic, or at least expressed in language—making categories of edibility a potentially rich contrast for poetry to explore. For example, Berry’s cherries may in part engage the reader’s experience of ekphrasis and synaesthesia—amplified by the assonance of “black” and “fat,” which evoke a feeling of fullness in the mouth—but the poem also complicates this pleasure by depicting the fruits as bitter and wild. Meanwhile, “tens of millions” frequent the Subway franchise despite McGrath’s revulsion; the poet positions himself as an outlier to a social agreement on what is good to eat.

### **The Raw and the Cooked**

The first book in the *Mythologiques* series, *The Raw and the Cooked*, claims as its purpose the study of categorical oppositions drawn from everyday encounters—raw and cooked, wet and dry, and so forth—that inform the conceptualization of more abstract concepts in myths and cultural beliefs. By *The Origin of Table Manners*, third of this series, Lévi-Strauss extends the framework to include a third category, along with a number of hash marks between each point on the triangle to denote various forms of cooking practices (such as roasting and boiling) which in turn link to the associated

values or connotations of one of the three points. But at its simplest, the triangle looks like this:



**Figure 1: Claude Lévi-Strauss's culinary triangle**

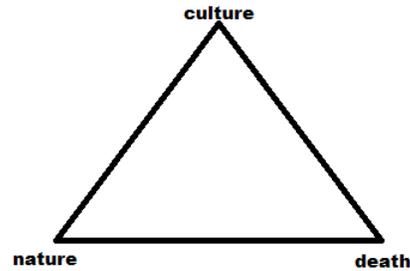
Food may exist as raw material, or it may be cooked for human consumption, or it may become rotten or tainted. Triangulating these food states illustrates a more complex relationship than *food / not food* or *good food / bad food*. If you look at the triangle from the point of view of the raw food (in a manner of speaking), you might perceive the other two points as the outcomes of two different processes: natural processes that decompose the matter versus cultural processes such as tools and culinary customs. Alternately, if you place cooked food at the top of the triangle (as I have it above), you might see the other two points as categories that fall short of the category of edibility by virtue of being underprepared or decayed. Of course, as Lévi-Strauss remarks in his treatise on culinary anthropology, there is no reason any two cultures will come to the same understanding of what constitutes raw, cooked, or rotten (*Table Manners* 478). For a dramatic example, Lévi-Strauss recounts stories of American soldiers landing in Normandy during WW2 who burned down cheese dairies, mistaking the smell of ripe cheese for that of corpses. On the other hand, a culture's conception of edible, appropriate food stuff may shift or

expand over time; as an example of this, Lévi-Strauss claims that Italian restaurants gradually widened French receptivity to eating raw vegetables without an acidic vinegar dressing. Raw salad dressed or undressed is still washed, peeled, sliced, and prepared for human consumption—“cooked,” as far as the triangle is concerned—and placing the French and Italian methods of preparing salads in opposition to truly untouched, unmediated foods permits us to perceive them as different in degree rather than kind. Either kind of salad would occupy a different point on the triangle than roast chicken; though salad and roast chicken are both “cooked” and fit to appear on the dinner table, roasting a bird occupies a fundamentally different place in the cultural imagination than salad—again a difference of degree.

Thus, as with the mythologies he explored in *The Raw and the Cooked*, culinary oppositions—dressed and undressed salad, salad and roast chicken—point to other clustered oppositions in cultural beliefs and practices. “Cooking is a language,” writes Lévi-Strauss, “through which society unconsciously reveals its structure” (*Table Manners* 495). He does not only mean the structure of food distribution and preparation, though this too is valuable data and he does meticulously detail the food habits of the tribes whose mythologies he examines: what counts as a meal versus a snack, what culinary practices are esteemed, and so forth. To look at the theory from another perspective, cooking can reveal a society’s structure *through* language. In fact, Lévi-Strauss frequently refers to linguistics to bolster some of his anthropological observations: for examples, he notes the French idiomatic use of the word *cru* (raw) to indicate bareness: *danser à cru* (to dance barefoot), *monter à cru* (to ride bareback). (*Raw and Cooked* 335). In these idioms, the concept of rawness seems to imply a lack of mediation by cultural

objects—no shoes, no saddle—parallel to the way raw food is unmediated by the cultural processes of cooking. Similar turns of phrase haunt English idiom, as well, such as when we refer to people as “green” or “raw” if they are not yet fully inculcated into the manners of civilization, or “crunchy” (as in granola) if they deliberately refuse certain trappings of society in favor of those closer to nature.

Thus, by exploring the “language” of cooking, we find ourselves squarely in the realm of metaphor, symbolism, and signification—the wheelhouse of literary studies—and the metaphors seem to be dominated by a common theme: the temporal process of transforming foodstuff is compared to the temporal process of aging and maturing. To borrow some examples from *The Raw and the Cooked*: the opposition between raw and cooked foods is used in some cultural rituals to express the opposition between married and unmarried. Lévi-Strauss cites a nineteenth century custom in one French area (St. Omer) to place the unmarried older sister of a new bride on an oven—to warm her up, as it were. Elsewhere in France of that time, unmarried older siblings might be asked to eat a salad of raw vegetables. These customs “all seem to depend, more or less explicitly, on the contrast between the cooked (the oven) and the raw (salad), or between nature and culture, the two contrasts being readily confused in linguistic usage” (*Raw and Cooked* 335). In other words, the culinary triangle might be read as a diagram of tensions between broadly generalized conditions:



**Figure 2: Another way of looking at the culinary triangle**

In the logic of the ritual described above, to be unmarried is to be somehow undercooked, or not adequately brought into culture or society; the rituals enact a figurative transition from raw to cooked, though in slightly different ways. Lévi-Strauss notes that the oven ritual acts as a totemic quickening of the unmarried sister’s cultural assimilation, while the salad symbolizes the “raw” state of pre-marriage; he also speculates that the raw salad is intended to “correct” the older sister’s raw state by moving her “one or two places up the scale,” toward rawness and away from rot, the natural process of decay (*Raw and Cooked* 337).

To look at the second triangle—*nature / culture / death*—from the point of view of culture, everything that falls outside of that category may either be considered too close to nature (raw) or too close to death (rotten), a sliding scale of judgment that plays out whenever we wash raw fruit to make it appropriate for eating or add salt to a dish that is already seasoned, and when we throw out food that has been dropped onto the floor. To prepare or cook food is to make it civilized and suitable for human society, and to discard

what is rotten is to cast away garbage, but what is civilized and what is garbage are designations that can both define and be defined by the taster.

### **Tipping the triangle**

One thing that remains consistent throughout Lévi-Strauss's studies, as well as many of the modern comparisons we can make, is that most languages, cultures, and foodways favor the cooked in both metaphor and practice. Our social agreements generally dictate that food, people, or ideas which are raw are also incomplete, and those things which are rotten must be discarded.

But suppose you consider the social order to be a polluting rather than civilizing force? Around the turn of the millennium, anthropologist Dylan Clark published a study he had made of the foodways and philosophy in a Seattle punk community during the 1990s. For this alternative society, concerned about the environmental and economic effects of industrial food production and branding, most of the food processed and packaged for the grocery store is considered extraordinarily cooked: the long chain of production from monoculture farming to plastic packaging pushed mainstream food into their conceptualization of rotten. Alternative foodways embrace literal raw foods as well as whole and unrefined foods, bulk and minimally packaged foods—any edible substance that hasn't been overprocessed, wrapped in non-biodegradable materials, and hyper-marketed. But Clark observed with interest that although his counterculture community disparaged the costly production and marketing of packaged food, many members of the community would willingly eat the same packaged food salvaged from the dumpsters

where chain stores regularly discard edible unsold food. Such food is not literally rotten, but widely considered taboo—for if the floor is considered a contaminating zone, the dumpster is exponentially more so. Clark suggests that freeganism (as it has been termed by mainstream media) “cleanses” packaged food of its industrially-cooked contamination (Clark 37). In other words, if the enemy of my enemy is my friend, perhaps the refuse of my enemy is my re-use.

For the community of Clark’s study, it’s as though the culinary triangle is flipped upside-down: mainstream culture and cooking at the bottom of the pyramid, and that which mainstream culture considers rotten or raw at the top. Meanwhile, that which is extraordinarily mediated by mainstream culture—food that is extremely processed or heavily branded—takes the place of the abject in punk hierarchy. As Clark puts it, “Punks perceive in everyday American food an abject modernity, a synthetic destroyer of locality and diversity” (Clark 25). Here, as elsewhere, abject food and culture manifests as the threat of consumption, as though the wrong goods will consume us, rather than the other way around.

Of course, this angle will sound more familiar—an example of the way counterculture politics and practices eventually trickle into the mainstream. Broadly, our national definition of “cooked” is shifting as we learn to value raw ingredients over processed food, chunky over smooth, honey over sugar. Wild or young plants—dandelion greens, ramps, green garlic—are now prized for the very qualities that may once have disqualified them from the category of food. The words *whole*, *fresh*, *organic* act as a signal for those who value fewer steps between raw and cooked food—increasingly more of us. This slight tip to the triangle—valuing raw-er foods with less human intervention—

seems like a reasonable reaction to a culture in which so much food is cooked and packed in factories.

But because these categories of food are constructed by words, associations, and oppositions, it's easy for food marketers to misleadingly align an image of their product with our expectations of rawness, naturalness, or healthiness. Hence the concept of "health halo": yogurt, for example, is almost universally accepted to be a more natural, wholesome alternative to ice cream, even though some yogurts are just as loaded with processed, denaturalized sugars. Juicing tends to push our buttons for "pure" food although the processing strips out many of the vital plant nutrients. Even the much-debunked Paleo diet depends on an opposition between the raw and the cooked—obviously dieters are not meant to eat raw proteins, but the appeal of the system lies in the imagined foodscape of a simpler, more "natural" time. Food marketing, indeed, is a rich landscape of metaphor, allusion, and other manipulations of our culinary/cultural oppositions.

Broadly speaking, the language of reading and thinking tends to reflect the abovementioned cultural bias toward the cooked. We stew and simmer on ideas, lest they come out half-baked. Language reveals the importance of the process of transformation, the human acts of mediation. In short forms like poetry, there is a great temptation to parallel the temporal process of reading with that of cooking: in the half-dozen anthologies of food poetry on my shelf, there are at least a hundred separate poems by diverse poets that describe mothers baking bread, grandmothers making stew, lovers learning new dishes together. The process of cooking embedded in the verse mirrors the process of reading: at the end, something is mediated and transformed.

But poetry is culture's critic as much as its scribe and patriot, so it follows that there are also numerous poems that sing of the raw and rotten. Particularly the raw: in the introduction to his anthology *The Hungry Ear*, Kevin Young notes that within his selection "the poems often focus on what we might call 'source foods,' foods in their natural, whole, and ingredient states." He adds cryptically, "We too seek the source." (Young 6). This vision of the poet as a source-seeker rests on the idea that poetry is a formation of language that strips away polluting words and approaches a purer, truer meaning—perhaps the same idea that motivated Romantic poets' pastoral visions or Imagist yearning for precise description.

If your search for a source implies an unpolluted and less mediated meaning, an escape from modern culture, you'll find no greater champion than environmental activist and agricultural poet Wendell Berry, whose poems linger on the sensory experiences of seasons and pastoral landscapes in which humankind plays a minor role, if any. To return to the poem quoted above, "Fall," it's clear that between the raw and the cooked, this poem values the raw more highly. The bittersweet cherries are perfect as they are; they require no human endeavor to be made ready to eat, and indeed human labor—or "man's sweat"—would be a potentially disgusting and corrupting influence on the unmediated, natural, raw perfection of this fruit.

The consumer wastescape of Campbell McGrath's poetry made a curious foil for Berry's pastoral fantasies of unspoiled fruit. McGrath's series of Capitalist Poems create snapshots of finding pleasure in spite of, not because of, the embarrassment of modern riches: for example, a game of hide and seek with a child in a big box store, or soothingly unstimulating purchases of 7-11 snacks after tiring days, every day. The pleasure of

“Woe” is in the playful parody of its form, which riffs on the solemnity of biblical sermons. In the same way that a hint of vulgarity (the taste of sweat) emphasized the holy wholeness of Berry’s wild cherries, the liturgical frame of this poem emphasizes the vulgarity of its contents. This is food that has been spoiled by the insensate hand of corporate franchising: it is *extraordinarily* cooked, as Clark might say, and veering toward rotten. The lettuce, mayo, and meat build up the case against Subway through increasing syllables and increasingly direct allusions to expiration. These sandwiches are clearly not considered food by the narrator, but if ten million customers are wrong. . . . then by triangle logic, these tens of millions must not be suitable for human society either. Thus the rotten food, fit only to be discarded, becomes a stand-in for the people who eat it. In this poem, the abjection of enjoying rotten food stands in for other tastes so far outside the bounds of human decency that they “must be passed over in silence”—the solemn silence of prayer, of course, but it’s also telling that the refusal of chain food corresponds to a rejection of a larger community or social bond. It may need to be said that while I relish the irony and hyperbole of “Woe,” I reject its premise that partaking and even enjoying fast food is evidence of some sort of social decay; indeed, in Chapter 9 I will make a case for the aesthetic merits of eating Doritos. But “Woe” offers a wonderful poetic example of the tensions at play in the culinary triangle: its argument rests on questioning shared social beliefs about what counts as good to eat.

As a tool of cultural comparison, the triangle simultaneously reveals cultural oppositions of values or beliefs and how those oppositions and values may be embodied in cooking and eating practices. Of the tools that follow, it is perhaps the most simple: the comparisons of natural foods to civilized foods to rotten foods, which *Mythologiques*

gradually complicated with varieties of cooking and allusions to classical elements, will be complicated in this dissertation by the introduction of aesthetic philosophy, class sociology, and literary devices. The triangle's question of what kinds of food are fit to be eat will merge into questions of what foods are fit to enjoy, desire, or elevate in stature—and what implication these distinctions bear on eaters and readers.

**CHAPTER 5:**  
**TASTE AS CULTURE IN TEXT**

In Chapter 2, I explored some of the ways that single words for simple food substances can evoke an immediate sensory response even as they allude to a less immediate, more evasive cloud of meanings. When the word in question refers to fruit, the involuntary association can be very simple: pleasure or disgust, appreciation of the natural or revulsion at the rotten.

But food words like “bread,” “coffee,” or “wine”—for just a few examples—often evoke immediate impressions of social behaviors along with their sensory characteristics and accompanying pleasure or distaste. As Lévi-Strauss would have it, these foods are products of culture; they exemplify cooked-ness, the processes of human mediation on natural foods to make them good to eat. The preparation and consumption of these products may differ widely from culture to culture, yet at the same time, they are archetypal enough that they can powerfully convey sensory experience in a manner not unlike the ekphrastic effect of fruit.

“The Good Life,” by Tracy K. Smith, makes effective use of those connotations in a short space. In an interview with *Ploughshares* writer Michael Klein, who observed that “The Good Life” appeared “pared down” in comparison to the sweeping, sometimes otherworldly poems of her collection *Life on Mars* (2011), Smith responded that the “concrete particulars” of any poem save it from feeling too abstract: “My belief is that they create the sense of a real space or a real encounter to be entered into and felt” (Klein). In this poem, five concrete particulars—milk, coffee and bread, chicken and

wine—carry much of the force of this poem’s argument; in particular, lines 5 and 10 use food to draw a pointed comparison between sustenance and satisfaction.

When some people talk about money  
 They speak as if it were a mysterious lover  
 Who went out to buy milk and never  
 Came back, and it makes me nostalgic  
 For the years I lived on coffee and bread,  
 Hungry all the time, walking to work on payday  
 Like a woman journeying for water  
 From a village without a well, then living  
 One or two nights like everyone else  
 On roast chicken and red wine. (Smith 1-10).

Perhaps the mouth waters at the allusions to coffee and bread, foods that likely invoke a warming and sustaining staple for most readers, but the positive presence of those foods is contrasted with painful absences: the lost lover and failed milk excursion, the constant hunger, the image of journeying a great distance for something as essential but insubstantial as water. Coffee and bread are contrasted again with the foods available after payday: *roast* chicken, *red* wine, food words that summon sensations of richness, satiety, and pleasure. But this is a poem about more than just the satisfaction of appetite: “like everyone else” suggests a yearning for a kind of social bond that can only be accessed through a convivial meal. Perhaps not everyone else has access to flavorful, satisfying foods like roast chicken and red wine, but the narrator feels left out of a certain cultural belonging when she does not have them either.

The previous chapter argued that enjoying food—or finding it disgusting, for that matter—is in part determined by cultural expectations of what constitutes good food. But as the example of the counterculture triangle demonstrated, *culture* is a broad category striated by divisions, and food very often plays the role of a sign of cultural difference or

otherness. Thus, desire for and enjoyment of certain kinds of food may not only be defined by what is good to eat, but what represents a good life to have or a good way to be.

This chapter will explore the ways that food in literature may allude to complex social relationships and how appetite may serve as a stand-in for social desire and ambitions. To interpret the poems cited here, I will draw on Roland Barthes' semiotics, wherein he examines substances such as wine and milk in light of nationalist or capitalist norms, and on Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of taste, which embeds the seemingly involuntary responses of enjoying or disliking food within a matrix of economic and social mobility. My literary analyses will focus on class stratification and mobility, although these systems of difference—haves and have-nots—provide a framework on which one may also understand different matrices of social difference or power, such as gender or race.

### **Wine and bread**

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes examines the many layers of meaning in red wine in the context of his native France. Building on Gaston Bachelard's association of wine with fire, Barthes notes that red wine bears connotations of warmth and of blood: it is thought to give heat and strength. Like fire, red wine transforms what it touches. Barthes writes: "it is a converting substance, capable of reversing situations and states, and of extracting from objects their opposites—for instance, making a weak man strong or a silent one talkative" (*Mythologies* 58). In addition to the poetics of fire and transmutation,

Barthes is interested in the role wine plays as a kind of social glue. Drinking wine socially is a ritual not confined to one time of day, season, or sequence in a meal; it is pervasive in French culture, and opting out of the ritual may raise questions or seem rude.

A few years after *Mythologies* were collected and published, Barthes returned to the semiotics of food substances in an essay titled “Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption.” This essay considers several foods that, like red wine, seem to bear connotations drawn from both physical characteristics as well as its place in systems of production and social stratification: sugar is one example, which he perceives as meaningful to Americans similar to the way wine in France structures certain rituals of communal leisure. He also considers the way preferences in taste and texture seem to be structured by class, suggesting that smooth and sweet qualities are favored by lower income populations while coarse textures and bitter flavors are preferred by the well-off. Bread is one example: between highly processed white bread and rustic brown bread, the latter is less refined in texture but a preference for it is thought to be the more refined judgment. He ruminates:

In this manner, one could, proceeding step by step, make a compendium of the differences in signification regulating the system of our food. In other words, it would be a matter of separating the significant from the insignificant and then of reconstructing the differential system of signification by constructing, if I may be permitted to use such a metaphor, a veritable grammar of foods. (“Psychosociology” 22)

Within the next twenty years, a “grammar” of foods is more or less what Pierre Bourdieu accomplished as part of his larger project of revealing how class is encoded in patterns of consumption. Through extensive surveys, Bourdieu sought to “determine how

the cultivated disposition and cultural competence that are revealed in the nature of the cultural goods consumed, and in the way they are consumed, vary according to the category of agents and the area to which they applied”—in other words, how education as well as financial resources affected the ways individuals purchased or interpreted cultural artifacts from painting and music to personal expenses such as groceries, clothing, and cosmetics. (Bourdieu 13). He states that to make a purchase is inherently an act of “decoding” or “deciphering” the cultural meanings of goods and services—for example, to choose coarse brown bread over processed white bread because you are aware of the refined associations of the former—and in turn, such purchases are performances which broadcast and reinforce that same code. His voluminous book *Distinction* includes an extensive examination of the physical and social connotations of food objects; like Barthes’ proposed gastronomical grammar, Bourdieu’s “food space” charts food preferences along two axes of signification.

### **The Sense of Taste Revisited**

*Distinction* is explicitly critical of the Kantian aesthetics described in Chapters 1 and 3. Bourdieu’s critique is twofold. For one, he argues, Kant’s aesthetic judgment displaces the role of pleasure in consumption: “Kant strove to distinguish that which pleases from that which gratifies and, more generally, to distinguish disinterestedness, the sole guarantor of the specifically aesthetic quality of contemplation, from the interest of reason which defines the Good” (Bourdieu 5). Secondly and relatedly, this kind of aesthetic appreciation is a learned mode of judgment; if we are not explicitly taught to

regard subjective like and dislike as something which clouds the purer experience of disinterested pleasure, then we would not consider it less valuable to gratify need and desire by pursuit of the agreeable, useful, and good. This difference between popular taste and elite taste is never more clear than in works of art, literature, and music: “Working-class people expect every image to explicitly perform a function, if only that of a sign,” Bourdieu argues, “and their judgments make reference, often explicitly, to the norms of morality or agreeableness.”(Bourdieu 5). Thus, the Kantian pursuit of unbiased contemplation of the beautiful necessarily contributes to class stratification. The purpose of Bourdieu’s research is in part to decode the ways education and wealth inform aesthetic judgment; he demonstrates how our patterns of consumption depend not only on economic capital—the money you have or don’t have—but on social capital, which depends on the labor you do or don’t do and the things you know or don’t know.

But food, according Bourdieu, dramatizes class distinction in a rather different way. “The art of eating and drinking remains one of the few areas in which the working classes explicitly challenge the legitimate art of living,” he writes.

In the face of the new ethic of sobriety for the sake of slimness, which is most recognized at the highest levels of the social hierarchy, peasants and especially industrial workers maintain an ethic of convivial indulgence. A bon vivant is not just someone who enjoys eating and drinking; he is someone capable of entering into the generous and familiar—that is, both simple and free—relationship that is encouraged and symbolized by eating and drinking together, in a conviviality which sweeps away restraints and reticence. (Bourdieu 179)

In other words: although consumers may try to broadcast a sense of taste that belongs to a more economically or culturally privileged class through fashion, décor, or artistic preference, Bourdieu believes that food preferences follow a different logic;

though restrained and refined eating carries prestige and “legitimacy,” social and casual eating is its own reward. There is something to be said for this theory; even decades after *Distinction*, the class chasm between plenitude (super sizing, buffets, large portions) and restraint (dieting, small plates, small portions) remains a strong current in contemporary food discourse, and certainly the most elite dining experiences still emphasize the formal (elaborate presentation or etiquette) over the informal, and the compartmentalized (private tables, quiet rooms) over the communal. Of course, there are other social pressures at play in these choices, and several of the texts I’ll examine in later chapters resist this generalization.

Ultimately, Bourdieu builds on Kant’s wariness of tastes of sense in order to make a larger argument about what taste is and how it is cultivated:

Taste is an acquired disposition to ‘differentiate’ and ‘appreciate,’ as Kant says—in other words, to establish and mark differences by a process of distinction which is not (or not necessarily) a distinct knowledge . . . since it ensures recognition (in the ordinary sense) of the object without implying knowledge of the distinctive features which define it. The schemes of the habitus, the primary forms of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will. (Bourdieu 466)

In other words, the knowledge we apply toward buying decisions is, like our pleasure and disgust, so immediate as to seem involuntary, and so encoded as to seem beneath language. But of course our judgments of taste *are* embedded in language, and not merely in the discourse we use to decode our consumer choices and broadcast them. The ways language influences our perception of class and taste may be seen in the graph of what Bourdieu calls “food space.”

## Food Space

Drawing from the empirical data of his survey respondents' food expenditures as well as the explicit and inferred connotations of their purchases, Bourdieu conceptualizes alimentary taste on a graph with four quadrants, with economic capital along one axis and social capital along the other. Like Levi-Strauss's culinary triangle, the practical distinctions of more versus less are overlaid with additional distinctions, both of a material character (fatty versus lean, coarse versus refined) and of a more allusive character (heavy versus light, rich versus delicate).

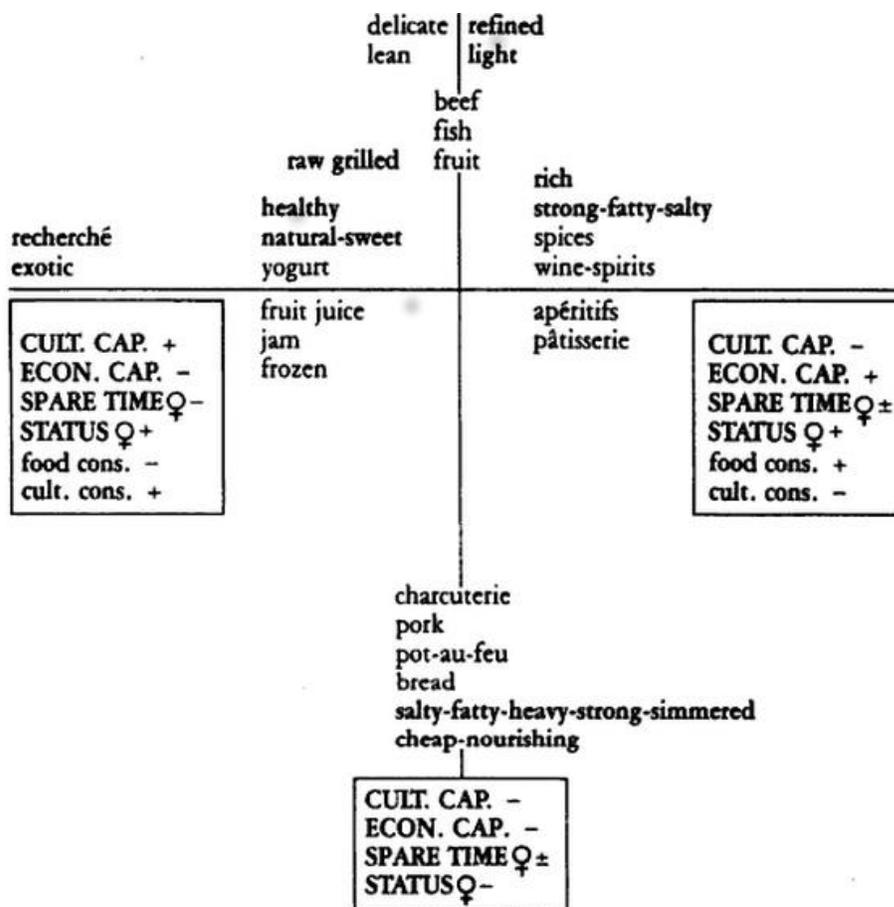


Figure 3: "Food space." Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. 186.

When he plotted the purchasing decisions of different socioeconomic classes along this graph, he found that increased economic capital tended to indicate quantitative differences (more food, better quality, more expensive ingredients) but that increased social capital prefigures a difference in *kind*, with those on the higher end preferring refined and delicate foods to the richer, rib-sticking foods of the working classes. To illustrate, he contrasts the buying habits of teachers with industrial or commercial employers. Teachers may be rich in social capital—indeed, their profession is the transmission of culture and critical judgment—but tend to be low in economic capital. The amount of money they spend on food and the quantity they purchase resemble the grocery habits of office workers—clerks, etc.—but the products they buy include more dairy and sugar than their income-level counterparts, with less spent on meat and fresh produce. Teachers are more likely than other professions to enjoy exotic cuisines, and when they cook at home, they favor time- and labor-saving culinary practices. Thus, their diets tends toward grilled meats and fish rather than stews or chops, yogurts and other milk products, and frozen foods. (Bourdieu 187). On the other hand, foremen who employ or manage manual laborers tend to enjoy the popular dishes as their employees: their tastes run to salty and rich foods, dishes that require a greater investment of time and labor, and carbohydrate-rich cereal goods—but as employers with a higher level of income than employees (or teachers), their groceries tend to be richer (in both cost and calories) and heavier than those with lower economic capital.

Thus, taste is defined by the bodily requirements of class: to a certain degree, “light” and “heavy” denote the caloric and fortifying capacity of foods, and certainly the

nutritional needs of a manual laborer differ from that of what Bourdieu calls the “professional” class. But of course, “light” and “heavy” also connote certain properties that may be valued by different classes for different reasons. If classes with cultural capital favor “light” and “delicate” foods, Bourdieu writes, it may be partially ascribed to an association between low-calorie foods and healthfulness, or a middle-class concern with maintaining a slender body. He also traces some of the ways certain foods become gendered: men of the laboring class reported a dislike for fish and similar foods that require delicate or picky handling—nibbling, perhaps, or delicate cutting and peeling. These movements are feminine, according to survey participants of over a century ago (although similar cultural connotations linger today, and will be explored further in later chapters). Thus is “culture turned into nature”—these tastes and distinctions help shape the class body (Bourdieu 190).

Viewing food objects and practices through Bourdieu’s food space allows for a practically literary analysis of food itself, particularly when food values change over time. Consider white bread, which made nutrition available and consistent to lower-income consumers in the mid-century. With its grains “refined” to whiteness and “enriched” with nutrients, the marketing of white bread leaned very heavily on class connotations. But of course, even decades ago when Barthes mulled over his “psychosociology” of food, white bread was considered less fine and less desirable than brown. As shown in the previous chapter, sometimes the coarse or natural can swing around and become more highly valued, due in no small part to the cultural associations of education. To prefer the ancient grains, the artisanal, and the rustic is to display fluency in the current gastronomical and nutritional discourses which value those

characteristics (particularly when that discourse employs euphemisms such as “rustic” in place of “coarse”).

### **Literary Food Space**

Let us return to Barthes, pondering his “psychosociology” of food.

Why not speak, if the facts are sufficiently numerous and sufficiently clear, of a certain “spirit” of food, if I may be permitted to use this romantic term? By this I mean that coherent set of food traits and habits can constitute a complex but homogenous dominant feature useful for defining a general system of tastes and habits. This “spirit” brings together different units (such as flavor or substance), forming a composite unit with a single signification.” (“Psychosociology” 23)

Suppose his semiotics of red wine constitutes one such “spirit”—the warming, the transforming, the convivial character of wine. “Wine,” “bread,” and a few such other foodstuffs can perform the same kind of invocation as the fruit in Imagist poems explored earlier, but the means by which they convey these meanings depends not only on the sensory memories and pleasures associated with consuming bread and wine, but the social connotations of weight and value—whether they are generally held to be fine or coarse goods, light or heavy, lean or rich.

To return briefly to “The Good Life” and the comparison it draws between living on coffee and bread and living like “everyone else”: in consideration of the cultural and economic capital of the foods which carry the poem, the poetic narrator’s hunger becomes much more clearly a taste for luxury. Placed on Bourdieu’s quadrants, roast chicken would fall on the end of heavy, fatty, salty, and *strong* foods: combined with red

wine, it simulates a nourishing feast of plenty in just a few words. Additionally, whatever complex connotations red wine has for a Frenchman, it is often associated with elevated status in American culture. In other words, the red wine bears all the connotations of warmth and repletion that make the poem satisfying at the end, but in contrast to the lightness and simplicity of the narrator's coffee-and-bread days, red wine also suggests a life of refinement and luxury which the narrator felt excluded.

“Sunday Greens” by Rita Dove does not rely so heavily on the ekphrastic impact of food words, although the foodstuffs mentioned within play a critical role in shaping the world of the poem. Food here is an active subject, not the weight objects of “The Good Life” narrator's seeking; accompanied by verbs, the food words in “Sunday Greens” make the narrator's hunger seem to vibrate with activity.

She wants to hear  
 wine pouring.  
 She wants to taste  
 change. She wants  
 pride to roar through  
 the kitchen till it shines  
 like straw, she wants  
 lean to replace  
 tradition. Ham knocks  
 in the pot, nothing  
 but bones, each  
 with its bracelet  
 of flesh.

The house stinks  
 like a zoo in summer,  
 while upstairs  
 her man sleeps on.  
 Robe slung over  
 her arm and  
 the cradled hymnal,

she pauses, remembers

her mother in a slip  
 lost in blues,  
 and those collards,  
 wild-eared,  
 singing. (Dove 26)

The “she” of this poem—Beulah, of Dove’s collection *Thomas & Beulah*—is cooking a meal that would fall in the lower left quadrant of food space: ham trimmings and inexpensive greens are often cooked together into a salty, strongly flavored dish, neither refined nor plentiful enough to connote capital. The ham bones knocking and the “nothing”-ness in the pot suggest that there may be little money to buy food, but Beulah is not merely hungry but yearns in the trappings of refined taste. She wants to “hear/ wine pouring”—the attention to sound and tone persists throughout the poem, and the wine is an aspirational drink as it was in “The Good Life.” Beulah wants “lean to replace/ tradition,” as though giving voice to the contradictions of Bourdieu’s food space, where lightweight or low-calorie foods are associated with higher cultural capital. She wants things in her kitchen to shine (perhaps even the ham bones, with their ironic “bracelets” of flesh”) and to be refined. Her longing for different tastes in the mouth and different sounds in the ear represent a desire for more than aesthetic pleasure, if she yearns to “taste/ change,” the implication is that she wants access to the ornaments and consumables that greater capital would allow.

Economic and cultural capital form only one axis of distinction in “Sunday Greens.” The collection *Thomas and Beulah* is a semi-biographical, semi-chronological account of the lives of an African American couple in the early twentieth century; the poetic telling of the events of their lives are entwined with historic events such as war,

the Great Depression, and midcentury racial oppression. Beulah's kitchen cravings are likewise entwined with her family's economic hardship, her lack of mobility relative to her husband Thomas, and the limited scope that domestic labor provides for her aesthetic taste and imagination. These tensions are palpable in "Sunday Greens" and arguably legible even without the larger context of the collection's narrative; ham and collards are strongly identified with African American culinary tradition, and the kitchen is a source of both pride and dissatisfaction for Beulah as she cooks while "her man sleeps on," dramatizing a gendered division of labor.

Perhaps it is the overlapping layers of tradition and yearning that give Beulah pause in the last stanza. She has a memory of her mother, also dishabille in the kitchen, and "lost in blues" that are echoed by the collards. Indeed, the collards harmonize with the poem's aural theme in two ways—they play the role of both ears and voices—and if anything perform a sort of crescendo, "wild" and "lost" in comparison to Beulah's quiet kitchen yearning. Whether this image is comforting to Beulah or disturbing is not clear: on one hand, a mother cutting collards might be precisely the kind of tradition Beulah wants to replace; on the other, the wild music of this memory makes a passionate contrast to Beulah's respectable robe and hymnal, perhaps representing a kind of beauty and pleasure that is within Beulah's reach even if the pouring wine is not.

In these two poems, hunger is complicated by the social meanings that accompany specific food objects and food practice—even in a time of privation. The pleasure the poetic narrators take in imagining food is meaningful both in constructing an aspirational sense of self—a future or idealized self who consumes wine and all the social pleasures that accompany it—and, particular for Beulah, in expressing her own tastes and

aesthetic judgment. In a short space, relying on the sensory impact as well as cultural associations of a few food objects, these poems dramatize the overlapping social pressures that complicate pleasure and appetite.

**CHAPTER 6:**  
**THE PLEASURES OF ASCETICISM**

“Sunday Morning” by Wallace Stevens begins with a woman’s consciousness on the verge of sleep and waking, the dreams of sacred abnegation in conflict with living, waking sensory pleasures.

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late  
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,  
And the green freedom of a cockatoo  
Upon a rug, mingle to dissipate  
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice. (“Sunday” 1-5)<sup>v</sup>

The tastes and bright colors of the morning challenge the seriousness of “sacrifice,” but they do not entirely successfully “dissipate” the latter images, since those re-emerge in the next set of lines:

She dreams a little, and she feels the dark  
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,  
As a calm darkens among water-lights.  
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings  
Seem things in some procession of the dead... (“Sunday” 6-10)

This scene of hovering between wakeful enjoyment and dreams of darkness provides a vivid illustration of theme of this chapter: the abstention from pleasure. On one side, there are physical comfort, visual beauty, the pungent scents and flavors we are accustomed to associate with waking up and breaking fast. On the other side, there are the noble immateriality of silence and sacrifice, the surrender to sleep. These contrasting

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<sup>v</sup> For this chapter I use the version of “Sunday Morning” that appears in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, not the heavily edited version that appeared in *Poetry* magazine in 1915.

images mingle in these first few lines, asserting their dual presence in the poem, which will unfold into a dialogue as the poem presents arguments in favor of each form of worship on a Sunday morning.

The first few chapters of this dissertation emphasize how the pleasures of eating provide an opportunity to assert the self: the phenomenology of pleasure emphasizes the experience of exercising aesthetic judgment, and the semiotics of appetite and eating position one within a matrix of social ties. But representations of food also have the potential to tease the reader's sense of transience, mortality, or insignificance as well as appetite. As I touched upon in the introduction, food studies emerged as a comparatively recent discipline since scholarship was once heavily dominated by thinkers who rejected the significance of the bodily senses and appetites, in part because of their transience. In other words, the absence or refusal of pleasure is as much written into literary and philosophical history as appetite and desire are.

"Sunday Morning" explores the tensions between the drives to enjoy the sensory pleasures of the present and to deny those appetites in favor of more abstract and ethereal concerns. In some respects, the poem dramatizes the classical mind/body dualism explored by Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight*: bodily pleasures such as fruit and visual beauty are pitted against seemingly incorporeal concepts of time and sacrifice in a bid for the woman's attention on the morning of the Sabbath. As the dialogue plays out, however, it becomes clear that the experience of sensory pleasure is inseparable from abstract allusions to death or decay; at the same time, self-denial or asceticism may itself give a kind of pleasure.

### The argument of “Sunday Morning”

Arranged in stanzas of fifteen lines, this poem takes the form of an almost Socratic dialogue, with the problem posed in the first stanza (the conflicting urges to honor religion or yield to sensory pleasure), and each subsequent stanza taking first one side, then the other. After the first stanza establishes the tension of the poem, the second stanza opens with the female character’s challenge to the vision of self-denial and religious afterlife that encroached on her Sunday morning comforts:

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?  
 What is divinity if it can come  
 Only in silent shadows and in dreams?  
 Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,  
 In pungent fruit and bright, green wings or else  
 In any balm or beauty of the earth,  
 Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven? (“Sunday” 16-22)

The pungent fruit and bright wings that initiated this poem return here, like an anchor: they are vivid articles of evidence in favor of the comforts which the female character ranks at least as high as the incorporeal threat of shadows and dreams.

But the third stanza introduces a counterpoint. Jove appears, seeming to personify those attributes of ascetic spirituality hinted at in the first stanza’s “holy hush” and dreamlike vision: muted speech (a “muttering king” alongside the silent shadows of the previous stanza); cloudiness, indistinctness; a pronounced separation from any “sweet land” such as what might give rise to her coffee and oranges (“Sunday” 31-34). This muttering king satiates his desire not with pungent fruits but with “our blood,” calling back the ancient sacrifice of the first stanza. The poetic narrator of this stanza counters

the peignored woman's commitment to earthly comfort: "And shall the earth/ seem all of paradise that we shall know?"—a reversal of her plaintive resistance to the necessity of giving up her earthly bounty ("Sunday" 40-41).

These two perspectives form the sides of the poem's argument: these are commonly taken to be the vaguely pagan celebration of the earthly, sensual, and pleasurable versus the vaguely Judeo-Christian elevation of the celestial, eternal, and terrifyingly sublime. Historically, many critics have argued that the latter argument fails here, defeated by the allure of earthly enjoyment, or a sort of liturgy of beauty in accordance with the philosophy of George Santayana, a friend and inspiration to Stevens (Smith, Feshbach). I am not convinced that the argument could be said to have been won by either side, however, as the pleasures of asceticism have a powerful draw in this poem. There is an austere beauty in the images Stevens invokes to paint the opposite of the sunny Sunday oranges: calm water-lights, sibilant silent shadows, the sighing holy hush. Similarly, the description of the muttering king reminds me of the pleasurable pronunciation of "The Word Plum": the alliteration of his "mythy mind," "moving," and "magnificent" suggest a satisfaction in contemplating this Jovian figure's unearthly majesty, and indeed the poetic narrator's next lines of reasoning suggest the superior pleasures of imagining a heavenly paradise.

That asceticism is both a renunciation of pleasure and a kind of pleasure in itself is a paradox explored in philosophy, most notably Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in which he criticizes the ascetic ideal of "an uncanny, dreadfully joyous labor of a soul voluntarily at odds with itself that makes itself suffer out of joy in making suffer" (Nietzsche 87). Drawing on Nietzsche as well as religious philosophy that

does not consider asceticism necessarily perverse, Gavin Flood notes that asceticism is paradoxical because it attempts to renounce the will and abnegate the self by an act of will that more or less reasserts the self: self-control, self-denial, self-discipline. Flood offers a description of the ascetic ideal that is more or less the mirror image of the epistemological possibilities of pleasure I described in my introduction: it is “a bodily action that seeks to reverse the flow of the body or the orientation of the senses towards the world” (Flood 493). In a manner of speaking, then, the ascetic ideal articulated by the poetic narrator does not necessarily ask the peignoured woman to choose between pleasure and sacrifice but asks her whether there is not *more* pleasure and greater promise in sacrificing the temporary comforts of pungent fruit. After the poetic narrator’s challenge—“And shall the earth/ seem all of paradise that we shall know?”—the female character appears, in the next two stanzas, to consider this question.

The female character asks herself what happens to the contentment of hearing birdsong in the morning when the birds have gone; it lives, she concludes, primarily in her mind by way of memory or in her desire to hear their song again. She admits to longing for an “imperishable bliss” (“Sunday” 62), in contrast to the ephemeral birdsong. In her lyric struggle to reconcile the impossible desire to prolong pleasure with the allure of temporary satisfaction, she envisions Death (personified as a woman) walking in the leaf-strewn woods and frenzying young men and women, who pile up fruits and then abandon them. The next stanza invokes fragrant plum trees along the banks of a river in a heavenly afterlife. These vivid images, earthly pleasures mingled with forecasts of mortality and eternity, might be said to illustrate the poem’s yearning for a third way between the dual philosophies proposed in the first stanza. The female character changes

the question from a binary choice—pleasure or sacrifice—to a question of whether it is possible to experience one without the other.

### **Death is the Mother of Beauty**

Before returning to this turning point of the poem, I would like to revisit Carolyn Korsmeyer's *Making Sense of Taste*, which will set the context for the plum trees and disregarded pears of the fifth and sixth stanzas. As she argues for the aesthetic and philosophical value of taste in this monograph, Korsmeyer interrogates some commonly held assumptions about food, eating, and the senses associated with them. For one, some might argue that food solicits the appetite and thus cannot be contemplated with purely aesthetic disinterest; for another, edible "moments and objects of enjoyment soon vanish" and thus make a poor object of study (*Making Sense* 188). Korsmeyer counters both arguments with the example of *vanitas* painting, a genre primarily associated with 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch art. *Vanitas* paintings were typically still lifes depicting a gleaming abundance of sumptuous possessions such as nicely-bound books, pocket watches, and fine glassware or ceramics, but also short-lived luxuries such as flowers, lemons, oysters, and other delicacies. These tableaux were intended to show off wealth and delight the eye, but they also chastised the viewer for enjoying worldly possessions too much: the watch and the book can symbolize the inevitable passage of time, and they are sometimes accompanied by the less subtle *memento mori* of a human skull.

Korsmeyer argues that the inclusion of food objects in a still life, even if they are its sole subject, can bear as much symbolic meaning and elicit responses from the viewer more complex than mere appetite:

I suggest that when representations of food whet the appetite, they may do so in a way that conveys to that appetite all the understanding of its temporary and unstable nature that is revealed in the paintings that explore it. The actual experience of eating may but need not simply revel in pleasures of taste and satisfied appetite. Indeed, the appreciation of pleasure is heightened from a perspective that recognizes its transience and unpredictability. This view demands an understanding that participates in the senses without needing to be in thrall to them. No insight into the impermanence of life actually requires a rejection of the lower senses as blind to understanding, nor does it insist on the morbidity of *vanitas*. (*Making Sense* 183-184)

This is part of an argument in favor of the semiotic and aesthetic interest of food: the objects of taste, despite their necessarily transient nature, can elicit complex responses worthy of study. But this paragraph also mounts a good argument against the mind/body dualism that both Korsmeyer and Bordo address in their respective works. Enjoying food, here, is not merely a matter of sensory pleasure but of intellectual apprehension—even if that means apprehending the transience of pleasure and, by extension, one’s own mortality.

“Sunday Morning” vividly brings to life the dialectic of the *vanitas* painting—vibrant, transient pleasures versus the inexorable march of time—and, like the paintings, elicits a complex awareness of pleasure and transience at once. The claim that sensory pleasure in the senses is not only accompanied but heightened by awareness of its transience seems to be at play in the fifth stanza where Death walks and “strews the leaves/ Of sure obliteration on our paths” (“Sunday” 65-6). “Paths” is not only plural but

varied in the next few lines: there is the path sorrow took, the paths of triumph, the paths of love and tenderness. It is on this last path that the proximity of death

...causes boys to pile new plums and pears  
 On disregarded plate. The maidens taste  
 And stray impassioned in the littering leaves. ("Sunday" 73-75)

Perhaps this moment is more reflective of the *carpe diem* tradition than *vanitas*: it is not necessarily the new fruits that cause the youths to reflect on their mortality, but the brush with mortality that inspires them to seize the day and indulge the earthly appetites while they last. But in the sixth stanza, the plums become the impetus rather than the accessory of the poem's counterargument against eternity. After all, paradise is supposed to be peak contentment and pleasure without end; but, this stanza suggests, without an end there is no pleasure:

Is there no change of death in paradise?  
 Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs  
 Hang always heavy in that perfect sky  
 Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,  
 With rivers like our own that seek for seas  
 They never find, the same receding shores  
 That never touch with inarticulate pang?  
 Why set the pear upon those river-banks  
 Or spice the shores with odors of the plum? ("Sunday" 76-90).

A conundrum: the plums grow heavy with their own ripeness and sweetness, and by their weight suggest their inevitable fall. On Earth time, they would need to be picked and enjoyed, or else they drop off the branch and rot. But if paradise forecloses either of those possibilities, then the fruit would stay on the branch, fragrant and tempting and untouchable, like a torment devised in Tartarus or an impossible test for the residents of Eden to fail. That there could be a paradise without the spicy odor of plum trees is not

given as an option here, which is intriguing; the desire to taste fruit would presuppose appetite—another kind of absence or lack, like Death, that would seem to be incompatible with eternity. Yet the poem argues precisely the opposite, here and when the feminine figure of Death walks the woods:

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,  
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams  
And our desires (“Sunday” 62-64).

Neither dreams—whether they are of wide, silent water or bright green wings—nor desires will be answered by eternity, only by mortality—which brings forth life, beauty, and fulfillment.

That would seem to be a clear answer to the peignored woman’s yearning for imperishable bliss, but the next two stanzas return to the point-counterpoint pattern of imagery. She hears a voice crying out that “we live in an old chaos of the sun,/ or old dependency of day and night,” or an island that is both “free” yet surrounded by the wide water which in this poem tends to suggest the crossing into death; though the crying voice seems like a mystical vision on the more ethereal side of the argument, the imagery it describes is that of balance and cyclical patterns (“Sunday” 110-114). Quasi-pagan imagery of beauty and sensation continue to burst forth in the form of whistling quail and ripening berries, but in a fitting close to a poem that opened with a sunny morning and bright sensations, the final stanza brings evening and twilight, birds making “ambiguous undulations” as they sink into “downward into darkness,” a mysterious night to balance the simple pleasures of day (“Sunday” 115-120). Sunday morning may have passed, but the sun will rise again and bring with it the same questions.

There's always something a little unsatisfying about "third way" arguments, but "Sunday Morning" makes a solid case for the virtues in both pursuing pleasure and renouncing it—themes that will recur in texts examined elsewhere in this project. Although interpretations of this mystical poem vary, it wouldn't have so much resonance over time if it didn't reference the mind/body dualism so deeply embedded (as Bordo argues) in our consciousness and culture. But it also provides a compelling demonstration of the complexity and ambivalence that may accompany pleasure itself. In a piece intended to draw together the work of Nietzsche, Stevens, and Hannah Arendt, Frederick M. Dolan alludes to a concept of Arendt's that pleasure is not necessarily enjoyment but "the enhanced awareness of reality" (Dolan 441). Dolan prefers the term "tragic pleasure" to qualify the fact that the reality we become aware of—our own mortality, for example, or those of our loved ones—may not give us pleasure in the traditional sense. But if pleasure can be described as "the deepening of our realization that human action and interaction is meaningful," then poetry makes an ideal vehicle to explore the line between "mere" pleasure and tragic pleasure particularly in regard to death (Dolan 454). Even Dolan's little qualifier, "mere," shows the ambivalent position sensory pleasure still holds today: the transient enjoyment of pungent oranges or fragrant plums, or even of reading or hearing a lyrical poem, are not usually cherished in the same way as the thought of eternity (to paraphrase "Sunday" 22). But "tragic pleasure" and "memento mori" alike demonstrate the importance of aesthetic experience as a kind of knowledge—both self-knowledge and cultural fluency—that makes both poetry and food studies worth exploring.

**CHAPTER 7:**  
**THE FEMALE BODY AS FOOD**

Written in 1934, Tess Slesinger's *The Unpossessed* follows the members of a community of intellectuals in New York as they search for ways to articulate and live by their left-wing principles. Written several years into the Great Depression, this is a novel preoccupied with food. The threat of hunger was frighteningly real to many of its principle players; when characters cook, eat, or shop for groceries, the narration of these actions is weighted with the threat of scarcity, and the ways they see themselves and each other are haunted by images of food.

At the same time, the language of food objects and practices reflect how gender influences how these characters seek to pursue or provide pleasure and comfort. We see both the personal obsessions of these characters and the larger cultural attitudes toward gendered expectations, bodies, and appetites. Many of these examples appear in the relationship of Margaret and Miles Flinders, whose marital troubles open and close the novel. Through narrative glimpses into the private fears and desires of both characters, we can see how their experience of appetite and hunger are deeply affected by their consciousness of binary gender roles—and how the conceptual opposition of male and female overlaps with other oppositions, such as having versus going without food, or being a consumer versus and being consumed. The basic experience of taking pleasure in nourishment is viewed variously as maternal gift and feminine weakness, radical act and bourgeois indulgence.

### **The gender of comfort**

The first chapter of *The Unpossessed* opens with Margaret shopping for groceries: it is winter, and the grocer's asparagus is frozen, but the couple must eat and so Margaret must negotiate the market. Right away the act of buying groceries is sexualized: as the grocer banters with Margaret, she perceives it as too intimate; the grocer himself reminds her of a gynecologist in his stained apron (Slesinger 7). As she walks home carrying groceries, she is very aware of herself fulfilling the role of wife. She imagines herself presenting the groceries to her husband as a gift: "Let me carry it home resting it on my breast," she thinks to herself, "let me bring the world home to Miles and lay it at his feet. A dash of salt, a skillful stir; and I will serve him the world for his supper." (Slesinger 8). Margaret internally celebrates what we would probably recognize as a traditionally feminine role, delighting in the opportunity to care for her husband and manage their household affairs. But Margaret does not see these actions as limited to a private, domestic sphere; for her, food is not only a source of pleasure and a symbol of love, but also a vehicle for worldly connection, commerce, and skill. Indeed, Margaret has a very keen sense of her own purchases within a network of food distribution and economy: it is the "world" she wants to present to her husband, and she mentally traces the chain of commerce that brought the autumnal treat of apple cider to their table:

"If he didn't see it, not as cider, not as cider she had bought for him, as cider which had come out of the country from apple trees specifically and courageously for them, for Miles and Margaret, to sit in a jug on their checkered tablecloth, why then the fine apple-y taste was nothing, the tang was bitter, the color dull." (Slesinger 12)

In addition to tying Margaret to the marketplace, this moment also foreshadows the trouble brewing at home: in practically the same thought, Margaret effuses like a honeymooner certain that the world arranges itself for their enjoyment, and betrays her apprehension that this small pleasure would be rejected by her husband. Indeed, when she returns home she finds Miles fretting over a pay cut at his already demoralizing job, and her fears about the cider are realized when he waves away the groceries and insults her impulse to comfort him (Slesinger 17).

A contributing element of the couple's conflict is the reversal of traditional roles: Miles' humiliation of having his labor both insulted and undercompensated by his boss is compounded by the fact that he is now partly dependent on his wife's income. As he tells her, "now *you* will be bringing home most of the bacon" (Slesinger 17); the irony of this idiom is not lost on the reader, since Margaret is already bringing home the groceries as well as her wages. But Miles' displeasure is also rooted in his austere puritanical upbringing, which has engendered in him a horror of domestic comforts. Miles values the abstractions of God and justice and the discipline of pain, which was usually dealt by his severe uncle. In contrast, he considers the physicality of pleasure to be unconstructive, oppressive, and distinctly feminine: "all of his life women (his aunts, his frightened mother, now Margaret) had come to him stupidly offering comfort, offering love; handing him sticks of candy when his soul demanded God" (Slesinger 15). For Margaret, comforting her husband is a personal accomplishment and a symbol of her love; for Miles, comfort is "salt to his wounds" (Slesinger 15). Notably, Miles views pleasure and comfort as subhuman: he sees Margaret's bags of vegetables and groceries are a "bucolic" gift (Slesinger 17); her happiness is animal and base, as he remembers "his

Uncle Daniel used to say his *pigs* were happy” (Slesinger 37). He also sees the lowly pursuit of pleasure as distinctly feminine, the purview of his wife and female relatives as well as farm animals. In a few deft pages, the binary oppositions in Miles’ personal philosophy become clear: on one side is strife, strength, loftiness, humanity, and masculinity; on the other side is comfort, weakness, baseness, animality, and femininity.

This uneasy introduction to the personal conflicts of the Flinders household will play out in other pairings throughout the novel. Although the men of the novel do not all share Miles’ rejection of feminine nurture, their actions are frequently governed by their investment in the same binaries that trouble Miles and Margaret: politics versus domesticity; pleasure versus sacrifice; appetite versus satisfaction; man versus woman. Although Margaret and several other female characters labor for wages, negotiate for goods, or otherwise directly engage with the same economic issues that their male cohort theorizes, they are not seen as politically or intellectually engaged subjects but as sexual or maternal objects. The novel shows that these oppositions are false dichotomies—consider Margaret’s apple cider, which connects domestic pleasure to politics and commerce—yet they are pervasive, and profoundly influence each character’s response to the specter of hunger.

### **The female body as food**

In the introduction to *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo sketches out how mind/body dualism tends to manifest in Western culture—namely, by perceiving the mind as the seat of the true self, and the body as

blunderer or deceiver. She also notes that, as many feminist writers have shown, “the scheme is frequently gendered, with women cast in the role of the body” (Bordo 5). The problematic implications of that dualism should be obvious, she writes:

For if, whatever the specific historical context of duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death. (Bordo 5)

There is a contradiction inherent to this gendered dualism, which Bordo articulates as she gives examples of how these binaries are embodied in contemporary culture. Historically, masculinity is associated with action and agency: Bordo cites examples from Aristotle to Hegel to contemporary reproductive health manuals which are dominated by constructions “of male as active, striving, conscious subject and female as passive, vegetative, primitive matter” (Bordo 12). The contradiction occurs when the negative traits associated with femaleness are perceived as threats: if femininity is passive and bound by the body, those very qualities may make femininity a “distraction” or “seduction.” In this way, Western dualism can position woman as both an object of appetite and an embodiment of a dangerous hunger.

The characters of *The Unpossessed* are invested in this classical division of binary gender even as they struggle with it. For Miles, the role of man is to strive: he works, he thinks, he seeks; *want* is the condition of his being, and feminine attempts to sate or soothe him threaten this self-definition. He does not like to be reminded of bodily appetites, and he sees Margaret as primarily governed by hers: as he says to her in the heat of their argument, “you wouldn’t see a social trend... unless it was crammed down your own personal throat” (Slesinger 18). Margaret would have it both ways—ambition

and satisfaction, public life and domestic pleasure—but when faced with her husband’s resentment, she tries to placate, distract, and seduce by turns, inevitably embodying all the forms of femininity he mistrusts.

After the upset over groceries, Miles and Margaret depart to visit their friends Jeffrey and Norah Blake, whose marriage starkly contrasts their own. Far from Miles’ asceticism, Jeffrey is a cocktail enthusiast and a womanizer. His character is introduced to us in his own kitchen, where he is mixing drinks for their gathering while attempting to persuade Margaret that marital fidelity is antithetical to their left-wing politics, an argument which also happens to be the topic of a book he recently published. Norah Blake is described as passive and yet somehow abundant, as if she embodies the food of comfort that Margaret yearned to give to Miles: she is most often depicted sitting and knitting, and the narrative compares her to a “lump of dough,” an “opiate,” (Slesinger 75), and, later on, “a pot of acquiescent honey” (Slesinger 239).

Norah’s “acquiescence” is most vividly demonstrated when another man of their acquaintance arrives at the couples’ gathering: Bruno Leonard, a university professor who has just discovered that the woman he loves intends to marry another man, arrives intoxicated and full of bravado to conceal his romantic disappointment. Bruno congratulates Jeffrey on the publication of his book and teases Norah about being the model for its racy passages, summoning her to be inspected and compared to the book’s descriptions of the female form. “[Norah] came and stood like an obedient animal in the circle of his arm;” she smells of soap and vegetables to Bruno, who lays his head on her chest.

As I thought,' he sadly said; 'nature-faking. Apples indeed! I'd sue him for libel, Norah.' His head sank softly back. Norah laughed her rich, warm laugh; he felt it throbbing in his ear like quiet milk. 'Apples! Don't you know apples from manna, Blake?' 'The merest euphemism,' Jeffrey said. 'Mistaking apples for such lovely, luscious euphemisms,' Bruno murmured from his soft warm nest. (Slesinger 70)

These pastoral allusions explicitly link Norah's body to the conflict dramatized by the Flinders family: Norah is the very embodiment of the pleasing apple cider Margaret yearned to give her husband, and the unthinking animal comfort that Miles rejects. For Bruno (and for Margaret, who surreptitiously observes Norah after having rebuffed Jeffrey's flirtation), Norah appears "passive and vegetal," replete in herself and content to give satisfaction to others.

The scene of Bruno's entrance seems to unfold in slow motion, with minute observations of the characters' facial expressions and intonations. It is the first time we see these main characters all together in one room, and it sets the tone for their dynamic as a group. Bruno will continue to perform broad theatrics to mask his private anxieties; here, his mind is on his betrothed cousin Elizabeth, who he sometimes refers to as a lamb, so perhaps it is not too surprising that he views Norah as a kind of domesticated animal as well. Jeffrey, having just made a rote attempt to seduce Margaret and a languid defense of his literary license to compare the female body to fruit, will habitually wax poetic about passions he pursues relentlessly and yet seems not to fully relish. Margaret, quick-witted and conciliatory, tries to lighten the mood by quipping that proletariats would never mistake breasts for apples, to which her husband retorts, "Not if they were

hungry.” Miles, always rigid and uncomfortable, rejects both the bawdy turn of the conversation and Margaret’s attempt to mediate it.

But as Bruno and Jeffrey continue to joke about the sexual content in Jeffrey’s book, it becomes apparent that Jeffrey’s objectification of women is folded into his purported commitment to opposing class-based oppression; or, to look at it another way, Jeffrey’s politics have more to do with euphemisms than with literal apples. Bruno teases him by pontificating on the bourgeois decadence of metaphor, although he privately wonders whether substituting the euphemism of apples for the reality of Norah’s body implies that they “have grown so civilized that we are more excited by the *idea* which represents the fact, than by the fact itself” (Slesinger 71). This rumination turns out to be prophetic: at this point in the novel, hunger is more of an idea or a symbol on which the male characters can fix their intellectual passions, and may as serve as a figure of speech interchangeable with sexual appetite or creative ambition. The female characters are presumed to know little of any of these hungers, being instead the object of those appetites.

### **The female body, hungering**

Despite (of because of) the Flinders’s discomfort, the Blakes’ complacency, and Bruno’s drunkenness, the group revives an old idea to start a magazine. A frequently-discussed, frequently-dropped project, the magazine appears to be a solution to their present needs: Bruno gets a distraction, Miles gets a less humiliating job, Jeffrey gets to schmooze donors, and they all get a platform for their political views and a galvanizing

element to resolve their minor disagreements. The men find a patron in the wealthy businessman Al Middleton, father of Bruno's soft-spoken assistant Emmett and husband of the louche, petulant Merle, with whom Jeffrey appears to have a sexual past. The group (minus Margaret, who has discovered that she is pregnant) meet at their sponsors' house to plan a party to raise money and awareness for the Magazine and as well as for a Hunger March planned for Washington; this preliminary meeting is attended by some of Bruno's college students as well as the Middletons, who are footing the bill. The Middletons' presence lends itself to humorous dialogue throughout, as they suggest expensive additions to the party despite the group's purported distaste for bourgeois decadence or the realities of the issues the party will represent. "I'll donate the buffet," says Al Middleton; to his be-furred wife, he adds "nobody will go hungry at *our* Hunger March Party, shall they, my pet?" (Slesinger 180).

Bruno stands up and attempts to establish or at least narrow down the goals and politics of the Magazine and March. As he speaks, he alludes to hunger rhetorically, which calls back to his earlier observation of the group's collective penchant for euphemism. Nonetheless, he assumes that he speaks primarily to people who, like him, can rely on regular meals and are politically motivated by the ideology rather than personal experience with privation.

"Man does not live by bread alone. . . . But the fight for full bellies—that can't mean everything to us; we come of a long and honorable line of full bellies—most of us. . . . [the intellectual] is a scientist; whatever field he's in, he's looking for the truth—it's the eternal values he's after. The full belly—we've got our eye on something higher, granted the full belly must come first. . . ." (Slesinger 174)

Like Miles, Bruno presumes that the drive for knowledge and the drive for food belong to opposite spheres, and that the body's hunger for food is of a lower, less refined order than that of the incorporeal appetite for truth. What he does not know is that two of the attendees have not had enough to eat, and one of them is weak with hunger—although not so weak that she can't make acerbic comments on the proceedings. Bruno's "Black Sheep" students Cornelia and Firman whisper to each other throughout the meeting, sometimes making fun of their wealthy hosts and sometimes flatly contradicting the bloviating banter between Bruno, Al Middleton, and Merle Middleton's psychoanalyst. The juxtaposition of their commentary with the formal proceedings stages a somewhat Socratic argument between theories and realities of class struggle, even when purely pointing out their own experiences. When Bruno rhapsodizes about intellectual pursuit over getting enough to eat:

"Those higher things," interjected Firman, "are going to fall pretty flat if they fall on empty bellies" "or on half the world dead of starvation" said Cornelia. (Slesinger 174)

Merle's psychoanalyst suggests that economics is not a fundamental human motivation, claiming that if you examine your earliest memories, they would find that they were neither of too much or too little money. Cornelia counters that her earliest memory is her mother throwing a kettle at her. "Because she was angry at the kettle for being empty," Firman adds (Slesinger 179). For Cornelia, the primal scene of her childhood is not a sex act but an act of hunger and violence; the angry, non-nourishing mother she conjures is a flat contradiction of the analyst's Freudian psychology, and makes a dramatic contrast with the flirtatious, theatrical Merle and even with Margaret

Flinders, whose body at two months pregnant is described in terms of abundance, “full bloom” and “sails full-set” (Slesinger 151, 154).

As the Middletons and the Magazine founders argue about the particulars of the fundraising party, and indeed whether there will be any need for a Hunger March this year, Cornelia passes out from hunger. Firman carries her out—followed by Norah, maternally and unquestioningly picking up their fallen possessions—and the men of the intellectual magazine are left to comprehend the reality of the empty bellies they so recently had used as a mere rhetorical device. Bruno in particular feels both angry and ashamed; he thinks to himself, “Cornelia, to whom he had carefully expounded the non-validity of hunger, had quietly and insolently fainted from it” (Slesinger 191). Even confronted with its limits, Bruno takes refuge in the sarcasm and rhetoric that he earlier questioned; hunger as a physical, harmful reality (rather than as a concept or metaphor) horrifies him.

Indeed, the fact that literal hunger confronted them in the body of a woman appears to have particularly affected the men, who each seek out and resist comfort for their shock. Bruno, waiting for his “lamb” Elizabeth to return from abroad, persuades his gentle, effeminate assistant Emmett to get roaring drunk with him. Jeffrey simultaneously fortifies and castigates himself by sleeping with Trotskyite Comrade Ruthie Fisher, and asking her to tell him stories of prison and political protest.

But Miles, even though he had more personal experience with privation than the others, is shocked out of the complacency he had been lulled into by Margaret’s pregnancy. When he left to attend the meeting, Margaret had appeared as content and replete as Norah; but juxtaposed with the “damned reproachable fact” of Cornelia with an

empty belly (Slesinger 185), Margaret's fullness becomes abjectly horrifying to Miles. After the seeing Cornelia faint, he dreads returning home to Margaret just as she dreaded returning home to him with groceries; he anticipates that she will want to soothe him, and he imagines her feminine desire to give comfort as a ravening hunger that threatens to consume him:

Womb versus world. . . . For Margaret, women in general, lived in their wombs; put their womb before their wits; all things grist to their wombs, all the time drawing their men to those rapacious female caverns, striving to make them forget the world, their rival. In the bottom of her soul Margaret wishes him to lay aside his restlessness and his fine nervous seeking (though they might be the very things she loved him for) and in exchange she offered him oblivion, an entirely personal world of vegetables; in which only a vegetable could endure. She wanted him to surrender. (Slesinger 186-7)

In his imagination, Margaret is paradoxically both an inert object of appetite, or “vegetable,” and a greedy emptiness that might destroy his most masculine characteristics. He imagines her to be a negative force in opposition to himself, like predator and prey: if he is human, she is animal (“bucolic”); if he is animal, she is vegetal; if he is grist, she is the mill.

Margaret is asleep when Miles returns home, so he tries to slip into bed and sleep without touching her or anything that reminds him of her—including the bedpillow, which is a comfort he didn't have as a child and which Margaret taught him to enjoy: “he slid away until his head, leading the way back to loneliness and courage, to the endless search for God, had left the pillow quite behind, till it hung like a severed fruit upon the edge” (Slesinger 190). Margaret and Norah have been compared to fruits and vegetables: passive, simple, and uncultivated, which more or less sums up how the men in the novel

perceive them. But Miles's gruesome comparison foreshadows what Margaret will perceive as his emasculation; while he fears being devoured by Margaret's "womanly world of vegetables," she begins view him more and more as inert and vegetal.

### **The female body, fruitless**

The final chapter of *The Unpossessed*, "Missis Flinders," was originally published as a short story (Biagi 277), which may account for the neatness with which it draws together the novel's themes of food, gender, and hunger. We end, as we began, with the Flinders, visions of the market, and comfortless offerings of food.

After the fiasco of a meeting party and the anticlimactic fundraising party, Margaret is being discharged from the hospital and waiting for Miles to hail a cab. Next to her is a basket of apples he sent: inarticulate and red-faced, they remind her unfavorably of him. She had tried to leave the basket behind, but the other women in the hospital wouldn't take it, and a basket of apples could not go to waste in a time of scarcity (Slesinger 291). Margaret imagines what the other women in the hospital will say about her after they depart; she had been roomed with a woman evocatively named Missis Butter who had been delivered of a stillbirth and could not understand why married, healthy Margaret would want an abortion.

The decision had been mutual, though brought about by Miles' womb-versus-world false dichotomy; they chose "world," or two working incomes. Though defensive in recollecting the unsympathetic wonder of the other maternity patients, Margaret is angry and resentful at Miles; she repeats to herself several times, "he is a man, he could

have made you a woman” (Slesinger 295). She thinks of the women in the ward, in particular their “grocery-and-baby minds” and “the certain little world from grocery store to kitchen” (Slesinger 298-9), a sarcastic contrast to her own enthusiasm in the care and connection symbolized by her own grocery shopping. Even as the realities of hunger remain on her mind (as in not being able to discard the apples), the empty belly that troubles her is her recently emptied womb.

When the couple arrives home they nearly leave the basket in the taxi until the driver calls after them. Margaret tries to get him to take a fruit, but he demurs.

“Maybe he doesn’t want any fruit,” said Miles harshly.  
 “Not want any fruit!” cried Margaret gaily, indignantly. Not want any fruit? —ridiculous! Not want the fruit my poor Miles bought for his wife in the hospital? Three days I spent in the hospital, in a Maternity Home, and I produced, with the help of my husband, one basket of fruit (tied with ribbon, pink—for boys). Not want any of our fruit? I couldn’t bear it, I couldn’t bear it.... (Slesinger 306)

The play on fruit, childbearing, and bearing the guilt and resentment of her abortion is almost too painfully on point. Though Margaret began the novel optimistically, envisioning herself as moving briskly and effectively from the public world of work and men to the private sphere of women and domestic comfort, her pregnancy and its termination brought her to realize that she has always been constrained to the roles carved out by gender dualism—and that in those roles they had been unable to find or create satisfaction. Her angry refrain shifts slightly:

He was a man, and he could have made her a woman. She was a woman, and could have made him a man. He was not a man; she was not a woman. In each of them the life-stream flowed to a dead-end. (Slesinger 300-301)

*The Unpossessed* was in many respects a remarkable book for its time, in its somewhat controversial representation of abortion (the short story was rejected by several magazines before it was published in *Story*) as well as its unflattering resemblance to intellectuals in Slesinger's own circle. By ending on the termination of Margaret's wanted pregnancy, Slesinger questions whether the left-wing movement itself will be able to "bear fruit," in a manner of speaking. Miles and Margaret, whose marital conflict both open this story and end it, become a parable of irreconcilable binaries: she hungers for the ability to give nourishment, but her affection, her cleverness, her maternity are all constrained or rejected by Miles, who feels consumed or threatened by her desire to feed. Theirs is both a personal and a political conflict, as the gendered mind/body dualism that forms the foundation of Miles' beliefs—reflected in different respects by Jeffrey and Bruno—undermines their lip service to social equality.

**CHAPTER 8:**  
**MASCULINITY, HUNGER, AND ASCETICISM**

As its title would suggest, Ernest Hemingway's memoir *A Moveable Feast* is peppered with descriptions of and allusions to food and appetite; scenes frequently take place in Parisian cafes, where Hemingway penned many of his early short stories. For example, the chapter entitled "Birth of a New School" begins by evoking the coolness and quietude of a café early in the morning, a seemingly tranquil space in which one may nearly step into one's own fantasy of rugged male survival. Narrator-Hemingway vividly imagines walking right into the woods of his fictional world: the reader is invited to imagine the smell and weight of a weathered leather pack and of a pencil sharpened with a knife.

This fantasy is interrupted by a derisive question from another café patron: "What are you trying to do? Write in a café?" (Hemingway 91-92).

Suddenly he and we are pulled out of the survival reverie and find ourselves back in the morning café, where narrator-Hemingway has been trying to put the fantasy to paper. This café, it may be presumed, is fragrant with far less rustic odors than Hemingway's imagined sweat and leather; it must be clamorous with the comings and goings of other patrons, nothing like the solitary quiet of the woods. Hemingway is annoyed by this disruption and speaks crudely to the interrupter, who turns out to be an aspiring literary critic. The critic, introduced in the narrative as a "tall fat young man with spectacles," is described derogatorily as both feminine and animal: Hemingway calls him a "bitch" and "in full cry." (92-3). The critic offers Hemingway some unsolicited words

of advice: Hemingway's writing is "too stripped, too lean, too sinewy" (96). In contrast to Hemingway's fantasy of solitary pencil-paring, the critic's superfluity of flesh and conversation are depicted as decidedly undesirable; thus, we might not take Hemingway too seriously when he replies that he will try to "fatten" his writing up a bit (Hemingway 96). Set at the beginning of a chapter which comments on the processes of writing and publishing, this moment serves as a succinct illustration of how men's bodies, men's hunger, and men's writing are conceptualized in ways that overlap and reinforce one another. "Lean" and some of its synonyms—"spare," "stripped-down"—describe what are considered positive attributes for writing. In this figuration, good writing is bare muscle trimmed free of fat, or—to borrow an image from Hemingway's woodland fantasy—it is a pencil shaved down to a fine point with a knife. Further, for Hemingway, good writing is generated in solitude; outsiders are a distraction, not an inspiration, and critics are superfluous at best. Yet the critic arrives like a fleshly, feminized reminder to Hemingway that they are both in the same café—a location other chapters set up as instrumental to his writing, offering the stimulation of senses and sociality as well as nourishment. Something does not quite connect between the figuration of the lean writer—solitary, self-sufficient, taking little and making no more than what is necessary—and the reality of the hungry writer in a café, nourished by food and coffee and a continuous stream of stimulus in the form of café patrons, even annoying ones.

This inconsistent approach to appetite recurs throughout *A Moveable Feast*, as does the link between writing and hunger. Starting with the first chapter, "A Good Café on the Place St.-Michel," Hemingway ushers the reader into seeing a café as a generative space that fuels writing with people-watching, refreshment, and intoxicants. Within those

café spaces and out in the cultural buffet of Paris, Hemingway draws his self-portrait as a hungry young man with an appetite for art and literature as well as oysters. In many instances, eating well is explicitly linked both to writing well and living well. In other instances, he values the suppression or outright denial of appetite, and looks in disgust at loss of self-control in himself and others. From the viewpoint of this memoir, there is no contradiction between the two; both the enjoyment of eating and the deferral of enjoyment are performances of masculinity.

In this chapter I will explore the ways masculinity, hunger, and writing are linked in *A Moveable Feast*, drawing on feminist theorizations of gendered appetite and embodiment. In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo observes how contemporary media, particularly advertising, depict men's hunger as natural, even admirable. "Men are *supposed* to have hearty, even voracious appetites," she writes. "It is a mark of the manly to eat spontaneously and expansively" (Bordo 108). Elsewhere, explicating the contemporary Western obsession with dieting (explored further in chapter 10), Bordo quotes Foucault on the moral ideology of performing "'virile' mastery of desire through constant 'spiritual combat'" (Bordo 198). In some ways, the contrast between Hemingway's solitary writing and lean prose with the loquacious, fleshy critic echoes the false dichotomies critiqued in *The Unpossessed* and explored in my previous chapter: masculinity is associated with strength, loftiness, humanity, and *desire*; femininity is associated with weakness, baseness, animality, and satiation. The friction among those conflicting conceptualizations of gender gives way this paradox: hunger is evidence of masculine vigor, and *ignoring* hunger as a feat of masculine strength.

At the same time, not unlike *The Unpossessed*, hunger and eating are weighted with the fear of not having enough. Several of the café writing scenes are accompanied by the pre-celebrity Hemingway's worry about making a living from writing fiction. If he does not eat, he cannot concentrate to write; if he does not write, he might not afford to eat. In *The Hunger Artists*, Maud Ellman links this dilemma to the desire to create: to write *is* to hunger, to have a powerful drive to put substance into the world, which is compromised by the mortal body's need consume substances from the world. This conflict, hinted at in "The Birth of a New School," will be spelled out more explicitly in the episodes described below.

### **Men and Hunger**

In most of *A Moveable Feast*, both the hunger and the satisfaction of hunger are seen as healthy drives. The relationship of this public space to his writing is figured as a feeding cycle: stimulation from the café flows in; writing flows out. Narrator-Hemingway feels emptied out and a little melancholy after completing a story—as though he had just “made love,” he says (Hemingway 6). But his emptiness is also a little like hunger, and then he orders oysters. The oysters do not just fill his stomach: they stimulate his senses, and replenish his sense of well-being and capability:

“As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away, leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each

shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans.” (Hemingway 6)

This meal is both sensuous (the succulent oysters, the crisp wine) and antiseptic (the metallic taste, the cold liquid). But it is filling and satisfies both the literal appetite and the emotional emptiness left behind by completing a work. Elsewhere, Hemingway describes a reward system of snacking on mandarins and hot chestnuts while he writes, finishing a good day’s work with a nip of kirsch; such scenes tantalize the reader with sensory descriptions as with the oysters and cold wine, but they are also intended to be bracing demonstrations of the writer’s control of his appetites.

Nonetheless, hunger for food as sustenance and pleasure (rather than as a reward) is also depicted as hearty and wholesome. In “With Pascin at the Dôme,” he writes:

“When you are twenty-five and a natural heavyweight, missing a meal makes you very hungry. But it also sharpens all of your perceptions, and I found that many of the people I wrote about had very strong appetites and a great taste and desire for food, and most of them were looking forward to having a drink.” (Hemingway 101)

Jeffrey Meyers, serving up a selection of food scenes from throughout Hemingway’s oeuvre, makes a similar observation: that “Hemingway’s heroes have the same appetite for food as they do for hunting and fishing, boxing and war, women and sex. . . . [R]ich feasts, devoured with gusto, are a constant source of sensual pleasure” (Meyers 441). Indeed, narrator-Hemingway is himself one such protagonist: this instance is not the only time he misses a meal and writes of looking forward to having a drink. In both quotes, hunger is depicted as a positive trait: natural, wholesome, and unmistakably associated with masculine virility. Feeling hunger is a sign of strength and desire; indeed,

the hunger itself appears to be just as good as the prospect of satisfaction, as it has the effect of sharpening your perceptions. In this vision of masculinity, experiencing hunger paradoxically demonstrates both the prowess of physical appetites the prowess of mental control.

In contrast, characters who either do not experience strong appetite or who yield to excessive appetites are portrayed negatively as unnatural and, arguably, feminine. This is evident in “With Pascin at the Dôme,” where Pascin is directly contrasted to the “wholesome,” “virtuous” thoughts that accompanied Hemingway’s musings on hunger. Pascin is depicted as querulous and distastefully indulgent of his appetites; drunk and accompanied by two models he treats with lewd familiarity, he inquires after Hemingway’s health and writing by asking “And everything still tastes good?” (Hemingway 102), suggesting that his own indulgences are not enjoyed. Hemingway, though he lingers over his description of the models and their physical attractions, declines to have dinner with the louche trio.

But the gendering of appetite is particularly apparent in the chapters that describe his relationship with F. Scott Fitzgerald, who is depicted as a hypochondriac and a picky eater with tastes and appetite which are incomprehensible to Hemingway. When they plan a trip together, Hemingway hopes to pick up the makings for sandwiches in town while Fitzgerald insists on having the hotel prepare a picnic lunch for them—an extravagance that compounds the time and expense of their hotel breakfast, leaving Hemingway uneasy (Hemingway 161). Later, Fitzgerald picks at the hotel-packed snails and chicken, leaving most of them to be eaten by Hemingway (Hemingway 173-4).

White wine, which in a previous chapter was described as refreshing and practically salutary—seemed to have extremely negative effects on Fitzgerald. Hemingway muses:

“In Europe then we thought of wine as something as healthy and normal as food and also as a great giver of happiness and well being and delight. Drinking wine was not a snobbism nor a sign of sophistication nor a cult; it was a natural as eating and to me as necessary, and I would not have thought of eating a meal without drinking either wine or cider or beer... it had never occurred to me that sharing a few bottles of fairly light, dry, white Macon could cause chemical changes in Scott that would turn him into a fool.” (Hemingway 166-167)

These scenes are played for comedic effect, with Hemingway pacifying a hypochondriac Fitzgerald who goes pale and takes to his bed in a manner that certainly evokes gothic tales of feminine hysteria. The narrative dwells on the effete details of Fitzgerald’s appetites, which either run to *too much* (the hypochondriac theatrics, and unnecessary expense of the hotel meals) or *not enough* (he picks at his food and has a low tolerance for wine). His prettiness, his delicacy, his fretting about his marriage position him as the opposite of that youthful heavyweight with a strong appetite described earlier.

In the subsequent chapter, Hemingway and Hadley visit Fitzgerald and Zelda at their home; given the attention to Fitzgerald’s fussiness with food and wine, it is unsurprising that Hemingway makes note of the “very bad lunch” they endure there (Hemingway 180). Nothing more needed to be said about what the food was; the bad lunch stands for everything wrong: their appetites, their company, their marriage.

### **Hunger is a Good Discipline**

Both in these vignettes of a hungry Hemingway, and in the numerous other cultural examples alluded to by Susan Bordo, healthy masculinity is associated with a lustful appetite and enjoyment of food. At the same time—and sometimes even in the same paragraph—masculinity is also performed by denying the appetite, as shown by Hemingway’s comment that hunger sharpens perception in “With Pascin at the Dôme.” Despite the bounty of good feelings associated with good appetite and good eating throughout *A Moveable Feast*, the sanctifying effects of going hungry also plays a role in his self-portrait.

As the title suggests, the chapter “Hunger is a Good Discipline” pays homage to the aesthetic of self-denial and refusal of intellect-dulling comfort, “You got very hungry when you did not eat enough in Paris,” recounts Hemingway, because there was good-looking and good-smelling food to whet the appetite wherever you went (Hemingway 69). At such times of not having enough to eat, Hemingway would take a route to the Luxembourg gardens that did not take him past food fragrances, and go to a museum to satisfy the appetite of the eyes instead. Hunger, Hemingway imagines, refined the other senses, making him more receptive to pleasures of a higher order: “all the paintings were sharpened and clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry” (Hemingway 69). Hunger makes him feel as though he understands Cézanne better; he even wonders if Cézanne too were hungry when he painted.

The association of elevated aesthetic perception with the denial of base hunger recalls the time-honored tradition of mind/body dualism critiqued by Bordo and Korsmeyer, but it was likely also influenced by early twentieth-century proponents of fasting. As reported by historian of religion R. Marie Griffith, the progressive era in the United States saw a number of writers and public figures (including Edward Hooker Dewey and Upton Sinclair) who advocated fasting for health. Most of the vocal supporters of this practice were male, notes Griffith, and most “explicitly connected their own experience of fasting to virility and defended the practice as intrepid and heroic” (Griffith 601). The heroism of the act of refusal underlines the performative aspect of fasting: there are numerous notes, journals, and essays written by Progressive-Era fasters eager to share their experiences, and their writings according to Griffith reveal a “near consuming fixation. . . “with purification, disciplined self control, and the pleasurable pain of food refusal” (Griffith 601). Certainly this pleasurable pain in refusal recalls the ascetic philosophy discussed in an earlier chapter; it also recalls Miles Flinders’s dilemma in *The Unpossessed*, perceiving struggle and want as the default condition of manhood while satisfaction and comfort remain the purview of those deemed inferior to men.

But in addition to the imperfect opposition of binary pairs such as male and female, or having and wanting, the act of writing adds another dimension to these appetites. We’ve seen how writing and appetite are linked for Hemingway, and how the performance of fasting inspired written records for the enthusiasts described by Griffiths, but writing and hungering also form the center of *The Hunger Artists*, an odd, slim monograph by Maud Ellman.

Like Bordo's essays on the body, *The Hunger Artists* was written and published in the height of the fashion for theorizing anorexia; like other body theorists, Ellmann is interested in the meaning and message of choosing hunger over nourishment.<sup>vi</sup> The recurring theme of *The Hunger Artists* is one of hunger strike: Clarissa wasting away among her letters from captivity, the 1981 hunger strike of Irish prisoners, suffragists with feeding tubes forced down their throats. Force and imprisonment shape the meanings of hunger and writing in the literary and cultural artifacts she examines, as each of these "hunger artists" appears desperate to refuse ingestion and yet find themselves compelled against their wills to eat.

"What *is* food, that it should be so fearsome and desirable? And why are all these hunger artists so desperate to resist its captivations?" she asks. "Food is the prototype of all exchanges with the other, be they verbal, financial, or erotic" (Ellman 112). That is to say, to eat is to reveal the dependencies and frailties of the self: one must take sustenance from outside the self in order to live. But, particularly if the sustenance offered is not wanted—as the captive may not want to eat the food of the captor—then eating may be perceived as an invasive act, violating the boundaries of the self. She writes:

Eating [subverts] the privacy of bodies, because our bodies are composed of what we eat, and what we eat is always foreign to ourselves. Eating, then, confounds the limits between the self and other. . . . [food] becomes toxic when it reveals the insubstantiality within, the dependence of an inside need upon an outside supplement (Ellman 56).

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<sup>vi</sup> Although she is ironic about her own participation in that trend, claiming that "the theorization of the body has become the academic version of the 'workout,'" an exercise undertaken as a palliative to the previous trend of overindulgence in poststructuralism and signifiers. (Ellman 3)

This dilemma—of requiring sustenance despite desiring self-containment and sufficiency—reflects the conflict in the café scene described at the beginning of this chapter. Hemingway is irritable with the fleshy young critic in part because he interrupts him, but also because of his incredulity—*what are you trying to do, write in a café?*—as though writing is such a self-evidently solitary activity that it is ludicrous in a public place. And indeed, at that very moment narrator-Hemingway had been writing a particularly solitary daydream, but elsewhere the café is shown to be pivotal in his writing process. As a writer, he needs to feed on the stories around him, but fantasizes about making art without consuming—going hungry, as he imagined Cézanne may have done while creating the paintings that captivated Hemingway in his hunger daze.

### **Writing and Hunger**

For Ellman, writing and eating become entangled on that point of needing but not wanting outside sustenance. Writing “voids the mind of words,” Ellman writes; “we do not starve to write but *write to starve*: and we starve in order to affirm the supremacy of lack, and to extend the ravenous dominion of the night” (Ellman 27). While this reverse-vampirism writing sounds a little wild—surely it doesn’t work that way!—it does call out to a particularly romantic view of writing, which entails words or ideas flowing outward from one’s generative genius (as opposed to, say, observing and interpreting the outside world to obtain material for the craft). Ellman traces the roots of this eating/writing connection to the Romantic writers, or perhaps more specifically to the capitalist and industrial watershed moment those writers lived in, when the practice of artistic

patronage was on the decline but attempts to make a living off your writing were still considered unseemly. Ellman suggests that the appearance of vampires and soul-draining demons in this period coincide with the increasing relationship between writing and making a living, which inverted what poets (such as Lord Byron, for example) thought was the appropriate relation of writing.

“Hunger is a Good Discipline” also engages the relationship between writing for a living and food. Some critics have challenged whether Hemingway was ever truly destitute, but in any case this chapter of his memoir he is very concerned with the conundrum of writing for art’s sake and writing to make a living. Working as a journalist earned money for his family; quitting journalism to focus on writing fiction was, in these early years of Paris, a comparatively lean time. Having skipped lunch on the particular day recounted in this chapter, Hemingway becomes plaintive about this dilemma and then angry with himself for complaining; apparently gazing on Cézannes is not sufficiently filling for an empty belly, so he takes himself to a heavy, flavorful German lunch that is described in great detail, lingering over the actions he takes upon it (peppering the salad, mopping up the oil with bread) with evident pleasure.

Despite the elevation of hunger as a higher mode of perception, it’s worth pointing out that this elaborate described meal appears to have the effect of clearing Hemingway’s mind, so that instead of getting angry at himself, he settles back after the meal to ruminate on the problem of hunger and writing with a measure of ironic detachment. He can imagine that he is putting stories into the world that people do not understand, and there is no one claiming to consume them; consequently, the writing he puts into the world is not putting food on his table. “It is necessary to handle yourself

better when you have to cut down on food so you will not get too much hunger-thinking,” he admits. “Hunger is a good discipline and you learn from it. And as long as they do not understand it you are ahead of them. Oh sure, I thought, I’m so far ahead of them now that I can’t afford to eat regularly. It would not be bad if they caught up a little.”

(Hemingway 75). He realizes he must write a novel, which could potentially provide more income than the short stories, but he doesn’t want to do it just for money. In Ellman’s terms, writing is something he is supposed to be *giving*, voiding from himself into the world—emptying himself out, as he imagines in the scene with the oysters—and not something he does to fill to fill the belly, figuratively or not.

This stream of consciousness about his relationship to his audience as a writer foreshadows the conversation Hemingway will have in the café with the critic. “Hem it’s too stripped, too lean,” the critic says of his writing; “too stark, too stripped, too lean, too sinewy. . . . mind, I don’t want it obese” (Hemingway 96). The next day, rather than go to a café, Hemingway stays home and feeds his young son, writing at the table with only the company of the baby and their cat. “In those days you really did not need anything,” he concludes, positioning himself as both a nurturing father and a solitary writer (Hemingway 96). This is a variation on the same fantasy of self-sufficiency, needing to take no food or fuel to generate creative and nourishing output. But of course, the memoir that traces both young Hemingway’s rise to celebrity and the disintegration of his first marriage tells a different story.

## CHAPTER 9:

### THE LITERARY DORITO, OR JUNK FOOD AESTHETICS

In Aimee Bender's *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* (2010), 12-year-old protagonist Rose is assigned to give a class presentation about a twentieth-century invention that improved her life. She brings a party-sized bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos and passes it around the class to sample. She asks her classmates to describe what the Doritos taste like; someone immediately suggests "cheese," but of course Doritos do not really taste like cheese, so Rose asks again. Another classmate suggests that Doritos taste like "that good dust stuff" —a contradictory set of terms, both vague and specific ("that stuff"), appetizing yet repellent ("good dust"). Rose agrees with this description, and segues into her point about how Doritos have improved her life: she can enjoy them with a minimum of effort or engagement.

What is good about a Dorito, I said, in a full voice, is that I'm not supposed to pay attention to it. As soon as I do, it tastes like every other ordinary chip. But if I stop paying attention, it becomes the most delicious thing in the world...

...What I taste, I said, reading from my page, is what I remember from my last Dorito, plus the chemicals that are kind of like that taste, and then my zoned-out mind doesn't really care what it actually tastes like.

Remembering, chemicals, zoning. It is a magical combo. All these parts form together to make a flavor sensation trick that makes me want to eat the whole bag and then maybe another bag.... In conclusion, I said, a Dorito asks nothing of you, which is a great gift. It only asks that you are not there." (Bender 126-7)

Rose's class presentation is enthusiastically received by her classmates as well as her teacher, although the latter takes her aside for a brief chat about nutrition.

The gentle humor in this scene emerges from the inappropriateness of the topic for the occasion: despite the ubiquity of the product and its venerable history (est. 1964), few would consider Doritos to be a suitable topic for a school report, let alone a “great gift” of technology. The way we talk about food of this type—“snack food,” to merchandisers and marketers, and “junk food” to everyone else—clearly positions it outside of what is considered fit or good to eat. To revisit language from the culinary triangle, highly processed snack foods are nowhere near raw or natural on any imaginable spectrum, and they may well surpass what we considered cooked or civilized as well. For some food cultures, like the counterculture punks described by Dylan Clark in Chapter 4, the highly-processed, industrially-packaged, and hyper-marketed snack chips verge on the category of the rotten. Even in mainstream food discourse, it’s common to refer to such snacks as “empty calories,” “addictive,” or “bad”—or to ourselves as “bad” for eating them. Indeed, the kind of thoughtless enjoyment Rose describes in her class presentation is the *bête noire* of many contemporary food writers who champion slower and more complicated foodways.

Despite negative associations with “bad”-ness and “empty”-ness, snack chips are still widely sold and widely enjoyed—which invites some examination of the nature of this pleasure and how it operates in cultural as well as personal narratives about food. On one hand, snack foods would seem to preclude the kinds of aesthetic experience we value culturally, like wine and cheese, regional cuisines or nostalgic recipes; they are designed to deliver fast and simple pleasure, not contemplation. On the other hand, Doritos do not exist outside of the webs of memories, social identifications, and cultivated tastes we regularly build around food. Rose’s classmates definitively embrace the presentation and

the subsequent “field trip” Rose organizes to visit a vending machine; one student literally hugs Rose in delight over the unexpected treat. But to return to the first hand, Rose’s presentation suggests that part of the appeal of snack chips is an abstention from that social or emotional web; they “ask nothing” of her, requiring her to give attention neither to the chips themselves or herself while eating them. As it happens, Rose’s eating habits are influenced by a particular set of supernatural circumstances, which I will explore more fully below, but her unapologetic enjoyment of industrially processed foods is echoed in other writings published around the same time. In particular, a collection of personal essays titled *Vanishing Point* by Ander Monson draws an explicit connection between the pleasure in eating Doritos and its fundamental difference from “real” foods. Both *Vanishing Point* and *Particular Sadness* were published in 2010, just as the American food media and marketing was becoming increasingly centered on regional, artisanal, and organically produced foods. Although snack food has long held a dubious position in broader food culture—at no point has anyone seriously argued that Doritos have an important role to play in nutrition, nor that they are worth contemplating like art—the recent surge in arguments about “good” food practices seems to have made snack foods a weightier topic for literature and the literary essay.

This chapter will explore the ways these two representations of Doritos reflect some of the anxieties of contemporary food discourse. Extremely designed, extremely packaged, and extremely ubiquitous, industrial snack foods nonetheless appear to offer a tantalizingly fast and simple respite from a barrage of consumer choices which ask the eater to consider how and where food is made, what it represents, and how it affects the body.

### **A new era of food discourse**

The tenor of American food discourse began to shift radically in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ongoing issues of food production and ethics, such as sustainable agriculture and humane poultry farming, began to get a bigger platform. Michael Pollan, a journalist and New York Times food writer, published locavore manifesto *The Omnivore's Dilemma* in 2006, followed by *In Defense of Food* in 2008. The former examined food practices in the present era of market-driven and globalizing food choices, exploring the question “What should we have for dinner?” The latter offered an answer the form of a tagline: “Eat Food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” Around the same time, the Italy-based Slow Food Movement was taking root on American shores and campaigning for change in food politics, organizing expos for small food producers and lobbying for healthier school lunches (*Slow Food USA*). As Stephen Schneider writes in “Good, Clean, Fair: The Rhetoric of the Slow Food Movement,” the new millennia introduced a time when it became increasingly common to think and write critically about food; specifically, it became more common to think and write about a food’s provenance and production as well as its gustatory and nutritive properties (Schneider). “Good” food in the new discourse is not just delicious and nourishing but also grown or made ethically, naturally, locally, and so forth.

Indeed, the perception of whether a food is delicious has always been somewhat influenced by such external factors. As discussed early on in this project, the seemingly involuntary responses of pleasure or disgust are already complicated by external properties such as social identity and politics. We also know that perception of external

details such as cost can affect how a subject perceives a food (Konnikova). If landmark media and organizations are causing a shift in how we taste food as well as how we talk about it, it may simply be that factors such as cost and production are more openly acknowledged.

Within the context of rallying cries such as “buy fresh, buy local” and “eat food, mostly plants,” processed snack foods (along with fast food and sugary soda) are often vilified. Such foods are not produced in accordance with “good, clean, and fair” methods, despite occasional snack package claims to healthful ingredients (multigrain, fat-free) or sustainable production (GMO-free, organic). Processed snacks are commonly considered even by those who enjoy them as intrinsically unhealthful, perhaps even deleterious. Although no research has yet proven that the particular additives and ingredients common to snack foods can actually induce chemical dependency in humans, they are frequently compared to addictive drugs. *Salt Sugar Fat* by Michael Moss (2014) crystallized many of these attitudes: the subject of the book was snack food marketing and branding, but the language of the book and many of the author’s think-pieces (most notably “The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food,” 2013) borrowed the language of addiction to cast junk food consumption as a danger.

The artificial flavors that characterize processed snacks are sometimes interpreted as a threat of a more existential kind. As an example that presages contemporary emphasis on organic and localized food experiences, sense scholars Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott argued that that artificial flavoring alienates today’s consumers from natural flavors. In their 1994 collaboration *Aroma* (in a section reprinted in *The Taste Culture Reader*) they write: “modern consumers have come to prefer strong

and straight-forward synthetic savours to their more subtle and complex natural counterpoints. The trend is towards larger-than-life flavours, especially popular among the young” (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 338). They speculate that in the not so distant future, only a few people will have tasted real food in their lifetimes—not only because synthetic flavors are available year-round (unlike the unreliable and seasonal nature of grown food) but because the distilled, simplified synthetic flavors are supposedly more appealing than the flavors they simulate. For these researchers, artificial flavoring—and its corollary in the world of fragrance, synthetic scent—is a post-modern sensory experience:

In the past, essences were indicative of the intrinsic worth of the substances from which they emanated. . . . Today’s synthetic scents, however, are evocative of things which are not there, of presences which are absent: we have floral-scented perfumes which were never exhaled by a flower, fruit-flavored drinks with not a drop of fruit juice in them, and so on. These artificial odours are a sign without a referent, smoke without fire, pure olfactory image. (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 341)

The result, they argue, is that modern consumers are increasingly alienated from “a full range” of sensory expression and bodily experience.

In short, “junk” food as it is discussed by its critics is an uncanny “other” to real food: it is somehow emptier of the flavors and nutrients we associate with real food, yet threatens to overwhelm the senses; it is alienating (from localized networks of production, culture, and sensory pleasure) yet powerfully appealing. Its defenders and vocal supporters are few, aside from the brands themselves. Yet consumers still buy, share, and enjoy processed snacks on a grand scale. Despite their supposedly alienating properties, we still serve them at social and professional gatherings, and eating them embeds the eater in a complex web of social and cultural meanings. Despite their simple

and exaggerated artificial flavoring—“that good dust stuff”—and despite being quite apart from the “good, clean, and fair” standards of contemporary food discourse, they still give pleasure and enjoyment to many. Which is what makes *Vanishing Point* and *Particular Sadness* stand out: these narratives explore the enjoyment of junk food’s uncanniness and put words to what it actually means to eat “a sign without a referent.”

### **Vanishing points**

Ander Monson is a novelist and poet who in 2010 published a collection of essays, titled *Vanishing Point: Not a Memoir*, which meditate on the implications of writing in the first-person perspective. In a summary on the book’s supplementary website, he writes:

The book is about memoir, and it's about me, and it's about you, because it's about us. . . . Even if it's not about me, it's about me, meaning that at least it is shaped by me and holds my trace. Writing about Doritos, which I do gladly and with fervor, makes this about me. (“About”)

Some of these essays examine the problems of narrating from the point of view as an “I” in situations that complicate seeing one’s own self, such as giving a jury verdict or Googling your own name and seeing mentions of someone else by that name. Other essays explore the flip side of consciousness: losing consciousness of one’s self, whether through drinking too much or getting lost in a snowstorm or becoming absorbed in an online multiplayer video game while the bland décor of the chain café around you fades away. If to speak of oneself as an “I” asserts a singularity of self, then the vanishing

points challenge or question where the “I” ends and the rest begins. One of these vanishing points is, for the author, the experience of artificial flavoring.

Monson professes deep appreciation for Doritos in particular, earnest despite the irony of valuing a product for the very characteristics that villainize it in food discourse. Though he notes that he has never had the opportunity to decide whether or not he *likes* Doritos—they are ubiquitous, a well-known brand and common fact of food markets everywhere—he claims to admire their “delicious and hilarious majesty”:

They are the perfect modern snack, honed by forty-two years of snack-making technology . . . ideally salty, artificially flavored, and addictive as anything I can conceive of that is permitted by law, and possibly more addictive than a number of narcotics. (*Vanishing* 148)

The comparison between Dorito abuse and a drug habit resonates with both the broader tendency to consider snack foods addictive (described above) as well as the presentation given by Rose in *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, where she mentions becoming so absorbed in eating that she might consume one or two entire bags. Yet despite the supposed void offered by Doritos, fictional Rose and self-reported Anders become connoisseurs of the brand in particular and industrially-made, artificially-flavored snacks in general.

For Monson, the oblivion offered by salty snack foods is an attraction, but it also a hobby that he cultivates and enjoys performing. In a scene that bears some resonances with Rose’s Dorito lesson, Monson and his wife savor some unlabeled chips and try to guess what they taste like. The context is a contest: the Doritos company had released a mystery flavor and offered a reward to consumers who guessed the flavor correctly. Monson and his wife concentrate on the taste, trying to separate out sensations, much like

Rose asks of her class. In both circumstances, there's more than a little ironic humor in the resemblance to a wine tasting in which aspiring oenophiles hold wine in their mouths and try to sort out subtle layers of taste. Consumers are rarely encouraged to pay such attention to the layers of Dorito flavoring, and Monson's narrative of the experience makes the reason plain:

Like most Doritos, they explode in your mouth: your saliva activates the MSG immediately and you might as well not try to eat anything else besides the rest of the bag for a couple of hours. In fact, you'll try to keep recovering the flavor of those first couple of bites for the rest of the bag, with your taste buds gradually losing their sensitivity. (*Vanishing* 150)

Nonetheless, the two of them taste, guess, and taste again. They locate a citrusy tang amid the ever-present blast of salt, and guess that the chips are supposed to taste like a margarita. As it happens, the chips were intended to invoke another ubiquitous brand known for its explosive artificial flavoring, Mountain Dew. Monson and his wife are not surprised to find that they have guessed wrong, but they are surprised to learn that Mountain Dew is supposed to taste like lime.

This scene dramatizes a more self-aware, knowledgeable engagement with processed food than *Salt Sugar Fat* and "Artificial Flavoring" give consumers credit for. Here are the dissociated flavors and can't-eat-just-one textures that those writers warn us about, but these consumers aren't fooled: the illusions are the selling point, not a trap they fall into. For Monson and his wife and for Rose, the paradoxes of taste aren't uncanny but miraculous. "I appreciate the modern magic here," Monson writes. "You put a chip (itself a form of modern processing magic) in your mouth and it tastes like a cheeseburger, grill flavoring, pickles, yellow mustard, ketchup, onions, and all. . . It is transubstantiation, the transformation from one substance to another, or at least its

effect” (*Vanishing* 148). What Monson is describing sounds a lot like what Classen, Howes, and Synnott would call “signs without referents,” although he engages with it differently than they fear: consuming the approximation of a taste is its own unique pleasure apart, not merely a substitution for the “real” taste.

At the same time, Monson openly challenges the expectation that “real” food should always be preferable to processed, and says that he is much more adventurous with flavors than with food. “Food’s hard. Kind of gross. Difficult to transport and grow without pesticides,” he writes, unmistakably riffing on the rhythm of Michael Pollan’s *In Defense of Food* manifesto (*Vanishing* 152). Where the latter celebrates food that is grown and prepared with little to no synthetic additives, Monson celebrates food that does not require so much knowledge, attention, or *presence* from its eaters. “In terms of *flavor*,” he writes, “I will try anything. Once you disassociate the flavor from the food, the flavor floats up, the word lonely and getting stranger in the sentence without the sensation or connotation of actual food” (*Vanishing* 152). For Monson, this disassociated experience of taste is one of the vanishing points to which each of his essays in this volume circles back. In place of the pleasures of judgment, connection, or desire, consuming the products of decades of flavoring and snack-making technology offers the pleasures of absence and respite; in some respects, this sounds closer to asceticism than to appetite.

Of course, Monson’s pleasure in disappearing is not nearly so complete as Classen, Howes, and Synnott might fear. The self is nonetheless asserted and identified within certain contexts: Monson is a member of a certain culture that produces and promotes Doritos; he is an engaged consumer who participates in contests; he is an

individual who enjoys novelty and illusion. Monson goes on in this essay to describe himself as someone who enjoys introducing friends to unusual flavors or snack food novelties: these snacks offer an abbreviated, exaggerated aesthetic experience, possibly comparable to other artifacts of popular culture which we call eye candy or ear candy. Like certain pop songs and internet memes, processed snacks strike simple, recognizable chords that can easily be shared and enjoyed communally, the way Rose's middle school class enjoys their playful sampling of Doritos. Monson's paean to Doritos, cloaked in irony and self-deprecation though it may be, ultimately supports an argument that enjoying junk food is "real" enjoyment, not an illusion or a refusal.

### **The particular sadness of cooked food**

While Monson may find processed foods easier as well as enjoyable, Rose in *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* actively yearns for the vanishing point they offer. For most of us, the ability to feel connected to other human beings through a lovingly prepared meal is magic, but for Rose it is information overload, and magic for her (even more than for Monson) is what can give her relief from an unbearable connectedness to others. Rose, however, differs greatly from the rest of us because her position as an eater is uniquely intersubjective, not experienced purely as her own personal pleasure or displeasure. In a supernatural twist, Rose develops the unusual condition of being able to taste the emotions of the people who prepare the food she eats.

Rose's sense of taste may be extraordinary, but she negotiates her unconventional superpower in an utterly ordinary California suburban landscape. As Jo Carney writes of

Aimee Bender's short stories, Bender's purpose is not to parody or reproduce a fairy-tale archetypes, but she "appropriates fairy-tale motifs and structural patterns to explore how humans negotiate their strange and incomprehensible worlds" (Carney 221-2). For Rose, that means that everything turns upside down at age nine, when every bite of her lemon-flavored birthday cake is laced with the feelings of neglect and unfulfillment internalized by her stay-at-home mother, who baked it. As Rose enters the strange and incomprehensible world of adulthood, her palate becomes more refined: for example, an omelette might reveal the separate if cacophonous emotions of the dairy farmer, the basil-picker, the butcher, and the cook; even further, she practices and distracts herself by tracking where each of the ingredients originated. As a child and preteen, though, the emotional information of the adult world she perceives in her food is too complex and overwhelming, so she copes by consuming primarily of factory packaged and processed foods. When describing the food she prefers to buy and eat, she frequently uses the uncanny phrase "food made by no one;" in particular, she favors brands that pride themselves on machine production, so the frozen enchiladas taste "blank" (Bender 167). Food made by no one does not confront Rose with invasive glimpses of the internal lives of the makers; neither does it confront Rose with a consciousness of her own feelings or perceptions. For the space of one factory-processed enchilada, she can be refreshingly unaware.

Although her eating habits are supernaturally influenced, Rose's desire to feel nothing—not herself and certainly not anyone else—is not so uncanny, particularly in light of Monson's self-reported pleasure in the transubstantiation and disassociation of Doritos. Within the world of the novel, Rose's predilection for junk food is not

considered extraordinary—especially when she is a teenager, united with her classmates by an enthusiasm for Doritos. Further, Rose’s desire to vanish or forget herself manifests in other relatable ways. As a little girl, Rose is characterized as friendly and eager-to-please; as a teenager, bombarded with bewildering emotional feedback, she becomes quiet, awkward, and withdrawn. But her eagerness to please others remains, to the point that Rose might be said to be subsuming her own desires into those of others: for example, she is enthusiastically befriended by a moody classmate who bakes brownies and cookies for Rose only so that Rose will interpret the emotional landscape whipped into the batter, and a casual hookup partner says to her, “You’re the perfect girl. You expect nothing” (Bender 157). Yet as with her eating habits, her difficulty with social interactions is presumed by other characters to be merely habits of adolescence, or phases that she might eventually pass through like anyone else.

Ultimately, she does. Though her superperception is a lifelong condition, as a college-age adult Rose eventually develops a cooking practice that allows her to mitigate the effects of tasting her own emotions in food by focusing on the feeling of successfully bringing ingredients together. Until that point, however, she enacts a sort of reverse Slow Food movement. She becomes knowledgeable about mass production and factory processing in order to find out which brands pride themselves on no-touch food preparation. While living at home and unable to avoid her mother’s emotionally drenched homecooked meals, she distracts herself from the foreground feelings by tracking individual ingredients to their distant origins. By adulthood she can tell at a taste whether oranges are from Florida or California, and whether or not ham is sourced from an organic pig farm (Bender 95, 272), but Rose doesn’t value local and artisanal foods above

the foods “made by no one”—they serve different purposes for her. If anything, the magical realism of Rose’s condition underlines how individuals eat to satisfy a variety of needs besides nourishment, such as comfort or stimulation, social belonging or escape.

### **Reading and eating in the new food discourse**

One of the biggest criticisms of the Slow Food Movement and similar food philosophies is that it requires a high level of literacy. Eating is a basic need; eating “good, clean, and fair,” however, requires an advanced fluency with food production, sustainable and ethical practices, nutrition, and more. There is an overwhelming amount of information to sort through, and that is even before you address the issues of accessibility, affordability, and fair labor—which sometimes demand solutions incommensurate with and consequently left out of the conversation about “good, clean, and fair.” The riot of convergent emotional landscapes of food laborers that Rose can perceive in an omelette might be inferred by any ambitious student of food practices; to do so for every meal would be unbearable and exhausting. Food is already too hard for many of us, as Monson suggests.

The point of food studies as a discipline is that we *don’t* always explore aesthetic experiences or social connections through food, but those meanings are nonetheless present and available to the reader who wishes to find them. Whether the object of study is a bag of Doritos or an omelette, eating entangles us with communities, with systems of commerce, and with a consciousness of ourselves and our choices. The Dorito makes a

no less valid object of study than any other, easy as it is to forget ourselves when eating them.

**CHAPTER 10:**  
**READING THE FAT BODY**

In *The Age of Innocence*, the conflict stirred up by Ellen Mingott Olenska's return to New York is stage-managed, spun, and presided over by a formidable woman who rarely leaves her own home. Mrs. Manson Mingott made herself a queen of the 1870s social scene by force of will, despite early setbacks such as middling family connections, mismanaged funds, and a purported paucity of personal beauty. As the main events of the book take place, Mrs. Manson Mingott rules over her clan's social appearances, delegating family members to "represent" her on fashionable occasions such as the opera. Mrs. Manson Mingott's blessing is vital to her granddaughter May's engagement and wedding to Newland Archer, and her warm welcome of Ellen Olenska sets the tone for the rest of the family and most of New York society, who might otherwise be inclined to snub Ellen due to her mysterious life abroad and disintegrating foreign marriage.

In addition to her vast and far-reaching social clout, Mrs. Manson Mingott possesses a vast and ponderous physical person. Her bulk is described in some passages as "monstrous" (Wharton 5, 183), and in others as something impressive and monumental. The lengthiest description of her figure positions her as a force of nature, both beautiful and terrible:

The immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her in middle life like a flood of lava on a doomed city had changed her from a plump active little woman with a neatly-turned foot and ankle into something vast and august as a natural phenomenon. She had accepted this submergence as philosophically as all her other trials, and now, in extreme old age, was rewarded by presenting to her mirror an almost unwrinkled expanse of pink and white flesh, in the centre of which of the traces of a small face

survived as if awaiting excavation. A flight of smooth double chins led down to the dizzy depths of a still-snowy bosom veiled in snowy-muslins that were held in place by a miniature portrait of the late Mr. Mingott; and around and below, wave after wave of black silk surged away over the edges of a capacious armchair, with two tiny white hands poised like gulls on the surface of the billows. (Wharton 27)

The tiny hands are a point of pride for Mrs. Mingott; she even compares her petite extremities to her granddaughter May Welland's larger and stronger appendages, lamenting how the *fin de siècle* fashion for playing sports tended to spread a girl's joints. The contrast of Mrs. Mingott's hands and small face with the "flight" and "depths" of her body may position her as grotesque, perhaps inhuman; yet at the same time she is awe-inspiring, like the ocean or flood of lava to which she is compared. In this novel and in their social circles, Mrs. Mingott is a force of nature.

It's hard to imagine anyone describing an obese body as awe-inspiring today, given the furious (though fading) wave of panic regarding the American "obesity crisis" in the present century. To be sure, the 19<sup>th</sup> century of *The Age of Innocence* and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in which Wharton was writing had their own forms of bodily panic: many theorists of the body trace contemporary practices of self-starvation and anorexia to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But arguably the present day has refined the practice of fat-shaming to an art or an instinct; Abigail C. Saguy and Rene Almeling, in "Fat in the Fire? Science, the News Media, and the 'Obesity Epidemic,'" compile a number of early 21<sup>st</sup>-century news sources and science reportage to demonstrate how pervasively obesity is linked to moral laxity and overindulgence. In the present, obese bodies are depicted in popular media as not only monstrous in scale but in appetite, creating an "epidemic" by "gobbling up" unhealthy food (Sagay 59, 67). Although there are numerous factors that influence

obesity, from income level and neighborhood to family history and medical history, fat bodies are commonly read as outward signs of inward disorder and unchecked hunger.

Perhaps the seeds of contemporary antipathy toward fat bodies can be seen in the characterization of figure like Mrs. Manson Mingott. The narrative is very clear that her ample flesh emerged from a sedentary lifestyle, not from eating: in fact, it is noted that one could never expect a good meal or a fine wine at the Mingott house, since her former financial straits had made her very thrifty and she “could not bring herself to spend much on the transient pleasures of the table” (Wharton 14). Nonetheless, she is depicted as a woman driven by hunger, in a manner of speaking. Her painstaking social ascendance and embattled acquisition of her husband’s fortune reveal an appetite for wealth and social position, and there is a shade of the erotic in the way she yearns for Ellen’s lively presence and flirts with her new grandson-in-law Newland. Indeed, as Newland observes the way Mrs. Mingott arranged her living quarters—on the first floor of her home, which reminds Newland and other New York socialites of adulterous love scenes in French novels—he notes “with considerable admiration” that “if a lover had been what she wanted, the intrepid woman would have had him too” (Wharton 28). There is no question that Mrs. Mingott’s peers and relatives view her body as monstrous—that very word is used several times to describe her appearance—but they also admire her and seek to satisfy her.

Mrs. Mingott’s body serves as the touchstone for this chapter, which will delve into descriptions of two more recent obese female characters. Obese characters and obese women in particular are rare in literature; often enough, obesity is used as quick cultural shorthand for laziness or immorality, and it is typically the purview of villains and

supporting characters. When an author takes the trouble to supply a principal character with immense weight, it is often intended to represent monstrous appetite or monumental force—or both, as when the character possesses an appetite for self-destruction. Of this limited pool, I have taken “The Echo and the Nemesis” by Jean Stafford, an enigmatic twentieth-century short story that ends on a mystery, and *The Middlesteins* by Jami Attenberg, a contemporary novel that simultaneously depends on and complicates the semiotics of obesity in the era of obesity panic. Like Mrs. Mingott, the women in these stories are simultaneously reviled and awe-inspiring, viewed by their peers as too hungry, too having, or too undisciplined. Like Mrs. Mingott’s body, their bodies dramatize cultural anxieties about social, sexual, and consumerist pleasure.

### **Reading the Body**

The title of this chapter comes from “Reading the Slender Body” by Susan Bordo, first published in 1989 as anorexia and its cultural implications were becoming a fashionable topic in critical theory as well as pop culture media. Bordo opens the essay by reflecting on how the shape of “slenderness” had shifted over the previous few decades: specifically, she caught herself thinking of female celebrities from the 1960s and 70s as “fat,” although they were objectively thinner than the average woman and had been considered slim in their time. This shift compelled Bordo to define what the new target for slenderness might be: “*Weight* was not the key element in these changed perceptions—my standards had not come to favor *thinner* bodies—rather, I had come to expect a tighter, smoother, more contained body profile” (Bordo 187-8). It is not just fat

itself but bulges on the body that disrupt the contemporary sense of slenderness, and such proturbences operate as a metaphor for “anxiety about internal processes out of control—uncontained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse” (Bordo 189). She pinpoints this shift as taking place around the 1980s: excess weight has been considered undesirable for many decades, but the violent language of battling “bulges” is more recent.

Thus, “Reading the Slender Body” is an exploration not only of bodily weight but bodily restraint, and how this appearance of bodily control is read socially. Bordo argues that body shape tends to be read two ways culturally: it can be a signal of social position or desirability, or it can be taken as an external indication of the internal state of the individual—spiritual, moral, or emotional (Bordo 186-187). Often enough, the body is read both ways simultaneously. Bordo cites political economist Robert Crawford in order to show how capitalist forces shape our attitudes toward the body: as consumers in a late capitalist economy, we are constantly barraged by products and services meant to incite our desires and encourage indulgence; simultaneously, as workers in a late capitalist economy, we are chastised to sublimate our own appetites to become more productive and better workers. Bordo suggests that the “tantalizing ideal” of the slender body emerges from those conflicting demands, and that the ideal of a smooth and contained profile represents “a well-managed self in which all is kept in order despite the contradictions of consumer culture” (Bordo 201). In other words, the slender body encodes anxieties about desire—the problems of how much to want and how much to have are seemingly resolved in a firm, replete form that does not pucker, sag, or swell.

But if a body is *not* firm and contained, it may be read as undisciplined, uncontrolled, willful, or careless. Bordo argues that when we evaluate a body for how well it conforms to an ideal of slenderness, we are evaluating whether an individual has succeeded or failed at “getting itself in order” (Bordo 203). Conflating bodily restraint with personal success can lead toward disgusted or hostile reactions to bodies who challenge the cultural norm—which includes anorexic bodies, which seem to embody refusal, as well as obese bodies which seem to signal an “absence of all those ‘managerial’ abilities that, according to the dominant ideology, confer upward mobility” (Bordo 195). Obese bodies appear to be breaking the social code—language echoed by Maud Ellman in her examination of writing and salvation. Ellman argues that eating can stimulate anxieties about “the insubstantiality within, the dependence of an inside need upon an outside supplement” (Ellman 56). Any ingested substance, even one as necessary as food, proves the autonomy of the self to be a fantasy. The slender body conforms to the fantasy, while “fat people are reviled, since they not only indulge in onanistic pleasures but flaunt them in the unconcealable abundance of their flesh” (Ellman 57). This language, particularly “flaunt,” underlines how easy it is to perceive fat bodies as intentional in both the common sense and in Aurel Kolnai’s sense of arresting attention, as though merely by existing, fat bodies are aggressively signaling.

So the size and shape of the body is overwritten with signs and signals of desire and control, autonomy and dependence, consuming and providing. In addition to all this, it is impossible to talk about slender or fat bodies without talking about gender. After all, the slender body is not only a display of mastered desire but it is also an object of

desire—and as Bordo points out, slenderness is “overdetermined... as a contemporary ideal of specifically *female* attractiveness” (Bordo 204-5). The pervasive mind/body dualism merges with binaries discussed in previous chapters—women are aligned with the body versus the mind, with passivity versus activity, with being the object of desire rather than pursuing desires. To be a slender woman is, paradoxically, to display a mastery of desire while grooming oneself to be an object of desire, and to show the triumph of the mind over the hungry body while the maintenance of the body becomes an preoccupation of the mind. Meanwhile, to be an obese woman is to be seen as weak, unable to resist temptations, unable to endure physical trial; at the same time, obese women are predatory, “flaunting” their refusal (in Ellman’s words). An obese woman refuses to conform to sexual or social standards of beauty; yet, if her body is read as an outward sign of indulgence and appetite, she may also be read as sexual and sexually appealing (consider Newland’s amused, affectionate musing on Mrs. Mingott’s capacity to take a lover).

These conundrums, once picked apart, certainly shed some light on the paradox that is Mrs. Mingott: hers is a figure of both refusal and dominance. She forgoes fashionable sports and promenading, does not leave her house to attend the opera and dine out, or obey any of the social rules. Yet, she rules over New York’s upper class like a monarch. Yet again, her subjects chafe at her mastery. It is no coincidence that the other two obese characters featured in this chapter are similarly imperious; given the way fat bodies are typically read, American literature has not been inhabited by many shy, unassuming obese female characters.

### Reading the unmanaged appetite

Where the slender ideal is a fantasy of a self that can reconcile the competing aims of consumerism, the obese body is invoked to play the role of a self that spectacularly fails to reconcile conflict. Jean Stafford's "The Echo and the Nemesis" is such a depiction. This short fiction story was first published in the *The New Yorker* in 1950, but was later included in "The Innocents Abroad," a collection about unworldly Americans living in postwar Europe and struggling to square their provincial upbringing and romantic expectations with the realities of a war-scarred, socially reshuffled Continent. "The Echo and the Nemesis" centers upon Sue and Ramona, two American-born students at Heidelberg University who become acquaintances from the accident of having a philosophy seminar together and taking coffee at a nearby café afterward. Sue, from whose perspective the story appears to be told, plays the part of the American innocent who feels out of place and unsatisfied with her experience in Europe. Ramona, though she lived in New York at some point, has spent most of her life abroad and closely resembles the shabby, unfashionable members of the deposed intellectual elite who appear elsewhere in this collection.

Everything about Ramona is over-the-top and unappealing as if by design. Her clothing is expensive-looking but mismatched, dirty, and eccentric. Her personality is not winsome; Sue considers Ramona "highfalutin" and "vain of her intellect" (Stafford 36). What sets Ramona apart from the unkempt Continental intelligentsia of other Stafford

stories is her body: Ramona is “obese to the point of parody” (Stafford 36).<sup>vii</sup> Ramona’s body is described as though a petite, ladylike person had put on a layer of excess flesh as a coat; like Mrs. Mingott, Ramona possesses small, delicate facial features which are described as overwhelmed by “billowing surroundings” (Stafford 37).

Sue knows that Ramona’s family is wealthy and well-traveled, but knows very little else about her until they hear “Minuet in G” played in the café while they have their coffee and cake. Hearing the Bach minuet unexpectedly launches Ramona into a manic monologue about her family: her brothers are good-looking, artistic, and adventurous; her parents travel and have affairs; and her ethereal twin sister Martha was the crown jewel until she passed away five years earlier. Sue is stunned by this recital of enviable sophistication and worldliness, but it causes her to see Ramona in a very different and more positive light: instead of a parody of human form and expensive taste, Ramona now appears to Sue as a “*spirituelle*” personality emerging “from the envelope of fat” (Stafford 41). When Ramona’s dialogue places her in line with her elegant family, Sue perceives her as separate from her weighty body, as though the body were an encasement that prevented a more desirable version of Ramona from issuing forth.

On edge from her Pavlovian response to the minuet—which reminded her of dancing with her twin, Ramona playing the lead—Ramona first pushes away her café cake, then eats it to calm herself, then expresses disgust with her eating habits and threatens to kill herself (Stafford 42). She begs of Sue a favor: if Sue will help Ramona

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<sup>vii</sup> Lionel Kelly remarks that this description is “perversely reductive, for a parody of the obese assumes the notion of an acceptable obesity” (Kelly 222). While itself perversely reductive, this statement effectively illustrates the assumptions described in the previous section: that obese bodies are presumed by nature to exceed acceptable limits.

watch what she eats, act as an external guide to prevent Ramona from overindulging, then Sue will be “repaid hundredfold” (Stafford 43)—as though Sue is a maiden in a fairytale. Compounding the shades of fantasy and romance, Ramona formally “begs permission” to invite Sue to a family ski holiday over Christmas (Stafford 41). Sue is reluctant at first, but the ski holiday quickly becomes a powerful lure, particularly given the possible attentions of Ramona’s rich and good-looking brothers. Thus, the project of controlling *Ramona’s* appetite becomes both a means for *Sue* to realize certain desires: social ambitions, possibly romance, and the sort of glamorous travel she had perhaps gone abroad to find.

But the plan goes downhill almost from the start. Despite her plaintive request, Ramona does not cooperate with Sue on the proposed eating regime: she eats an improbable amount of food (“twelve cherry tarts,” “two or perhaps three or four of these little sandwiches”), often furtively, and when Sue half-heartedly reprimands her, Ramona responds with hostility (45, 46). As the impending ski holiday draws close, Ramona’s behavior becomes more and more erratic. Finally, Ramona suddenly retracts the offer of hospitality on the spurious grounds that she can see a resemblance to her dead sister Martha in Sue’s face. Then Ramona is alternately tender and hostile toward Sue; she strokes Sue’s face in the gathering twilight and takes her arm with affection, then (when Sue asks her a question) Ramona slaps Sue and launches into a disjointed, paranoid rant about her family, her doctor, and her dead sister. Apologetic afterward, Ramona invites Sue to come to her rooms for a glass of kirsch. Annoyed but intrigued by Ramona’s evidently convoluted relationship to her family, Sue accepts in order to see a photograph of Ramona’s twin.

Once in her lodgings, Ramona empties all her drawers and cupboards and reveals a lavish, eccentric stockpile of gourmet treats—“cheeses and tinned fish and pickles and pressed meat and cakes, candies, nuts, olives, sausages, buns, apples, raisins, figs, prunes, dates, and jars of pate and glasses of jelly and little pots of caviar, black as ink” (Stafford 51). In front of this high-end smorgasbord, Ramona transforms into an animal, “cropping and lowing like a cow in a pasture” (Stafford 51). Sue is disgusted that Ramona can’t “curb her brutish appetite,” and blames Ramona for the loss of her ski vacation, although to the reader it is never plain that such a vacation would have ever materialized (Stafford 51). There are numerous subtle links between material consumerism and literal consumption through this story, precursors to the class-centric readings of the body explored by Susan Bordo decades later (“The Echo and the Nemesis” was published in 1950). Part of the impact from these scenes comes from the contrast between Ramona’s high-income purchasing power (the clothing made from fine materials, the exotic and gourmet foodstuffs) and her bovine comportment. At the same time, control of the appetite is explicitly linked to upward mobility here: by refusing to confirm to the bodily and behavioral norms that would have allowed both herself and Sue to ascend the slopes, Ramona has descended and (from Sue’s perspective) blocked Sue’s chances for advancement too.

But in addition to this play on consumption and consumerism, there is a sexual undercurrent throughout that reaches a crisis point in Ramona’s rooms. Sue looks at a photograph of thin, wan, and beautiful Martha; the photograph has “Martha Ramona Dunn at sixteen” written on the back, and Sue realizes that Martha and Ramona are the

same person. We now see that Ramona is so far from embodying a controlled and contained self that she has split her consciousness into two selves. From Ramona's ranting, it appears that her psychotic break ("the last night I was Martha") can be traced to a night when an unnamed man entered a room on the pretense of searching for sheet music (Bach, probably the triggering "Minuet in G"). The suggestion is that the man—whether doctor, brother, or father remains unclear—found Martha/Ramona alone, and sexually abused her (Stafford 52).

This implied sexual abuse is often taken to be the origin story of Ramona's obesity and, not coincidentally, her apparent schizophrenia. Some readings of this story reference the work of psychoanalyst Hilde Bruch, whose research suggested a high coincidence between schizophrenia and obesity, and who authored a study linking extreme weight gain to sexual guilt. Lionel Kelly's analysis of Ramona reads as though decoding her by Bruch's key: in addition to linking Ramona's weight and the implied abuse, Kelly interprets her eccentricities of language and dress as well to the "overcompensations" attempted by the obese and/or abused to balance poor self-image (Kelly 224). It is very possible that Stafford was familiar with Bruch's research, as the cause and comorbid symptoms of Ramona's weight bear strong resemblances to the latter's work. Intriguingly, Bruch was certainly aware of "The Echo and the Nemesis," and even cites Ramona an example of "emotional maldevelopment" in her 1970 book *Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa, and the Person Within*. In the present day, these readings may seem reductive and unappealing; in real life, any correlation between obesity, abuse, and disassociation is unlikely to be so pat and glib. Perhaps one might argue that the story is reductive and glib: Stafford transforms Ramona into a beast the

way Narcissus was transformed by Nemesis into a flower, inevitably incurring a vaguely moralizing tone.

But as unappealing as I find this representation of obesity, I've kept returning to this story and its weird antihero. Perhaps it is because Stafford's portrait of Ramona, if parodic and overblown, is also so vividly detailed that one might find many more stories within it. For example, Ramona's performance of gender is no more normative than her taste in snacks or fashion: from her masculine attire to her fond memory of dancing the lead with her imaginary twin to her occasionally courtly and tender manner toward Sue, we might read their unlikely friendship as a queer love story in a repressive era that forbade it. We might probe the uncanny power of Ramona's charisma, drawing in Sue and directing her around Heidelberg as inexorably as Mrs. Mingott ruled New York, despite or because of her perceived monstrosity. We might concentrate our attentions instead on Sue and her hunger for the promises of wealthy worldliness fed to her by Ramona. In any case, I want to sketch out the troubling conflicts of this story to act as a bridge between the monumental Mrs. Mingott and the volatile Mrs. Middlestein, in the next section.

### **Reading the overmanaged self**

*The Middlesteins* was released in the midst of a period of widespread concern that obesity, as defined by a number calculated according to weight divided by height, was becoming more common and more severe. Medical spokespersons are now recommending that body weight should be less of a public health concern, but for the first

decade of the new millennium, the widespread media movement to raise awareness about obesity frequently hedged into alarmist and unsubstantiated claims, often accompanied by hyperbolic depictions of fat bodies as described earlier in this chapter.

Published in 2012, *The Middlesteins* offers a slightly more humane portrait of an obese woman, although it also reveals the perspectives of several other characters who are frustrated or disgusted by her body. This novel follows several members of the Middlestein family in suburban Chicago. Edie Middlestein, the matriarch of the clan, had always been plump but became obese late in her life, and toward the beginning of the novel is diagnosed with an advanced case of diabetes and arterial disease, requiring bypass surgery in her legs. Despite her weight and troubled health, many characters perceive her form as more monumental than monstrous: her friends describe her presence as “sweeping,” like an opera star; her boyfriend, appearing both late in Edie’s life and in the novel, views her full form as “tremendous.” Edie is said to comport herself as a queen, and is certainly a character who carries a lot of presence in an impressive way. Other characters are dismayed by Edie’s body and see it mainly as an outward sign of impending death. Her ex-husband, attracted to her size and curves up to a certain point, views Edie’s body at 300 pounds as a refusal of sexual intimacy. Edie’s daughter Robin, narrator of the first chapter, explicitly believes that “her mother refused to eat properly or exercise” (Attenberg 9), or display a correct attitude toward her body.

That persistent reading of refusal accords with what Bordo mentions about fat bodies being read as lazy or failing to manage themselves properly: here they are reading Edie as failing to take care of herself. But in every other aspect of her life, Edie resists the stereotype of the lazy fat person. She is depicted as ambitious, working as a successful

lawyer for many years (until the other legal partners, embarrassed by her size and wishing her to disappear from sight, offered her a substantial incentive to retire early). She is active in her community and synagogue, logging numerous volunteer hours. She is fiercely loving and loyal of her family. It is only in regard to her own person that she shows a purported lack of care, or even a propensity to harm, which her relatives plainly view as selfish. Edie's daughter Robin, watching Edie consume a meal at a Chinese restaurant in a strip mall, reflects angrily on what she perceives as Edie's negligence embodied by her flesh:

Edie had always lived to help people, volunteering with the elderly, the synagogue, feeding the homeless every Christmas without fail. All those female political candidates she canvassed for. All those family members who needed pro bono work, and she did it without thinking, staying up late after Robin and her brother had gone to bed. God, where was that passionate, connected, committed woman? Robin missed her so. Was she right here? Sitting right in front of her? Was she still there under all that weight? (Attenberg 137)

Not unlike the way Sue saw Ramona's obesity as a sort of "fat envelope" from which a better self might emerge, Robin sees the weight as something separate from her mother and quite possibly keeping her mother from being her true and best self. A reader might even be tempted to sympathize with this perspective—after all, it's a very prevalent one in diet discourse and even evident in the battle-of-the-bulge language examined by Bordo: the body at war with the self, an unruly mass that weighs down the lofty business of the mind.

But Edie's weight is meticulously recorded at the beginning of every section, as are her memories of a busy, engaged life: what emerges is a portrait of a woman who has always hungered, always ate, and always put on weight, all while volunteering, practicing

law for profit and pro bono, taking care of ailing parents, and raising a family. Edie's life is the ideal of middle-class values while her body is read, as Bordo might put it, as a failure to get itself in order.

In some early scenes, Edie's appetite is put into context in her life growing up with Jewish parents who often fed and sheltered Jewish immigrants. There was food for the household, food for the guests, food after religious services, and food as the family discussed politics at home and abroad. During all this eating:

Edie ate everything the men ate, more than the men ate. They smoked, she ate. They drank coffee, she drank Coca-Cola. At night she ate the leftovers. It didn't matter, there was always new food coming through the door. She ate on behalf of Golda, recovering from cancer. She ate in tribute to Israel. She ate because she loved to eat. She knew she loved to eat, that her heart and soul felt full when she felt full. (Attenberg 23)

Edie's appetite is depicted as competitive—keeping up with the adults, particularly the men—and immense, almost superhuman in scope, as she appears to out-eat everyone and still have room for more. But her eating is also explicitly linked to her cultural and political consciousness; it is not an escape, as addictions so are often framed; nor is it a refusal. Eating is part and parcel with Edie's investment and participation in society. It is also, importantly, a source of pleasure.

As a teenager in her parents' house, Edie is not yet obese but her body is substantial, and she is always hungry. Her weight makes her a target of one of her parents' guests, who sexually harasses her while she sits at the table eating. He comes onto her *because* she is eating: he sexualizes her appetite for food, conflating that with an appetite for other pleasures. At the same time, he reads her weight as a signifier of lower status or low self-esteem; he preys on her, in other words, and insults her when she

refuses his advances. But Edie does not consider herself prey. She takes the time to finish her sandwich—“because she was hungry, and because it filled her up, and because she was in her house, in her kitchen, and she was a queen, and because women could rule the world with their iron fists”—and then she screams loudly, effectively ending the interaction as well as the guest’s stay in their home in one fell swoop (Attenberg 28). Far from feeling shame about eating, hungering, or taking up space, Edie’s sense of self and belonging are strengthened by the pleasures of the table.

### **Pleasure and self**

Despite how much bodies are interpreted in terms of desire, when critics write about bodies that resist norms by being too large and/or eating too much, there is very little said about pleasure. But pleasure is essential to Edie’s personality, and it is also the root of her excessive eating. Attenberg lingers over Edie’s enjoyment of the food she eats, describing the satisfaction she experiences in the salty/creamy contrast of chips and dip, the salty, meaty aroma of a McDonald’s, and even the tangy coleslaw on the sandwich she is eating when her parents’ guest harasses her. The emphasis on enjoyment is significantly missing from the media sensationalism of “gobbling” described by Sagay, and it’s even a little unusual in literature scenes of eating: the visual, textural, and aromatic characteristics of food get as much or more space as the more intimate descriptions of how food *tastes*.

Edie's pleasure in eating may drive her consumption, but so does her desire to eat alone and only for herself. This revelation occurs at a crisis point, when Edie as a young mother takes her small children to McDonald's. She grows frustrated with their childish antics and her own loss of her sense of self apart from her family, and she is irritable when her husband arrives to meet them there. He asks if she wants to eat alone, so she moves to another table across the restaurant. At first this seems like a hostile move of one or both parties, because family eating is so important to contemporary ideology, and because Edie feels strange at first: "She sat down with her McRib sandwich and then started shivering, because it was suddenly cold in the restaurant, away from the mess, the heat of her family, the source of her frustration" (Attenberg 99). But after the shock of the change, it becomes clear that eating and enjoying alone is all Edie wanted: "She pulled out the newspaper from her purse. Edie took a bite of her McRib and flattened out the front page. Was this really happening to her? Because this was perfection" (Attenberg 99).

Later in life, most of Edie's pleasure eating is done alone—in cars, at night, away from where others can see, leading some of her family members to assume that Edie feels shame about eating. During the main crisis of the novel's plot, when Edie is between leg surgeries and in the midst of a divorce initiated by her husband, her daughter-in-law Rachelle follows Edie's car and observes her secretly as Edie drives from one fast-food franchise to another, driving expertly and nailing the cleanup: "she tossed her now-empty, crumpled McDonald's bag through her window. A half-beat later, she hurled an empty plastic cup. Perfect aim" (Attenberg 38).

In some ways, this portrait of Edie reflects the dehumanizing language of contemporary depictions of the obese. Here instead of Edie we see her car, with food siphoned in and out of it as though she is a machine or vacuum, which must be how Rachelle sees her. At the same time, this is of a piece with Edie's personality: she is a go-getter, efficient, not one to waste time or money. She eats fast and she eats cheap. To call back to Bordo's theory of contemporary body anxieties: surely Edie's eating habits are the logical outcome of those competing capitalist aims that shape desire.

Although we may find it easy to relate to Rachelle's disgust with Edie's secret eating, which after all echoes some of our worst collective fears about consumption, the narrative allows us a chance to be disgusted with Rachelle too. Her reaction to the family crisis is so become obsessed with correct eating—orthorexic eating—and the meal she provides for her family is intended to be repugnant:

They ate salmon, bright pink, flavorless, and Rachelle eyed everyone as they reached for a pinch of salt, anything to save this meal, and she whispered, "Not too much." Brown rice. "Drink more water," she commanded. Out-of-season strawberries and sugarless cookies that sucked the air out of their lives. There would be no fooling around with food on her watch. (Attenberg 52)

There's no such thing as neutral when it comes to eating: if food has no flavor and does not elicit pleasure, it borders on the disgusting. Her husband and children eat with great effort and no pleasure, raising silent tensions that burst when one of Rachelle's children harms herself in an attempt to run away.

### Reading the dying body

What becomes clear over the course of the novel is that every member of the Middlestein family has some sort of troubled relationship between appetite and satisfaction. Many characters in or adjacent to the family abuses some substance to find their preferred emotional landscape. Robin drinks herself into oblivion—her words. Daniel, her neighbor and eventual boyfriend, self-medicates with beer; through Robin's eyes, his body too is distorted by appetite and escapism, "belly bloated by the yellow-amber-brown stuff, slung low and wide over the belt of his pants, his own personal air bag" (Attenberg 13). Edie's son Benny smokes a lot of pot.

Even in a chapter narrated in first person plural, the perspective of a group of old synagogue friends of Edie's and Richard's, the narrators overindulge at the b'nai mitzvah for Rachele's and Benny's children. These narrators consume out of polite consciousness of how much things cost: "A chocolate fountain appeared in the distance. We were certain we couldn't take another bite of anything, but it would be rude not to sample the wares of the hardworking Hilton pastry chef. And those chocolate fountains didn't come cheap either" (Attenberg 238). But they are of the same generation as Edie and Richard; it's possible that they grew up in houses like Edie's, where serving too much food was both a ward against privation and a celebration of comparative plenty, and waste was unthinkable. Perhaps they also ate for pleasure. In any event, they feel ashamed after: "we ate and ate, and we looked at no one but ourselves until we were done" (Attenberg 238).

But for most of the novel's characters, overindulgence was intimately entwined with death. Watching Edie eat, we're told several times, shocked her family members with the foreknowledge of her death. When she does eventually die, her estranged husband is forced to confront his own mortality when he encounters the copious quantities of funeral food.

Given how important Edie was in her community, her synagogue, her extended family, and law firm. Her funeral is well-attended, and the wake at Benny's house is well-supplied with edible offerings from friends of the family: "kugels and casseroles covered in aluminum foil, fruit salads in vast Tupperware containers, pastries in elegant cardboard boxes tied with thin, curled ribbons" (Attenberg 260). These funeral foods mean many things to many people: respect for Edie's life, comfort for her grieving relatives, perhaps a ward against mortality the way Edie's parents' generous table was intended to stave off hardship. But for Richard, despite his newfound love with a widow near his age, the food makes him think of his regrets over his failed marriage with Edie, and he can't seem to stop eating it. Seeing all the food makes Richard lonely, frightened, and hungry all at once: "When he died—oh God, he was going to die someday—he wasn't sure he'd get the same kind of crowd. Not anymore. He was suddenly consumed with a desire for savory foods, the saltier the better. He wanted his tongue to be swollen with salt" (Attenberg 262).

Richard eats at the wake to feel something, to taste something—and if that feeling is more disgust than pleasure, that is still a way to feel. As he eats himself sick on funeral foods, he appears to find a way to identify with his ex-wife:

It was then he thought he understood Edie, and why she ate like she had; constantly, ceaselessly, with no regard for taste or content. As he stood there, alone, in a room full of people who would rather take the side of a woman who was dead than acknowledge his existence, he believed he at last had a glimmer of an understanding of why she had eaten herself into the grave. Because food was a wonderful place to hide. (Attenberg 263)

It's possible that Richard's realization is intended to be the final word on this story, the story of Edie's pleasure and destruction. It does come near the end, apart from some flash-forward scenes offering glimpses into how the Middlesteins recover from their varying forms of grief and loneliness. But I don't think that this is ultimately the argument of a book that offers so many different perspectives on Edie's obese body. We have ample evidence that Edie loved the taste of things, far from having "no regard" for it; we saw that although Edie often hid her eating, it was not exactly a means for her to hide herself. Arguably Richard's last word on the subject is another example of *mis*-reading Edie's body—one of many in the novel.

Likewise, one wonders what how *The Middlesteins* will be read and mis-read in coming years; as I've noted throughout, the novel allows room for a generous, empathetic reading of Edie Middlestein but also provides plenty of material to position her as an exemplar of American obesity, a monster created by the cheap and easy pleasures and disordered appetites of middle America. Indeed, "this is how we live now" was a theme running through some early reviews of the novel (Kirsch, Orringer). But Edie's body, just as Ramona's and Mrs. Mingott's before her, challenges readings that do not take into account the complex social, sexual, and economic conditions of her era. Food, food practices, and the way we experience them bodily in the present day warrant more nuance than alarmism or dismissive devaluation.

## CONCLUSION

I stated in my introduction that the aim of this project was to study the dynamics of pleasure in literary scenes of food, eating, and hungering. Such scenes are many and varied, and the interpretations that emerge from focusing on food and pleasure shed light on different aspects of the experience of reading, from synesthetic sensory stimulus to understanding character and conflict to reflecting on the transient but meaningful pleasure of both reading and eating. My goal and my challenge were to avoid serving up this array of texts and scenes as a crowded or cluttered buffet of readings—a presentation that is difficult to forestall, as other scholars who have anthologized food essays or designed food studies syllabi may agree. To select one subtheme of the topic or methodology is realize shortly how indebted you are to the ones you didn't choose. I chose to focus on the patterns that emerge in texts across different eras and genres when viewed through a particular theoretical lens, and on the rich ambiguities and meanings these patterns expose. But each chapter is indebted to years of reading and research; for each selected text, there is a great deal of historical and sociological detail left off the page. In my upcoming projects, I look forward to trying out variations of this balancing act by interpreting scenes of eating within more historical context or literary genealogy alongside the theoretical frame.

To justify the order and selection of the literary texts and readings, I aimed to make the claims in each chapter refer back to previous claims until they gradually built up to the longer and more theoretically complicated chapters about contemporary novels—because food discourse in the present day is diverse, complex, and not

infrequently demanding of its would-be eaters and readers. Indeed, it is the complexity of contemporary food discourse that both prompted my initial research and encouraged me to continue thinking and writing about food both in this scholarly context and for general audiences in the form of articles and blog posts. While in my dissertation I deployed the tools of both structuralism and phenomenology to illuminate my interpretation of texts that explore food and pleasure, I experimented on more informal platforms (such as blogs and magazines) with applying these same frameworks to contemporary food culture, with interesting results.<sup>viii</sup> What I learned from these responses is that, broadly speaking, people are hungry for tools to understand even everyday, ordinary eating practices, and everyday scenes of eating can benefit from food studies. Structuralism and poststructuralism are useful in parsing the byzantine landscape of late capitalist consumption. Phenomenology offers a compelling reflection of our own appetites for pleasure and why they matter. Food studies may be gaining traction as an academic discipline, but these methods of reading and interpretation are not merely scholarly concerns. It follows that literary scholarship, with its attention to figurative language and connotation, has much to offer to ordinary consumers as well as academic food studies,

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<sup>viii</sup> Some examples: while Lévi-Strauss is sometimes criticized for the rigid categorization of his food research—consider Mary Douglas’s critique of a “grammar” of food—my explication of Lévi-Strauss’s culinary triangle helped an *American Conservative* columnist articulate his conflicting perceptions of a painful family disagreement over food (Dreher). When I historicized the ubiquity of mint flavoring in toothpaste and mouthwash for a bimonthly food column I once wrote, my essay was reprinted in *Culture: A Reader for Writers* along with several other essays that explored how consumers both shape and are shaped by the availability of certain consumer goods. When I published some early, informal versions of my exploration of junk food aesthetics, I was asked to join a live webcast of writers and professionals who were debating the idiom of “addictive” junk food, a framework which decenters the choice and aesthetic judgment of the junk food consumer (“Hooked”). Perhaps most surprisingly, I wrote a throwaway post describing the palpable and infectious pleasure of reading about Hemingway roasting chestnuts, which was flooded with clicks and comments when it became featured content on my blogging platform (Davis).

despite its comparative scarcity in the latter (which I observed in my introduction). I wrote in my introduction that I hoped to buoy up a case for a greater presence and inclusion of literary studies within the interdisciplinary and constantly evolving field of food studies, but I also believe the literary practices of reading and interpreting food myths, narratives, and metaphors have much potential for application outside of academic food studies as well. This kind of interpretive practice could take many forms, from a more nuanced discussions of contemporary food writing and television (which tends to be written off disparagingly as “food porn”) to increased literacy in dietary research and negotiating the resulting minefield of conflicting nutritional claims.

Finally, I would like address what might be seen as a bias or partiality toward theorizing pleasure in these literary selections, even in chapters where I propose an exploration of ambiguity between categories such as pleasure and disgust or pleasure and asceticism. I titled this dissertation *Food and Pleasure in Modern American Literature* because, for me, both the study of food and the study of literature are inseparable from the study of pleasure. This project has itself been enjoyable from beginning to end; food studies arguably invites an inherently playful engagement with theory and language, given its contradictory stance toward traditional hierarchies of sense and scholarly attention. But the mind resides in a corporeal, irregular, hungering body, and even in the silent satisfaction of reading a delectable poem, pleasure and knowledge are inseparable. Perhaps it could be said that the enjoyment of eating up words—devouring a book, ruminating on an idea, parsing a poem—is what brings many of us to the study of literature in the first place.

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