

Introduction

Eating relations

“Food is the first thing, morals follow on.”

Berthold Brecht, *Threepenny Opera*

“Only a subject that eats can be for-the-other.”

Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*

Eating beans

Hunched over his narrow table, in a stone cellar with a single barred window, the peasant worker peers suspiciously out at us from underneath the brim of his hat (see Figure 1). One meaty hand rests protectively on a hunk of Bolognese bread. The bounty of simple dishes squeezed onto his table makes the narrow space seem cramped. There is no room for another to join him. Will we, who have also stumbled into this hostelry with grumbling stomachs, make a move to take his food? Just try it. He is ready to defend himself and his hard-earned meal. Though his lips do not move, he all but growls, “Leave me be.” He eats alone.

The subject of the painting commonly known as *Mangiafagioli* (*The Bean Eater*), by the Italian Renaissance artist Annibale Carracci, seems the epitome of the individual diner, curled into himself and focused entirely upon his own digestion.¹ He would desperately like to ignore the viewer and concentrate on his food. In his approach to eating we sense suspicion, hoarding, defensiveness, and the closed interior. And these are all surely intrinsic aspects of eating. Hunger wells up within us; we satisfy its physical need without much concern for others. When we are hungry, it's hard to think of anything beyond what will silence our stomachs. Sharing is far from our minds. The hungry belly, as Rabelais' Panurge puts it, has no ears.²

The bean eater, however, cannot entirely escape other people. Much to his annoyance, he has already locked eyes with us; he can't fully ignore the

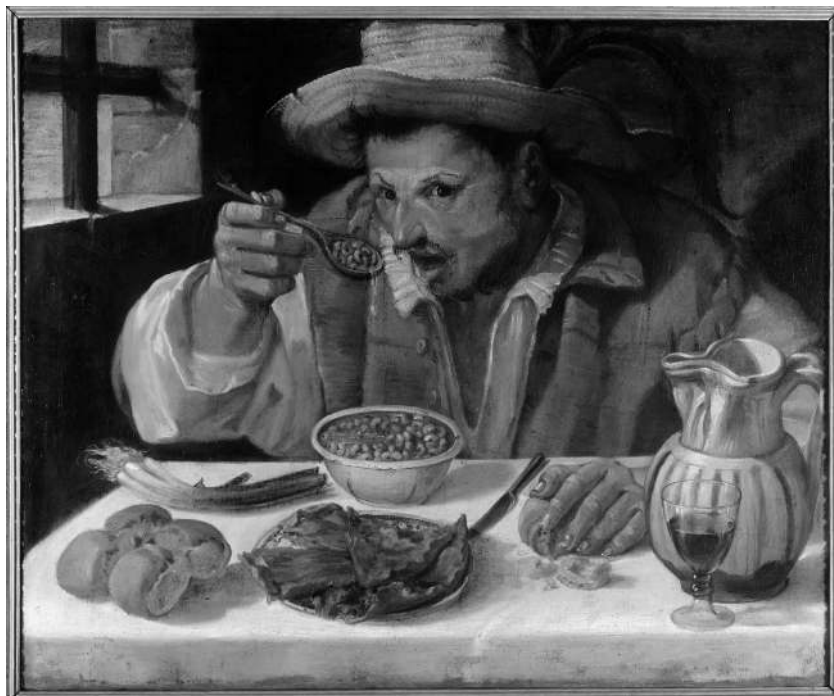


Figure 1. Annibale Carracci, *The Bean Eater* (*Mangiafagioli*) (1580–90).

world beyond him. More pressing, he is eating food that – presumably – has been prepared for him by others, and to whom he is bound through that relationship. Further, the foods themselves – the beans, the bread, the vegetable *torta* – were recently alive. As the bean eater eats them they enter his body and become him. Most likely, if this is his usual meal, he is made of them already. He is inextricable from his food, and from those who made and served it.

What do we know of Carracci's bean eater? Only what he eats, and that he eats. But to know that is to know quite a lot; in some ways, this book will argue, it is to know all. We might begin by pointing out that eating and identity are tightly connected in this painting, and go on to engage in a discussion of what his meal means in socio-economic, geographic, and ethnic terms. Yet to recognize that the bean eater is already entwined in a complex set of relationships – with the humans who grew and prepared his food, with the food itself, and with the earth that nurtured both the

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food and the people – is not only to include but to go beyond these questions of identity. The recognition that eating makes the bean eater a member of a larger community drives us toward a set of ethical questions about our obligations to those creatures – human and otherwise – who feed us, and whom we feed. How are we connected with those who share our table and those who do not? The relationships that form and bind the bean eater, or any other eater, do more than create a local identity – they imply the larger whole into which the eater fits, and against which he struggles.

Eating and Ethics in Shakespeare's England undertakes an exploration of precisely this relationship between eating and the whole. What did it mean to eat, and to write about eating, in Renaissance England? Traditional answers to this question, especially in literary studies, have all emphasized the role of individual choice and consumption. This study instead considers eating from the point of view of community. It examines the ways in which the act of sharing food helps build, demarcate, and destroy relationships – between eater and eaten, between self and other, and among different groups. Tracing what I call these “eating relations” through literary and non-literary texts from 1547 to 1680, I show that to think about eating was to engage in a complex set of discussions about ethical behavior, and ultimately about the nature of the self in its relationships. Eating provided a central means of understanding the relationship between ethics and community-formation in early modern Britain. Put more succinctly, eating creates a relational ethics.

Since virtually every author of the period addressed these issues in some way or other, this book declines to survey the range of attitudes on the subject. Instead, I focus upon several nodal points in writing of the period that bring together the most potent rhetorical approaches. This book gives pride of place to John Bale's edition of *The Examinations of Anne Askew*, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *The Merchant of Venice*, the recipe books of Lady Ann Fanshawe and others, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Montaigne, Ben Jonson, and a host of anonymous or little-known cookery authors play important supporting roles. I can envision a book in which the backbone consisted of Jonson, Herrick, Herbert, and Dryden, or any one of several other combinations – they would make for different particularities, but similar conclusions. Emerging from a historical grounding in early modern culture, the book's arguments reverberate well beyond the Renaissance. In contemporary discussions of eating, we tend to give inordinate emphasis to what we as individuals put into our mouths and why, while ignoring the power of food to build and destroy the lineaments of society. This study

contests that emphasis, offering an account of eating that begins with the act of sharing food.

“A continuall feeding together”

The connection between eating and community is ancient and formative: biological, evolutionary, archaeological, and anthropological research shows that the act of eating together provides a fundamental architecture for human sociality. As the bio-archaeologist Martin Jones points out, most of the behaviors involved in sitting down with others around a table – direct eye contact, “the opening of mouths and the exposure of teeth . . . the placing of food, midway between a group of individuals other than parent and child” – constitute “a clear recipe for conflict and violence.” Yet humans, alone among primates, draw together willingly and continually for “hearth-centered meals.”³ Eating, especially in a communal setting, is one of the few “activities in which person and organism remain intimately connected within a common whole. For all their social shaping and ritualization, [phenomena such as eating together] remain as gateways that interconnect our compartmented selves, points at which social person and biological organism inextricably combine.”⁴

The general term for these communal aspects of eating, in the Renaissance as now, is “commensality.” The word emerged in the early fifteenth century, having been borrowed from French and derived ultimately from the medieval Latin term *commensalis*, com + mensa, “with the table.” From the first, “commensal” meant both the act of eating at the same table, and a member of the company who did so. The term “commensality” first appeared in Randle Cotgrave’s French–English dictionary of 1611, again imported (perhaps fittingly, given that country’s lineage of gastronomic appreciation) from France: “*Commensalité*: commensalitie; a continuall feeding together at one table.”⁵ Almost immediately, commensality came to denote metaphorical and spiritual acts of eating as well as literal ones: Joseph Hall, the influential Anglican bishop known as “the English Seneca,” wrote in the early seventeenth century of “The guests of the great King of Heaven, and the commensals of the Lord Jesus, with whom we do then [at the Eucharist] communicate.”⁶ Renaissance discussions of commensality often point toward religious fellowship as well as the dining table, communion in community. A feeding together always gestures toward a “continuall” feeding; commensality overflows its temporal and spatial bounds, creating ineffable but no less real group identifications in the wider world, especially the theological and spiritual realms.

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Indeed, the use of commensality to describe communal eating in the modern social sciences originates in theology as much as in biology. In his analysis of early Semitic religion, the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian W. Robertson Smith observed:

if kinship means participating in a common mass of flesh, blood, and bones, it is natural that it should be regarded as dependent, not merely on the fact that a man was born of his mother's body . . . but . . . that he was nourished by her milk . . . Again, after the child is weaned, his flesh and blood continue to be nourished and renewed by the food which he shares with his commensals, so that commensality can be thought of (1) as confirming or even (2) as constituting kinship in a very real sense.⁷

Smith's insight captures three major features of commensality in cultural systems: that notions about and literal practices of eating *confirm* the boundaries of community, that these notions and practices help *constitute* community, and that the process of community-formation through commensality often occurs in a theological context, or one with strong religious overtones. These three features, especially the first two, are central to much social analysis of eating. The great culinary anthropologist Mary Douglas, for example, argued passionately that food functions above all "as a medium of relationship."⁸

Today, the relevance of eating relations is a given in the social sciences; as a recent sociology textbook notes, "It is a commonplace of discussions of food and society to speak of the social importance of commensality."⁹ This study builds upon the numerous insights that such discussions have generated. Literary criticism, however, has tended to ignore the word and its social implications, usually addressing food in terms of individual choice, consumerism, and interiority. This book seeks to expand our understanding of eating in Renaissance society. In early modern England, eating, commensality, and community were bound together. When authors imagined the act of eating, they automatically activated a system of relationships both far-reaching and inescapable.

Commensality – eating together – means something different from conviviality, the enjoyment of another's company. To form a group means to exclude others from it; to share food means also to keep others away from the table of power. "It is disingenuous," writes Douglas, "to pretend that food is not one of the media of social exclusion."¹⁰ As the sociologist Claude Grignon reminds us, "Consuming food and drinks together may no doubt activate and tighten internal solidarity; but it happens because commensality first allows the limits of the group to be redrawn, its internal

hierarchies to be restored and if necessary to be redefined.”¹¹ Commensality has a dark side – it is the cultural mechanism that divides the eaters from those who starve, those we love from those we ignore or destroy. The exclusions that commensality creates, the costs of its obligations, and the negative ramifications of its inclusions, are very much at issue in the relations of eating. Eating was used in early modern England to exclude certain groups by privileging others. Each chapter of this book addresses a particular category of marginalized other, including early Evangelicals, Native Americans, Africans, Jews, women, and Catholics. In every case, language and practices of eating help define, exclude, and do violence to these groups – to devour them, spit them out, or toss them aside. Yet this book also demonstrates that these disempowered groups can, and often do, co-opt the same language and practices in order to make, or at least imagine, a place for themselves at the table.

In early modern England, as I will argue, eating was viewed primarily as a commensal rather than an individual act. Anyone who seriously considered issues of eating in the period, therefore, did so within the relational framework of what Robert Appelbaum has called “aesthetic communities.”¹² Eating forced Renaissance thinkers to consider questions about how communities were formed and shattered; the creation and dissolution of true fellowship; the inclusion and exclusion of groups and individuals; the tensions among hospitality, obligation, and agency; and the contested, even illusory, boundary between the self and the world. Further, to think about eating was to acknowledge that the individual did not just have a *relationship* to the world but was *made* of the world, utterly inseparable from it.

At first blush, eating seems highly individual: I take something other than me and incorporate it into me. This is the attitude of Carracci’s bean eater. Yet the ingestion of food is what lets me know in the first place that there is an “other” at all, and my incorporations further remind me that I am entirely composed of absorbed others. At the same time, we eat together, around a metaphorical or literal table, and the fact of the table creates powerful links between the individual and communal contexts of eating. In all cases, eating urges us toward a relational understanding of the self, which in turn forces us to consider the ethical ramifications of our constitution by and in the world. “We should not so much consider what we eat as with whom we eat,” writes Michel de Montaigne.¹³ Montaigne does not mean that what we eat is irrelevant – he spends much of his essay “Of Experience” exploring the minutest details of his diet. He means that even more important than the culinary – the “what” of eating, as the Judaic studies scholar Jordan Rosenblum phrases it – is the commensal, the “how” and “who” of eating.¹⁴ Commensality pushes us toward an acknowledgement

that the self is a kind of necessary fiction, that its boundaries are temporary, problematic, and constantly negotiated. The pressure of that acknowledgment bears upon every aspect of this book.

Eating *contra* food

Against Montaigne's imperative, critics of food in early modern Europe have tended to focus on "what we eat," and may or may not move from there to the question of "with whom we eat."¹⁵ This book takes as primary the question of "with whom we eat," and discusses "what we eat" only in the context of those commensal relationships. To that end, my main focus is not precisely *food*, but *eating*. Phrased another way, I examine food in its modality as a principle of relation more generally referred to as eating. The bean eater glares at us. But the most arresting part of the image, the vector of greatest energy, is the raised arm holding a spoon heavy with *fagioli*. The painting is not about food so much as it is about the act of eating. Our subject is caught at a moment of organic drama – the moment when beans will cease to be beans – taking on instead a new diffuse, unbounded existence within a human body – and when that human body will become part bean. One organism is about to become part of another. We are at the threshold of an everyday miracle. As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas writes with similar astonishment, "To be able to eat and drink is a possibility as extraordinary, as miraculous, as the crossing of the Red Sea. [. . . To] be able to satisfy one's hunger is the marvel of marvels."¹⁶

"What would happen," asks Michael Pollan, "if we were to start thinking about food as less of a thing and more of a relationship?"¹⁷ We limit our thinking about food when we think of food as a mere object. As Anna Meigs writes, "Food, according to our dictionaries, is something material, a thing made up of different kinds of similarly impersonal and material things."¹⁸ Some objects can, but do not have to be, relational: rocks do their own thing without humans around to define them. Food, however, is not *only* or *precisely* a material object, a "thing" one simply eats, digests, and excretes. It is more properly a function or relationship, like a language – a dynamic inhabiting of the nexus between earth and human, idea and sustenance, divinity and mundanity, ideology and instrument.¹⁹ Evidence for this adage might begin with the thought that the categories of "edible" and "food" are hardly coextensive.²⁰ Plenty of organisms are biologically edible, but only a comparatively small selection of them meet the cultural definitions of human food. Further, these definitions change from culture to culture, from situation to situation within culture, and sometimes even from moment to moment within a given situation (if a spoonful of yogurt

falls on a clean floor, will it be eaten?). We ourselves are a prime example of this phenomenon: in most situations and in most cultures, humans are not considered food, though all but the toughest of us are edible. Yet in certain cultures at certain periods, as well as in times of starvation in any culture, human bodies have provided culinary sustenance. On the other hand, an organism may be recognized as food but not considered edible, as is the case with pork in traditional Judaism and Islam. Food has no *a priori* existence, and there is little more fixed relationship between food and edibility than between word and meaning. An organism becomes a food only when created as such.

The process by which an organism does become food is complex. A cow becomes beef only when it is translated into culturally legible nutriment, a transformation that includes not only ranching, butchering, packaging, cooking, and presentation, but also the psychic work of establishing divisions between things we imagine as food and things we don't (witness the dog in North America as compared with the Philippines, or the cow in Hindu India as compared with North America). Depending upon choices made in that cow's preparation and presentation, the resulting beef may function in many ways, may share in one or another complex code. As linguists have pointed out, many languages, English especially, have developed different words to describe animals as beings from the same animals as foods, such as cow/beef and pig/pork, though interestingly this is not generally the case with fruits and vegetables.²¹ Such linguistic evidence helps to both identify and maintain the boundary between organism and food. It suggests further that when an animal becomes a food, it is transformed from the perspective of human consciousness. The animal is now defined by its relation to us, rather than by (or in addition to) an intrinsic set of qualities. This seems to me about as close to a transhistorical truth as it is possible to achieve when the subject of food is under discussion. Food may be a culturally, temporally, and historically contingent phenomenon in nearly all of its aspects, but its relationality – the way in which it both constitutes and confirms relationships among people, the earth, and divinity – cuts across these boundaries. Indeed, we may put it more directly: the relationality of food *is* the chief quality that makes eating a culturally, temporally, and historically contingent phenomenon. Because food is not a static fact, but instead exhibits elasticity of meaning and function, its character changes from one context to another.

Rather than struggle constantly against grammar in order to assert that food is more a relation than an object – which is another way of saying that it is more a verb than a noun – I will be using the term “eating” to mean

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“food in its relational mode.” When I use the term “food,” this relationality will be implied. This is why the book is about *eating* and ethics – the term “eating” already connotes the relationship inherent in food, the ostensible object of eating. To eat is a verb, and the food we eat is also verbal, or at least tends toward the condition of a verb. As Douglas again puts it, “Food is a field of action.”²² All these terms remind us that food is a conduit for our relationship to our bodies and to the communities of which we are a part. Eating is food as principle of relationship.

The self in the age of relation

If eating is inherently relational – though the terms of those relations may shift among cultures and times – critics have traditionally hesitated to say the same for the self. Since Jacob Burckhardt famously called the Italian Renaissance the age of individualism, scholars have battled over how relational the early modern subject may have been. Recently, however, a cross-disciplinary consensus has emerged that emphasizes the inextricability of self from the social, linguistic, biological, and philosophical networks and ecologies of which it is a part. For example, social historians such as Keith Wrightson and Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos argue, in Wrightson’s words, that “individuals derived their identities from their place within a complex of interdependencies. Those relationships might constrain, but they also empowered and enabled; they were essential to the successful pursuit of individual goals. There was no categorical distinction to be drawn between selfhood and society, for the one was not meaningful without the other.”²³ Economic historian Craig Muldrew, in a study of what he terms the “economy of obligation,” argues that early modern England developed a “social structure of trust” in which “credit was a public means of social communication and circulating judgment about the values of other members of communities” – in which economic activity increased individuals’ sense of relation and obligation to each other and to society as a whole, thereby producing a “moral economy” founded upon community relationships.²⁴ The literary critic Jill Phillips Ingram follows Muldrew in arguing that “idioms of self-interest” arose at the same time as this economy of obligation was taking shape, operating “in accordance with the social theory of trust and contract.”²⁵

Approaching the issue from a rhetorical perspective, Peter Stallybrass has shown that during the Tudor–Stuart period, according to the definitions of “individual” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “the uses of ‘individual’ suggesting indivisibility and those suggesting divisibility emerge *together*.”²⁶

He goes on to argue that in Shakespeare's work, the term "individual," whatever its range of possible meanings, suggests a *relation* of part to whole, of part to part, of member to body, of body to body, not a separate entity," and that this emphasis upon a relational self remains normative at least through the middle of the seventeenth century.²⁷ One might make the same case by looking at any number of other terms of relationship. Let's take the word "obligation." The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites ninety-two distinct variations of the term "obligation."²⁸ Of these, fifty-nine emerged between 1500 and 1700. Twenty-eight of the ninety-two variations had disappeared by the end of the eighteenth century. A similar pattern may be seen in versions of the word "duty."²⁹ In other words, the English language gave birth to a multitude of terms describing relationships of obligation and duty during the Renaissance, and many of these terms vanished soon afterwards. Such a labor of language suggests that the very question of what it means to be in relationship was very much in flux during the period. To judge by the production of new words and senses alone, the issue of relationship was of pressing concern – perhaps of greater concern than in any period in English history before or since.

Alongside these overlapping investigations of social and rhetorical ideas of selfhood has emerged a corresponding account of the biological and psychological self as interwoven with its environment. Historian Timothy Reiss's magisterial and influential *Mirages of the Selfe* describes a fungible pre-modern self whose boundaries are in constant flux. The "material world, society, family, animal being, rational mind, divine," Reiss argues,

named some of the "circles" which were a person. These circles or spheres . . . did not "surround" a person who somehow fit into them. They were what a person was: integral to my very substance. At the same time they were public and collective, common to everyone qua human. They named existential spheres to which the person enlaced in them was in a reactive relation.³⁰

This self, "pervious and tied to divine, social, material spheres and historical community, underlay western experience from Petrarch until Michel de Montaigne, even as dissonances appeared."³¹ Reiss's account of the self has proven fruitful for literary critics, especially scholars of what Gail Kern Paster has called "psychological materialism" – the humoral mind-body of pre-Enlightenment Europe. Paster's call for an account of "how subjectivity in the humoral body is regularly breached and penetrated by its phenomenological environment" has been answered by a host of scholars, including Katherine Rowe, Mary Floyd-Wilson, and Paster herself.³² As the