

Introduction

You Are What You Eat: Thinking Food Otherwise

“You are what you eat” is a popular phrase that this book dares to take entirely seriously. Since 1825, when Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote, “Tell me what you eat and I shall tell you who you are,” the phrase has assumed multiple significations.¹ A quarter of a century later, a variation of it appeared in Ludwig Feuerbach’s “Natural Science and the Revolution” (1850), a review of Jakob Moleschott’s *The Theory of Food* (1850). Here, Feuerbach declared: *Der Mensch ist was er isst*, “man is what he eats.”² Far from a mere play on words, Feuerbach was making a bold claim with this phrase: he was basically suggesting that the failure of the German revolution (1848–1849) was a consequence of the army’s consumption of non-nutritional food. Some decades later, the nutritional sense that Feuerbach had ascribed to the expression, minus its explicitly political significance, emerged in the Anglophone world in a different context: it appeared in an advertisement for beef published in *Bridgeport Telegram* in 1923, which stated that “[n]inety per cent of the diseases known to man are caused by cheap foodstuffs. You are what you eat.”³ In the 1940s, the publication of nutritionist Victor Lindlahr’s *You Are What You Eat: How to Keep Health with Diet* (1942) came to support the advertisement’s claim and helped to popularize the health-based sense of the phrase. And, recently, attorney Paul D. Swanson has exposed some of the ways in which this health-based sense is exploited in the market today.⁴

In this book, I embark on the task of reading the phrase *otherwise* – in a more philosophical way. More specifically, I seek to extrapolate its ontological implications. Today, to say that “one is what one eats” is, of course, to use a cliché, and it is perhaps its status as such, a mere cliché, that has prevented us from exploring its ontological implications – from attending, that is, to what it might have to say about the idea of being. There is even an etymological connection between eating and being; as Christian Moraru points out, the infinitives of the verbs “to be” and “to eat” are identical in Latin (*esse*).⁵ We will here uncover connections between the alimentary

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and the ontological – between what and how one *eats* and what one *is* – by asking questions like: What can eating tell us about being, about our being in the world, and about our subjectivity and agency? Do we become who we are through what and how we eat? And if we are what we eat then do we eat what we are? In Elspeth Probyn’s words, “Do we eat or are we eaten?” Or, as she puts it in “less cryptic terms,” “do we confirm our identities” through our eating, or are “our identities reformed and refracted by what and how we eat?”⁶ In short, does one’s eating affirm, preserve, and even determine one’s being? And, if so, then might one *eat otherwise* in order to *be otherwise*?

In the course of this book, such questions will be considered in relation to the literature of the twentieth century. Indeed, when Moraru flags up the identity between the infinitives “to be” and “to eat” in Latin, he points out that “an entire modernity, complete with its postmodern aftermath,” associates the alimentary with the ontological.⁷ Moraru’s claim, though, appears in a six-page essay which clearly cannot hope to investigate the matter in depth. This book aims to do precisely this. It uncovers instances in which the alimentary is entangled with the ontological in the work of (primarily) four influential twentieth-century authors. It focuses on two modernist figures, or representatives – namely, Georges Bataille (Chapter 1) and Samuel Beckett (Chapter 2) and on two postmodernist figures, or representatives – namely, Paul Auster (Chapter 3) and Margaret Atwood (Chapter 4). It concentrates on *strange* or *unusual* acts of eating in their work – acts of “eating otherwise” – which allow for the emergence of a philosophy of food that points to a conception of being as material, as dependent on the here-and-now, and as potentially mutable. To put it another way, this book is about acts of eating otherwise that bespeak the possibility of being otherwise.

This engagement with acts of eating otherwise as means to ways of being otherwise is informed by a little-known figure: Michel Foucault’s alimentary “monster.” In a series of lectures delivered at the Collège de France in the mid-1970s, Foucault elaborated on the concept of “abnormality,” a context in which he discussed the figure of the “monster,” identifying two of its forms: the sexual and the alimentary.⁸ Foucault proceeded to engage in detail with the sexual “monster,” arguing that, in the nineteenth century, this mutated into the figure of the “sexually abnormal individual,” but, as Chloe Taylor has pointed out, “the alimentary monster is forgotten.”⁹ In this book, I take up Foucault’s forgotten alimentary “monster,” bringing it forward to the twentieth century and its literary scene, albeit in a way that is different from Taylor’s. *Eating Otherwise* does not

imitate Foucault's task by identifying eating practices in the twentieth century that are explicitly or implicitly regarded as "abnormal" in the way that Foucault identifies sexual practices that came to be regarded as "abnormal" in the nineteenth century. Rather, what is here drawn from Foucault are the ontological implications of his understanding of the concept of "monstrosity." "[W]hat defines the monster," Foucault declares in one of his lectures, "is the fact that its existence and form is . . . a violation of [both] the laws of society . . . [and] nature."¹⁰ Neither a creature of society nor a creature of nature, the monster is a being that is difficult to classify and thus a being that raises the problem of being. To put it simply, Foucault's "monster" tells us that our being – who we *are* – is conditioned by materiality, by natural and societal norms; if one does not conform to those norms, one is regarded as "monstrous." This, in turn, tells us that "monstrous" forms of being are therefore possible, that ways of being otherwise can be brought forth through materiality, through behaviors in the here-and-now that do not subscribe to societal or (what are seen as) natural norms. Eating is, of course, a particularly prominent example of a material practice that is explicitly bound by both societal and natural norms; as such, and in the light of Foucault's insights, the possibility emerges that acts of eating otherwise might bring forth ways of being otherwise. It is with this in mind that the coming chapters will examine alimentary "monstrosities" in twentieth-century literature.

The literature of the twentieth century, particularly in its modernist and postmodernist manifestations, is widely seen as experimental, and the acts of eating otherwise explored in this book constitute a striking aspect of this experimentalism, an aspect which has not yet received due attention. Not only does the unusual and, at times, shocking treatment of the alimentary in much of twentieth-century literature add to our understanding of its experimentalism but, as will become clear by the end, it also constitutes part of wider narratives about modernity and postmodernity, offering an alimentary perspective through which the very relationship between modernism and postmodernism can be considered.

Gastrocriticism

Before we begin thinking the "you are what you eat" adage otherwise, as outlined above, an overview of the ways in which it has so far been thought within the academy is in order. With the rise of food studies, the question of eating has come to be explored from a variety of angles; in their examinations of alimentary matters, food scholars choose from an array

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of possible perspectives – agricultural, anthropological, archaeological, artistic, cultural, ethical, geographical, historical, legal, literary, medical, mythological, philosophical, sociological, and theological ones.¹¹ In the study of food in literary criticism – or “gastrocriticism” – we witness the employment of a vast spectrum of such perspectives, and understandably so, given that the literary imagination recognizes no disciplinary boundary.

There is, for example, a strong interest among gastrocritics in the historical specificity of literary references to food. As Joan Fitzpatrick puts it in her overview of the study of food in literature, gastrocritics see as “an important part of [their] job” the task of “explaining obscure foodstuffs and attitudes toward feeding that a modern reader might not grasp.”¹² Naturally, this attempt to illuminate alimentary obscurities is mostly undertaken in examinations of literature written prior to the twentieth century. Thus, the first monograph on food in Shakespeare, written by Fitzpatrick herself, engages closely with early modern dietary theories, providing a “historically accurate account of the range of, and conflicts between, contemporary views that informed the representations of food and feeding in [Shakespeare’s] plays.”¹³ Robert Appelbaum is also interested in the “historically and geographically specific conventions” present in the literature of the early modern period; in *Aguecheek’s Beef, Belch’s Hiccup, and Other Gastronomic Interjections* (2006), he argues that those conventions ascribe to food “a set of . . . identities” which he sets off to examine.¹⁴ In other words, if one is what one eats then, for Appelbaum, this is so within specific historico-geographical contexts.

This is an insight that is also present in Denise Gigante’s *Taste: A Literary History* (2005), which focuses on the Romantic period and demonstrates the “essential role” of the concept of taste “in generating” the “very sense of [the Romantic] self.”¹⁵ For his part, Timothy Morton makes reference to a specific form of the Romantic self; in his introduction to *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism* (2004), he argues that “in the Romantic period the notion of consumption as performance . . . generat[ed] such specific roles as that of the bohemian.”¹⁶

In addition to the alimentary-related formation of such roles, attention to historico-geographical specificity has also led gastrocritics to investigate the ways in which food contributes to the construction of national identities. Annette Cozzi, for example, focuses on the Victorian novel, identifying food-related “anxieties” emanating from imperialism and industrialism that “directly affected how [national] identity” was both “constituted and consumed” at the time.¹⁷ Tomoko Aoyama’s *Reading Food in Modern Japanese Literature* (2008) also brings up questions of

cultural and national identity but within a non-Western context; Aoyama's book thus shows that food assumes similar functions in literature from around the world.

The task of pinning down alimentary-related formations of cultural and national identities is a complex matter, and Roland Barthes has pointed toward some of the complexities entailed in such a task. In the "Steak and Chips" chapter of his seminal book *Mythologies* (1957), he says that steak is a food that is "nationalized" in France, and that eating it is associated with a sense of national virility, but he immediately acknowledges that the idea of the steak being "a French possession" is "circumscribed today . . . by the invasion of American steaks."¹⁸ The issue here is that beef-eating has a similar signification in two different cultures and nations, which makes the association of a foodstuff with national identity problematic. Indeed, Erica Fudge shows that the same association between beef-eating and national identity/virility (which Barthes finds in France and America) has also been made in reference to Britain. In fact, Fudge goes further than this, arguing that meat-eating in general, and not just beef-eating, is associated with strength and virility across various nations and historical periods.¹⁹

Allison Carruth's important monograph *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (2013) partly draws on these insights. As the title of her book suggests, Carruth is on the one hand concerned with a specifically American context and, on the other, with a global context. In particular, she "question[s] a central premise" within globalization theory – namely, that the "spaces of production and consumption" are separated as a result of global capitalism.²⁰ Carruth's work thus pushes the gastrocritical inquiry beyond the mere pursuit of associations between food and nation in locating food production and consumption within a global context.

In light of the above, it is clear that the gastrocritic's attempt to pin down alimentary-based formations of national identity in literature does not simply consist in linking up literary representations of the alimentary with isolated geographical contexts. Involved in this, as we can extrapolate from Barthes's and Fudge's observations, is also a process of what we might think of as "myth-making," which tends to traverse strict national boundaries. Indeed, many food scholars draw on Claude Lévi-Strauss's work, which shows that the significances of food are deeply embedded in mythology.²¹ In *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (1999), for example, Carole Counihan draws on Lévi-Strauss in her exploration of the meanings of food in "stories told to children," and finds that, in many of these stories, "proper eating represents humanness and effective socialization."²² What is at stake here, then, is

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something much broader than national identity: the identity of the human as a socialized being.

Related to this are studies like Suzanne Skubal's *Word of Mouth: Food and Fiction After Freud* (2002), which reads food in relation to psychoanalytic theories – theories that deal with the universal, not the nationally or culturally specific. When, for example, Melanie Klein theorizes the ambivalent feelings of love and hate toward the parent on the basis of the nourishing “good breast” and the withdrawing “bad breast,” these are understood to be feelings that mark the human psyche in general rather than feelings which are determined by historical, geographical, or national coordinates.²³ Similarly, when Julia Kristeva theorizes the constitution of the human subject via the process of abjection – which, she argues, begins with food-related abjection – this is a general theorization of the constitution of the subject (or “abject”) rather than a theorization of the constitution of a specific national or cultural identity.²⁴

Given that Freudian psychoanalysis is highly preoccupied with sexuality, and that both Klein and Kristeva emphasize substances like milk in their analyses, it is no wonder that the identities emerging from psychoanalytically informed investigations of food are often gendered. Gender identity is, in fact, a major focal point in gastrocriticism in general, something that is also discernible in Barthes's and Fudge's references to the association between meat and virility quoted above. In *Making a Man* (2009), Gwen Hyman engages not so much with how food is associated with the notion of virile masculinity but, rather, with the notion of the gentleman. Beginning with the premise that “the table is the site of self-fashioning,” Hyman proceeds to examine how gentlemanliness is conceptualized through attitudes to food within the nineteenth-century British novel.²⁵ In *A Taste of Power* (2015), Katharina Vester engages with “manly cooking” and “negotiations of ideal masculinity” – from Ernest Hemingway's “campfire cooking” and “rugged masculinities” to “hard-boiled cooking” in the genre of the American noir, to “the rise of the gourmet.”²⁶ Vester, however, is not only concerned with masculinity but also looks at “what lesbians eat,” examining, among other things, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) and Alice Toklas's *Cookbook* (1954), texts which we shall have occasion to discuss in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.²⁷

It is, indeed, mostly in relation to women rather than men that gastrocritics tend to examine the gender politics of food. Sarah Sceats's monograph *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2000) is an important example of a literary study of female appetites. Here, Sceats examines the “central and multiple significances of food and

eating” in terms of the formation of female identities, and does so in “relation to [the] specific historical and geographical contexts” of selected literary texts authored by women.²⁸ Also engaging with the subject of women’s appetites, Patricia Moran and Tamar Heller point out that these appetites are condemned in religion. In their introduction to *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women’s Writing* (2003), Heller and Moran begin with Eve’s transgressive consumption in the Fall narrative, a narrative according to which “sin and death enter the world when a woman eats,” and proceed to overturn this condemnation through the work of feminist thinker Hélène Cixous.²⁹ Andrea Adolph, on the other hand, approaches the subject of women and food from a different angle; Adolph focuses on challenging the mind/body split by looking at representations of food in fiction written by twentieth-century British women authors, representations that, she argues, form part of an attempt to arrive at a unified female subjectivity.³⁰ Other important thinkers, such as Carol J. Adams, flag up traditional conceptualizations of female identity as animalistic – conceptualizations that are also traceable in fiction – in order to make the case for a feminist vegetarianism.³¹

Gastrocriticism, then, is very much preoccupied with the question of identity; as this overview suggests, at stake in gastrocritical explorations is the investigation of food in relation to wider contexts, which almost invariably leads to the extrapolation of certain historico-geographical, national, political, or gendered identities. Regardless of the perspective adopted, then, gastrocritics draw correlations between what one eats and who one is. This correlation, I would argue, can be seen as the very premise of gastrocriticism; it is both its philosophical ground and the wider philosophical conclusion that it points toward as a field in its entirety. This, however, still remains by and large unacknowledged; for, in concentrating on a particular perspective (for example, historical, geographical, national, cultural, or political), individual gastrocritical works end up ignoring or even effacing the more general, philosophical link between questions of eating and questions of being – the very link that they themselves help to trace when considered collectively. *Eating Otherwise* draws on this collective gastrocritical insight: it explores the philosophical correlation between eating and the question of being, which, despite underpinning the gastrocritical project as a whole, has so far remained implicit. Each of the following chapters will focus on this correlation and what it reveals about questions of subjectivity, agency, and action in the literature of the twentieth century and, in particular, the modernist and

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postmodernist movements. In flagging up and engaging with what I see as the general, philosophical premise of gastrocriticism – the correlation between the alimentary and the ontological – and its implications for subjectivity, agency, and action, it is not my intention to ignore historical specificity; indeed, as much is suggested by the fact that these philosophical themes will be explored in relation to literature produced within a specific century. The aim, in other words, is not to privilege either the general or the specific but to think about them in conjunction with one another.

I Eat Therefore I Am

It ought to be said, at this stage, that the task undertaken here, the task of exploring the question of eating together with the question of being, would no doubt seem incongruous to those who associate ontology with a “universal above” or “beyond” – an “above” or “beyond” that is seen as incompatible with the act of eating, located as this is in the realm of the here-and-now. It is this perception of incompatibility or incongruity that I want to begin challenging here, by looking at various alimentary moments in the history of Western thought which point toward a different conceptualization of ontology. This is an ontology that almost rewrites the Cartesian cogito as “I eat therefore I am.”

The traditional association of ontology with a universal “above” or “beyond” puts forward a conception of being that is effectively detached from the material forms that “instantiate” it; this, therefore, is a conception according to which being remains immune to the change or mutation that these material instantiations can manifest. To briefly demonstrate the point, let us take as an example an egg – the perfect symbol of being in various mythological and philosophical contexts (to which I will return later). Or, rather, let us take *three* eggs and observe that they have something in common, which is, of course, that they are all eggs. Based on this, we can say that they all instantiate what we might call “eggness.” These three eggs, however, may well exist in very different ways: the first may be boiled; the second may be under the hen, developing into a fledgling; and, finally, the third may have the form of powder and, unlike the first and the second egg, has neither come from nor will turn into an animal but has, rather, been created in the laboratory. In the course of this book, we will encounter such different instantiations of “eggness.” In Chapter 1, we will find both boiled and raw eggs that are eaten through the mouth or otherwise. In the same chapter, we will also discuss the

Futurist dream of food – eggs or otherwise – as powder. In Chapter 2, we will encounter a character with a taste for eggs that contain not only white and yolk but also feathers. In Chapter 3, “eggness” will feature as a symbol in a theory of being, and in Chapter 4, we will find boiled eggs that are associated with yet another type of egg, the human ovary. While these literary cases will present us with a different conception of the ontological, the conception I am seeking to demonstrate now would state that “eggness” remains unaffected by the differences we have identified in some of its possible material instantiations. To generalize, this is a conception according to which being is “located” in an (un-locatable) otherworldly realm that remains detached from the material world in which it is instantiated. Being is, in other words, predetermined, immaterial, immutable, and thus admits no cultural difference.

This is, of course, a very schematic account of a traditional conceptualization of ontology – a version of ontology that immediately brings to mind Plato’s “Ideas” or “Forms.” Yet, if we were to turn to Plato and look at his treatment of the materiality of life through what he has to say about the need to eat, a rather more complex picture seems to emerge. Consider, for example, that Plato’s belief in Ideas or Forms includes a belief in the Idea or Form of “humanness.” In simple terms, this means, among other things, that he thinks that humans differ in their essence from other animals. But the fact that both humans and other animals need to eat presents a danger of ontological indistinction: if both human and nonhuman animals eat alike, then their eating does not reflect their ontological difference but instead threatens it. It is for this reason that Plato prescribes certain *ways* of eating which are, for him, “proper” to the human realm. These are ways of eating that, in his mind, affirm humanness “proper,” protecting it from the alimentary threat of a merge with nonhuman animality. Thus it is that, in the *Republic* (ca. 288–360 BCE), Socrates speaks in disdain of those “lawless appetites” that characterize our “bestial and savage” part, the part that would “refuse” “no food” – the very part that he implores us to strive to hold “back in check” by reason, by our “rational, gentle, and ruling element.”³² It is as though the instantiation of the Idea or Form of humanness is here thought to rely on following Socrates’ dietary prescription rather than being taken for granted: only when we manage to hold our appetite “in check” do we properly actualize our essence. The implication, therefore, is that, in the instance of eating otherwise, of breaking the Socratic diet, one might end up being otherwise. Looked at from this alimentary perspective, then, being in Plato turns out not to be detached from materiality but seems, on the contrary, to be very

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much dependent on it, so much so that how (or, better, how much) one eats can determine what one is.

A similar dynamic is found in the Bible, where eating appears to reflect, maintain, or even construct ontological differences between humanity and divinity. As in the case of Plato, the implication here is that the ontological depends, at least partly, on the alimentary. Note how, according to the book of Genesis, the prelapsarian humans eat “every herb bearing seed” and the fruit of trees “yielding seed” (Genesis 1:29–30). Exempted from these, we are told, is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; such knowledge is reserved for God. And so, when Adam and Eve disobey and eat of this tree, they enter a different ontological state, having crossed one of the dietary lines of distinction with the divine: they have now come “to know good and evil” like God (Genesis 3:22). In response, God establishes another ontological distinction by expelling man from the Garden – “lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Genesis 3:22). The knowledge of good and evil has now become a mutual characteristic as a result of an alimentary transgression; thus, the difference between humanity and divinity is preserved through an extra alimentary prohibition – one that ensures that immortality is reserved for God. In other words, who one *is* depends on what one *eats*.

Also reserved for God, as we discover in the chapters following the expulsion from Eden, was meat; God alone “nourishes” on animals, through sacrifices. Since God is the giver of life, life belongs to Him; humans are not allowed to kill other animals except for sacrificial reasons. But then another ontologico-alimentary shift occurs, this time after the Flood, when God tells Noah that “[e]very moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you” (Genesis 9:3). After the Fall, man’s ontological state is altered, with evil now infecting his being from “his youth” (Genesis 8:21), and the new postdiluvian dietary law, which allows humans to kill other animals to eat them rather than just to sacrifice them, seems to seal God’s acceptance of the fact that His postlapsarian offspring is also evil rather than just good. However, with this newly granted right to eat animals, the postdiluvian humans would be crossing another one of the dietary boundaries of distinction with the divine. Therefore, God introduces yet another dietary prohibition to ensure ontological separation: this time He prohibits “eat[ing] flesh with its life, that is, with its blood” (Genesis 9:4).

In all these shifts, food distinguishes between the different ontological states of humankind while also separating different types of being: human and divine. It is, however, clear that apart from separating, food also has