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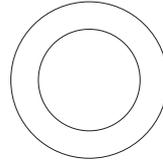
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## *Introduction*

SIR TOBY BELCH. Does not our life consist of the four elements?

SIR ANDREW. Faith, so they say; but I think it rather consists of eating and drinking.

SIR TOBY BELCH. Thou'rt a scholar; let us therefore eat and drink.

*Twelfth Night*, Act 3, Scene 2<sup>1</sup>

In a little throwaway conversation between two relatively minor characters, Shakespeare puts into words what we might consider the most fundamental of the impulses that underlie the present volume: we love to eat and drink. To be sure, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew may not be the most creditable spokespersons; they are, not to put too fine a point on it, drunks. They careen through *Twelfth Night* in a blaze of overindulgence that is lovable, but just up to a point. Only in this interchange do we catch a glimpse that their intemperance might be (as we sometimes say nowadays) *theorized*. It appears that Sir Andrew, a wealthy but unsophisticated country dweller who is sojourning among the urbane personages in Illyria, has amassed a certain degree of learning, perhaps in his more abstemious youth. Hence Sir Toby's appeal to his expertise concerning those fundamentals—earth, air, fire, and water—that in the old cosmology were said to be the constituents of the natural world. Sir Andrew has, however, replaced the old cosmology with a new one: eating and drinking. And Sir Toby, who must be delighted at this rewriting of the textbooks, gets on board quickly by pursuing the perfectly logical consequence—namely, that in honor of this scientific reassessment, they ought to spend all their time eating and drinking. Nor is it a completely preposterous notion, since it's impossible to imagine life of any kind without something equivalent to eating and drinking.

Shakespeare, then, provides one perfectly simple premise upon which this book rests. There is nothing more important, more basic, more inevitable in human life (*all* life) than the consumption of food and drink. Granted, Shakespeare locates this truth in the mouths of some dubious characters. What Sir Andrew learned in school was right, and his new cosmology is not right: the world *is* made up of the four elements, and his brand of heretical New Science is merely an excuse for the kind of excess that gives eating and drinking a bad name. Indeed, any sort of heavy focus on those activities—for instance, writing a book in which all sorts of cultural enterprises are being *read for the food* (to cite the title of our first chapter)—is flirting with this sort of bad name.

Throw in another quotation, as remote in time and place from Shakespeare as is possible to imagine:

To be cultured [in China] is, first, to know the rites and the classics; second, to have a certain flair for poetry and painting; third, to be an aesthete of food—to appreciate the precise flavor and texture. But although good professional cooks are respected, cooking, with its unavoidable violence of chopping and cutting, boiling and frying, and its intimate association with blood and death, tends to arouse unease.<sup>2</sup>

Those of us whose formations are wholly European and who love to talk about food need always to remember that, compared to many ages of civilization in China, such high points of cuisine as Renaissance Italy or nineteenth-century France amount to chump change—not only in what was served to gourmets but also in the table talk concerning such delectables. The present book remains wholly in that European realm. But though we may not hear of the East again in these pages, I allow myself to exploit the insight of the distinguished geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, who points out a paradox in the world that he has studied. High cultural attainment in China afforded equal reverence to sacred ritual, to the arts of the ancients, to poetry and painting, *and* to being, as he puts it, “an aesthete of food.” Pause there for a moment, and we take note of a proposition familiar even to those of us who are not Asianists: in the long history of Chinese civilization, the art of cuisine has been afforded the same kinds of honor that were enjoyed by art, literature, music, sacred studies, and the rest of high cultural attainment. Then, however, there is a *but*: despite this veneration, there are aspects of cuisine—chopping, boiling, frying, not to mention blood and death—that (in Tuan’s marvelous formulation) “arouse unease.”

This is a book about that mix of veneration and unease, which Yi-Fu Tuan observed in China, but *mutatis mutandis*—that is, changing what needs to be changed so as to plot it onto European culture from the ancients to the early moderns. And quite a lot needs to be changed. The story to be told here is not so much about great sages, artists, or theologians who also proved to be exquisitely productive gourmets (though there may be some along the way) but rather about the fact that the operations of eating and drinking—call it Sir Toby’s cosmology—inevitably found their way into the work of such culturally creative individuals: philosophers philosophized at dinner tables; religions revolved around epochal feasts; rulers enforced their sway by

means of banquets; painters depicted food and drink that may not have always been mere metaphors for something more important, and they may have also noticed that their own labor was not so very different from that of the kitchen; poets found that the language of consumption, nutrition, and taste was an inspiring mode of framing the very effects they aimed to produce via their own more mediated and incorporeal productions—just to name a few possibilities.

But—to revert once again to Professor Tuan’s double-sided account—it’s not just that Western European cultural heroes prove to be chefs and gourmets in disguise or via a particular close reading of their work (though that can be true), but that the other half of the formulation—the part about arousing unease—is fundamental to these operations as well. The makers of the works discussed in these pages find that eating and drinking are central and essential to their imaginative undertakings, but all this creative exuberance can never quite shed that sobering dose of unease that we detect in the somewhat dubious authority of *Twelfth Night*’s tipsy spokespersons, whether it’s the chopping and frying or the anxieties about body and pleasure or the abjection that awaits at the end of the process.

It would be a shame to conclude on that particular sour note. *The Hungry Eye* is not a thoroughgoing history of gastronomy, though it covers some large swaths of the past and approaches them through historical methods. Nor is it likely to provide much advice on what to serve for dinner, despite its prejudice (as the reader will hear many times) in favor of food as food rather than food as a figure for something else, something (quite possibly) less tasty and nutritious, less pleasurable. Rather the book is a celebration of the complex forms of debt, with whatever portions of joy and unease, that Western high culture, particularly from antiquity to early modernity, owes to mealtime.

That phrase “Western high culture” merits a pause for reflection. This is a book about the lives and works, from antiquity to early modernity, of a very selected stratum of individuals. Those are the persons, for the most part, whose work in whatever medium survives in sufficient fullness to make a portrait of the past possible. We all know that this yields a highly selective past; we also know that historians have developed ways to see beyond the limits of the verbal, the visual, and all the other forms of literacy. The present volume accepts, even embraces, the archive of the widely known and readily knowable past, however, on the principle that it has been common, available, and shared through the millennia. At the same time, it focuses precisely on a fundamental activity that *all* persons of whatever stratum have had in common: the experience of taste and the gaining of nourishment. Between the time this book was written and its appearance in print, the entire globe has had the experience of deprivation, not just of taste and nourishment but, for hundreds of thousands, of life itself. There is no repairing this loss or pretending to palliate it with a book. All that can be said by way of contributing to the present historical moment is to affirm that eating and drinking—and particularly the *pleasures* thereof—deserve to be remembered and celebrated, to be awarded their rightful place, as this book strives to do, and thus to bring some shred of everyone’s past into the present.

A few words, finally, about the structure of the book. The opening chapter will enlarge upon what might be called the paradigm of this volume: the operations of

high culture—philosophy, aesthetics, literature, art—finding themselves in need of references to eating and drinking in order to make their claims about more prestigious activities; somewhere, in virtually every lofty expression of the human spirit, someone is thinking about the next meal or actually consuming it. That chapter will also have quite a bit to say about the methodological principles of the whole book. After that, the chapters develop more specific focal points. In chapters 2 and 3, the subject matters are largely historical and chronological. The former, “Rome Eats,” is concerned with classical antiquity, the latter, “Fooding the Bible,” with the Judeo-Christian traditions, not only within their ancient origins but in their reception and recuperation as well. The final two chapters divide up the subject on a different, more conceptual basis. In both, the works under discussion are drawn predominantly from the early modern period, along with some of its classical forebears. But each of them follows a distinct path through a broad subject matter appropriate to the themes of eating and drinking. Chapter 4, “The Debate over Dinner,” concerns itself with the celebration of dining from the time of Athenaeus to the Renaissance, but it chronicles as well the counterattack, on the grounds that eating and drinking might have been considered culturally unworthy, frivolous, prone to excess, and lacking in the kind of system, or *techné*, that loftier enterprises could boast; as we’ll see, many respond in defense, via both theory and practice. The final chapter, “Mimesis, Metaphor, Embodiment,” tackles the question of the material versus the metaphorical, which is to say, from food as the thing itself to abstract realms in which such forces as consumption, nourishment, taste, and commensality are either expunged or metaphoricalized almost beyond recognition; the chapter argues not only for the opposition between these approaches but also for their interdependence. These itineraries—more about this in chapter 1—are not always precisely linear; it is hoped that they invite readers to make their own paths of recognition and reflection through this contribution to a particular account of civilization as reflected through eating and drinking.

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