

Introduction: Diet Consciousness and Current Literary Trends

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Although diet-conscious individuals may be found in any historical period or cultural context, today the concern with eating and drinking habits has become something of a collective obsession. Reflective of this situation is not only the way that ingestion has recently become a major concern of artists and scholars but also the way that their interest in the subject differs from that of the past. No longer is the focus on how eating and drinking provide a conducive setting and, by extension, innocent analogies to describe imaginative activities; nor are references to food and drink in a literary text regarded as incidental "realistic" touches or as constructed symbols. Instead, the focus is now on how eating and drinking in themselves constitute an elaborate and complex sign language which metonymically brackets and informs all aspects of discourse and human experience.

Characterizing the essays in the present collection, therefore, is their interdisciplinary quality and the way that they not only utilize insights from psychology, anthropology, sociology and philosophy but also show how food terminology and attitudes toward eating inform these disciplines. Similarly, what characterizes each of these essays is its far-ranging quality; although each has a specific focus, each branches out in a variety of directions. As a result, there is an intriguing network quality about the collection as a whole; what is explicit in one essay is also implicit in another. Although this makes it difficult to provide a comprehensive survey of the contents, the general range may be suggested as follows: how attitudes toward eating and drinking can affect the critical reception of a literary work and its interpretation; how a focus on food or drink has an effect on the shape or narrative technique of

a work, and how attitudes toward food and drink may function as indexes to mode or genre; how the presence of food or drink in a text invariably situates that work in a cultural context; how the question of metaphoricity becomes especially crucial in texts dealing with eating and drinking habits; how media presentations of food problems can have an anesthetizing effect; how literary artists have anticipated and challenged social scientists by suggesting the way that a change in eating habits could have an effect upon gender and sexual orientations; how food functions as a mediator between Nature and Culture, author and reader, world and text.

What none of the essays explicitly addresses, however, is how the diet-conscious atmosphere of recent years has had an impact upon the general nature and direction of current literary trends—e.g., how current theories about nutrition and current methods of food preparation inform current theories about literature. Although many of the essays utilize contemporary research about eating and drinking habits, the focus tends to be either on the past or on a specific aspect of current literary scholarship. Similarly, although many utilize current semiotic theory in their discussion of how food functions in literature, what remains unexplored is the way that such theory in itself is informed by dietetic thinking and practice. Or again, although many of these essays conjoin ingestion terminology and critical theory, they tend to do so as a rhetorical strategy and hence to stop short of a consideration of why such terminology constitutes an effective means of communication in the modern world.

As a way of giving this collection an immediate and practical edge and in the interests of suggesting further areas for investigation, therefore, I would like to speculate upon a variety of connections that might be drawn between diet consciousness and literary discourse today. If some of my observations seem absurd, I hope they will thereby serve to add a touch of playfulness to this otherwise appropriately serious collection. At the same time, however, I would also like to suggest that possibly the seeming absurdity might derive from the way that diet consciousness has become so ingrained in our thinking that we are no longer aware of how it may have affected our literary tastes, vocabulary and practices. Conversely, to the extent that my analogies may seem far fetched, I hope that they will paradoxically serve to suggest why eating and drinking function so well as literary metaphors: namely, their insistence upon their own factuality and their refusal to become mere tropes or part of literature's "conceited" design. The only way to assimilate food is to eat it; you cannot have your literary cake and eat it too!

Because the current distrust of metaphor is part of a reaction against sexual politics—to wit, the "edible woman"—perhaps the best place to begin an inquiry into the connection between diet consciousness and current literary trends is to note that what characterizes the latter is the prominence of women. Although this prominence is sometimes thought to be the result of women's liberation from the kitchen, one might also speculate that it is really their return that is responsible. As is frequently noted, when the production of food

was shifted to the marketplace, women suffered a decline in power; what I would like to suggest is that this power was recouped when eating habits became a primary public issue. For not only does the present concern with diet involve a criticism of "marketplace" food, but also the current visible authorities on such matters—dietitians and nutritionists—are predominantly women. This is not, of course, to say that dieticians are responsible for the current prominence of women writers, but rather that many of the qualities that are thought to distinguish women's writing and which have now become part of the general literary scene have their correlatives in the values espoused in the dietetic sphere.

An interesting case in point is the current popularity of autobiography, a form frequently associated with women's writing. If one way to account for this situation is the "exhaustion" of the novel—and the term itself is worth noting—then another might be that autobiography is popularly thought to be more "authentic" and as such the literary equivalent of the preference for more "organic" and less "adulterated" food. Lending support to such a speculation is the very use of the term "life-writing" to describe autobiographical documents—that is, a term which locates such literature in the physiological facts of existence, of which eating is the central component.

Moreover, insofar as current theorists emphasize that autobiography is not a product of recollection but a process of remembering and recreating the self, so much does the concept of ingestion/digestion seem to be the informing idea behind such a shift in emphasis from product to process. Although this emphasis upon "organicism" is frequently seen as the legacy of romanticism, we move out of a purely literary explanation and back to the present dietetic scene if we note that much current scholarship on the romantic poets involves attention to their dietary concerns. Similarly, that Proust commands so much attention today may have less to do with his concern with memory per se and more to do with our interest in the way food functions as a means of recall. Accordingly, a new direction in autobiographical scholarship might entail a focus on the subject's eating habits and/or the role of implicit ingestion imagery, just as attention to menus might occupy equal place with laundry lists in biographies. Equally, a good way of extending the argument that all literature is autobiographical might be to focus on food as the common denominator.

Another increasingly popular form of literature—also allied with women writers—is the short story, and here one might speculate that its attractiveness could be related to the "fast food" syndrome in the case of the general reader and to the concept of the virtues of "complex carbohydrates," in the case of the academic audience. Again, what seems to support this possibility is the frequency with which the setting in short stories is a restaurant and the context is some type of eating/drinking situation.

The recent resurgence of interest in Gothic fiction, too, could be said to reflect not so much a conscious "hunger" for horror as much as the subliminal impact of a diet-oriented culture. For characterizing current scholarship in this

area is a focus on the vampire, and distinguishing current interest in this subject from that of the past is a shift in interest from eating as a metaphor for sexual relations to a concern with the phenomenon in itself. The current popularity of detective fiction might similarly be related to concerns with ingestion, with the "clue" here being the way that food poisoning has replaced other modes of murder, and the autopsy has become a central motif.

To the extent that concern with diet has made us focus on the mouth—the emphasis upon dental hygiene is a good indicator—perhaps it is also diet consciousness which lies behind the current challenging of the hierarchy of the senses and the related critique of visualization; if the "gaze" involves an objectification of the other and a devouring eye, it thus constitutes an artificial form of eating that is not conducive to reciprocity or conversation. In turn the current reaction against "mirror" concepts of narrative and their related narcissistic notions of desire also begins to fall into place, and especially if one notes that the proposed alternatives—communication and conversation—are allied with the notion of communion.

The present preference for a dialogic form of criticism and a heteroglossic literary text may also be explained in this context, although an equally appropriate correlative may be found in the current emphasis upon a well-balanced diet. The related dietetic emphasis on the need for variety may also then be correlated not only with the attraction to the de-centered text but also with the revisioning of the canon and the interest in marginal forms of discourse and ethnic literatures—especially since the notion of ethnic is so frequently associated with food. Even more important, possibly it is the dietetic down-playing of the previous centrality given to meat that informs the rejection of traditional literary hierarchies and the respect for feminine modes of discourse.

Indeed, the dietetic challenging of the old hegemony of meat and the championing of vegetables sheds an interesting perspective on the presence of vegetarianism in the work of feminist writers. That is, perhaps this alliance has less to do with a sense of refusing to be meat for man's carnivorous appetite and more to do with the way that nutritional theory has emphasized the importance of vegetables. In short, it may not be so much a case of eschewing the power politics of food as a case of capitalizing on the realignment of the power structure; by allying themselves with vegetables, women are allying themselves with what is now perceived to be an essential if not "superior" food stuff: "real men" today do eat vegetables! What also recommends an interpretation along these lines is the extent to which the majority of those responsible for this new food politics are women.

In a related context, it is interesting to consider the way that many of the current political metaphors used to describe author/subject relations are really displaced agricultural images. For example, if behind the notion of exploitation and expropriation lies the concept of property or territory, behind these lies the notion of land and behind the notion of land is the notion of food production. Similarly, if "imbricate"—another popular critical term—seems to have an architectural orientation, the implied concept of tiling derives from

the way that the scales of a serpent or the leaves of a plant overlap. Or again, as much as the recent penchant for words like "inscribe" and "encode" seems to reflect the impact of the legal profession, so much does the prefix suggest a biological if not a specifically dietetic orientation.

Dietetic preoccupations may also underlie such current critical approaches to literature as reader response theory, especially insofar as the premise here is that each reader reads a text differently. For the correlative dietetic premise is that different individuals have different rates of metabolism and that what determines the value of a food is the specific needs of the eater. One could also locate current notions of the "resistant reader" in this context, although perhaps the better analogy here would be the dietetic emphasis upon the importance of "roughage." Insofar as this roughage constitutes an essential but not digestible component of nutrition, one might also liken it to the "impurities" and "irrelevancies" in a literary text that are prized by critics who emphasize the "work" of reading and who are also concerned with "problematizing" their own interpretations.

To pursue such analogies might also lead to a consideration of how fears about the dangers of constipation may be the informing rationale behind the resistance to "closure" and the valuing of "open endedness." And in this context, how might one conversely interpret the argument that pleasure and desire arise from postponement? In any event, if a primary project of Post-modernism is to expose our cultural hang-ups, it might also be said that an excremental preoccupation also informs the post-modernist vocabulary itself: gaps, traces, floating signifiers. More seriously, one might note that by virtue of current technology or pre-packaging of food, meals have come to have an anonymous character, and hence perhaps it is the disappearance of the cook that also lies behind the notion of the disappearance of the author.

If it is important to consider the impact of diet-consciousness on current literary theory, so much also is it important to consider how the promulgation of diet-consciousness has involved the use of "esthetic" means. Primarily responsible for diet consciousness is the media, and perhaps it is this enlisting of the visual and the verbal that accounts not only for the impact of diet consciousness on literary theory but also the subliminal nature of that impact. Moreover, the dietetic co-opting of literary discourse today goes far beyond "alphabet soup"; currently it takes the form of inculcating good eating habits by educating children in the proper pronunciation of dietetic terms, just as one of the arguments for literacy has become the need to read the labels on food packages.

In addition, the promotion of diet consciousness frequently takes the form of co-opting literary structures and modes themselves. Many food commercials take the form of witty dialogues and involve punning on dietetic terms, while others take the form of mini-dramas or morality plays in which eating habits and the merits of various foods are debated. A particularly instructive example of this recourse to literary forms is the recent television commercial which features the conversation of three pre-schoolers as they eat french fries.

Clearly the literary model here is the ancient symposium—the classic example of the conjunction between diet and discourse. Similarly, the “plot” of the commercial echoes the traditional comic formula: while two of the children talk about “Saturday fat,” they are distracted from noticing that the third has consumed the french fries.

As much as this commercial evokes literary forms of the past, however, so much does it have a distinctly modern signature. In this symposium, not only are the conversants children rather than adults, not only has eating replaced imbibing, but food itself has become foregrounded as the topic of conversation. Similarly, if the comedy derives from the way that their talking about food has the effect of preventing the two from getting their share of the subject of their discourse, the moral of the story is the goodness of the food which the silent one has eaten.

Nor is such moralizing of food always so subtle; repeatedly the adjectives used to describe “good” foods or eating habits are explicitly ethical: a “decent” meal; “proper” nourishment; a “sensible” diet. To the extent that the inculcation of ethics was traditionally regarded as the province of literature, it could be said that diet has co-opted not merely the forms but also the function of literature. Yet if one notes in turn that an absence of moralizing is today regarded as a virtue in literary scholarship and that to describe a literary work as “decent,” “proper” or “sensible” is equivalent to damning it, then diet consciousness could be seen as a response to the way that literature has abandoned its traditional function.

In this sense, diet consciousness would seem to have a conservative dimension, and to be noted here is the nostalgic element that frequently informs food commercials. Back to nature and back to basics are recurrent motifs, and for every youthful protagonist there is an avuncular figure who prefers “unrefined” carbohydrates. More often than not, such a figure is also a farmer, through whom is evoked the agrarian myth with its implication that independence and moral integrity are related to being in charge of one’s source of sustenance. Because this is virtually impossible today, the implication now is that moral integrity is tied to eating habits and that independence is manifested in one’s choice of food.

More precisely, the implication is that integrity and independence are manifested in the “correct” choice of food. Thus today the relation between eating habits and morality goes far beyond the notion that gluttony is a sin; everything one eats is coded, and in turn the distinguishing feature of current diet consciousness is the way that the old morality has acquired a secular political character. Of significance here is how the word “diet” itself has become reified and how it has lost its old (Greek) meaning of a “way of living” and foregrounded instead its subsequent designation: a public assembly or a legislative body. Thus diet today connotes not merely what one eats, but planned and socially acceptable eating habits. Equally instructive is the terminology used to describe deviant eating practices and elimination problems: eating disorders and irregularity. As much as such terms reflect the current

penchant for euphemisms, so much do they also suggest that diet is a code to be enforced. Diet, in short, connotes control over the body and its processes, and the implication is that such control is in the interests of the body politic.

If these observations suggest a new direction for Marxist critics, they also suggest a different way of viewing the “irresponsibility” of current literary practice. Instead of being an “in-house” literary quarrel with Modernism, Post-Modernism might be seen as a reaction against the restrictiveness of a culture which has turned the pleasure of food into a system of right and wrong. The current association of indefiniteness and indeterminacy with the “pleasure” of a text may therefore not be a totally literary issue; nor might it be accidental that North American diet consciousness coincides with the importation of literary gurus from cultures famed for their “haute cuisine.” Even more to the point, the attraction of current artists and critics to the concept of “carnival” might be related not merely to the general notion of transgression that carnival involves but specifically to the orgiastic nature of such transgression.

In contrast to the secular nature of carnival in current literary practice, however, originally carnival had a religious character, and if we take a closer look at this aspect we begin to see the way that certain dietetic and literary trends go hand in hand as symptoms of a more fundamental problem of our times. Far from being the invention of the Renaissance, carnival had its roots in primitive ritual, and particularly seasonal fertility rituals; eating was a component in the sense that regeneration of the food supply was a primary concern, and the transgressive element was sanctioned by reason of the fact that it was mimetic of a larger cosmological paradigm; the orgy was a form of communal participation in the transition from the death of the old to the beginning of the new; informed by a cyclic sense of seasonal change and associated with the ever-dying/ever-reborn wine-god Dionysus, the orgy involved a sense of the fragility of human life and the dependency upon larger forces, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, a sense of the power of collective energy, a faith in renewal, and a belief in the efficacy of mimesis.

Although this is an admittedly simplified and syncretic description of the dynamics of primitive ritual, and although it is sometimes argued that civilization has precluded us from understanding anything about the primitive mentality, as a heuristic strategy it can be used to afford insights into the nature of diet and discourse today. Moreover, what recommends such a procedure is the fact that it was through an investigation of the archaic mentality that cultural philosophers like Ernst Cassirer initiated the relational philosophy which underlies Deconstructionist thinking, just as it was equally through his investigation of primitive mythology that Claude Lévi-Strauss initiated the current interest in the semiotics of food.

What one might notice, then, is that insofar as the ritual component of primitive food/fertility practices can be allied with literature qua art, primitive fertility rituals—even more so than the classic symposium or the Renaissance banquet—provide the prototype for the connection between diet and discourse, nature and civilization, the sacred and the profane, church and state.

To the extent that sexual intercourse was part of the mimetic element, such rituals also provide the roots for the use of eating as a metaphor for sexual relations and vice versa, for the use of sexual relations as a metaphor for literary practices and vice-versa, and ultimately for the association of eating, sexual intercourse and discourse.

What most characterizes certain dietetic and literary tendencies today, in contrast, is the breakdown of this complementary network as a result of the loss of the sense of a larger system. Instead of deriving their *raison d'être* from their mimetic status, diet and literary discourse attempt to be ends in themselves, self-justifying and self-explanatory. Symptomatic is the way that each has claimed to be a "science" and each has focused its attention on "theory." Similarly, each is characterized by a denial of the creature status of humanity. Instead of reflecting a sense that we are dependent upon food for life, dietetic theory tends to emphasize the way we can control our lives through what we eat; instead of admitting that words are inadequate to convey "truth" and that we are too limited to know it, literary critics reject the notion of "transcendental meaning."

One of the effects of their mutual emphasis upon self-sufficiency is their tendency to downplay their traditional spheres of influence and to co-opt the territory of the other; thus dietetic theory is concerned with the nutritional rather than the pleasurable aspects of food, and with developing an elaborate taxonomy to describe and classify it; critical theory uses the language of appetite and satisfaction while insisting that literature is non-referential; dietetic theory has become a form of social criticism, whereas critical theory has opted for the ludic and linguistic—Oscar Wilde rather than Matthew Arnold.

Given their denial of a larger frame of reference, it is therefore not surprising that literature has suffered from the "anxiety of influence" and that one response has been the bulimic attraction to encyclopedic works and the ironic mode. Nor is it surprising that what characterizes both dietetic and literary discourse is a sense of the finality of the end and hence a concern with prolongation. The underlying premise of diet consciousness is that to eat right will ensure longevity; literary theory champions "deferral," the absence of conclusion, the never-ending "work in progress," the trilogy, and the "long poem."

Such a stopping of time, however, is possible only in a condition of stasis. In literature and life, resistance to the end constitutes a "duration that outrages nature," as Lessing phrased it in his discussion of the difference between the temporal and spatial arts. Resistance to the end results in an intolerable sense of waiting for the end, and thus another if not consequent feature of the current dietetic and literary scene is a participation in the hastening of the end. In this light, we begin to see another way of explaining the prevalence of anorexia today, why it can be regarded as an active rather than a passive response, and why it may be more than an endorsement of the anti-carnivorous sentiment that "we murder to digest"—to adapt Wordsworth's phrasing. Equally, we may begin to see a connection between anorexia and the apocalyptic tendency

in fiction, as well as the attraction to "self-destructive" texts and "self-consuming" artifacts. Perhaps, too, it is a sense of preparing for the end that underlies the popularity of confessional fiction today.

Significantly, another means of hastening the end has been a self-reflexive application of the means which primitive societies used to stimulate renewal: imitation. Thus literature has carried parody to the extreme of self-parody, just as anorexia could be described as a self-destructive carrying to the extreme the dietetic strictures against over-indulgence. Although not intentional, there is also something self-deconstructive and self-parodic about the proliferation of dietetic research, and how what one "recent study has shown" contradicts what a previous "recent study has shown."

As much as we seem to be witnessing the end, however, so much are there also signs that "a new world order" is beginning. Although this new order is often thought to be due to the efforts of certain political leaders or to economic factors, I would like to suggest that it is not merely an awareness of a global food crisis but more a matter of how this awareness has regenerated the same type of religious world view that informed primitive ritual: namely a sense of our creature status and the concomitant sense that we are part of a larger cosmological system. In the case of dietetics, this new humility is reflected in the concern with ecology, and of significance here is how the discipline has changed its name from "home economics" to "human ecology." In the literary sphere, this sense of the larger context is reflected in the relocating of literary works in their cultural setting, and in the rethinking of the notion of "self." Equally reflective of the recovery of a "cyclic" world view is the current concern in both areas with "recycling."

An interesting consequence of this renewed reverence for "mother earth" is a new liberality and playfulness. Dietitians have begun to focus their attention on the emotional satisfaction that food and drink provide and hence with the need to restore pleasure to eating and drinking; previously tabooed materials like wine and junk foods are regarded as acceptable, and in planning diets room is now even made for occasional over-indulgence. Indeed, it could be said that behind the emphasis upon "lite" food and drink is the idea that they allow one to consume more. In the literary sphere, the "realistic" novel is making a comeback, and there is a renewed interest in the ritual nature of narrative. Particularly suggestive of a primitive reorientation and concern with the communal is a sense of the "impoverished" nature of the written word and the consequent interest in the oral and emphasis upon "voice."

Orality, moreover, is also the definitive locus of the conjunction of diet and discourse, for here the instrument of speech is allied with the orifice of ingestion, and conversation between two diners is stimulated by reason of the fact that one cannot eat and talk at the same time. Therefore, whereas formerly no prospect might have seemed more to be avoided than to eat with a dietitian or to talk with a literary scholar, given the new—or renewed—directions in diet and discourse and their recovered alliance, for a dietitian and a literary critic to dine together today might be quite a pleasant and productive experience for both.