

# Hungry Souls

BY THOMAS HIBBS

**As we oscillate between the extremes of gluttonous indulgence and puritanical self-denial, we are missing the true joy of eating. And even if we approximate the practice of temperance, we are distorting our meals with our individualistic ways and cutting ourselves off from the natural sources of food production. No wonder many of us are leaving the table with hungry souls.**

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**A**n abstemious character in the acclaimed film, *Babette's Feast* (1987), explains to the members of his religious community that they should engage in feasting just as the participants in the wedding feast at Cana, where "food was unimportant." The line is unintentionally comic; the humor reposes upon the double mistaking of Scripture: nowhere does it say food is unimportant and it indicates clearly that wine is quite important.

*Babette's Feast* is perhaps the greatest artistic statement of the way the communal enjoyment of food and wine provide more than necessary nourishment for our bodies. Unlike the more recent film, *Chocolat* (2000), which opposes religious self-denial to a pagan affirmation of bodily appetite, *Babette's Feast* argues for a sacramental union of matter and spirit, both human and divine. The feast—prepared by Babette, a Parisian chef and Roman Catholic, for the strict Protestant sect that has given her sanctuary in remote Denmark over the years—is a love affair that combines "spiritual and bodily appetites." It unites and elevates the entire community in a spirit of gratitude toward those who have made sacrifices and offered gifts on their behalf, especially toward the "giver of every good and perfect gift." It is an anticipation of the heavenly banquet.

**BETWEEN THOUGHTLESS INDULGENCE AND SELF-DENIAL**

The obstacles to our recovery of natural and spiritual virtues of eating are many, rooted commonly in what Wendell Berry calls a “mainstream American life of distraction, haste, aimlessness, violence, and disintegration.”<sup>1</sup> Increasing numbers of Americans suffer from obesity, and recent polls locate the number of overweight Americans at roughly two-thirds of the population. Among those who are not obese, there is a growing number afflicted with eating disorders. Even the physically fit cannot be assumed to have virtuous attitudes toward eating; they often exhibit a maniacal and excruciating devotion to a model of the perfect body. Americans seem to oscillate between the extremes of thoughtless indulgence and instant gratification, on the one hand, and puritanical self-denial, on the other.

The failure readily to achieve the desired restraint can lead to revulsion toward one’s body and toward food itself. Indeed, we often construe the virtue of temperance as purely negative and as coming into play only in moments of great temptation, where it requires that we slap down our appetites. The classical understanding of temperance is quite different. Although wary of excess, it is not principally a virtue of negation or repudiation. Indeed, if one’s chief experience of the moral life is one of restriction, prohibition, and deprivation, then that is a clear sign that one is not yet virtuous, not yet capable of experiencing pleasure properly, as one ought to experience it. And that is the point of the virtue of temperance: to make possible a right ordering of pleasure, an experience of pleasure at the right things in the right way. It is marked by ease and delight, not calculation and anxiety.

Far from being a virtue of self-abnegation, temperance insures bodily health and proper pleasure; it is a source of cheerfulness of heart (*hilaritas mentis*). Intemperance generates not active rebellion against the good but indifference, dissipation, “lazy inertia.”<sup>2</sup> Without temperance, the soul becomes restless and anxious, confused by noisy distractions. Josef Pieper writes, “unchaste abandon and the self-surrender of the soul to the world of sensuality paralyzes the primordial powers of the moral person: the ability to perceive, in silence, the call of reality, and to make, in the retreat of this silence, the decision appropriate to the concrete situation” (p. 160). The extreme form of this roaming unrest of the spirit (*evagatio mentis*) is “complete rootlessness” (pp. 200-201). “It may mean that man has lost his capacity for living with himself; that, in flight from himself, nauseated and bored by the void of an interior life gutted by despair, he is seeking with selfish anxiety and on a thousand futile paths” (p. 201). Wisdom, as Nietzsche says, puts limits to knowledge, to the seemingly endless desire for experience and titillation as an end in itself (p. 198). The scope and function of temperance is not limited to the curbing of this or that sensitive

impulse; Aquinas relates temperance “to the root of the whole sensual-intellectual life” (p. 187).

In our culture, even where we may approximate an understanding and practice of temperance, we still tend to conceive of eating in an individualistic way. Yet in the classical tradition, still dominant in many places in Europe and the Middle East, eating is inseparable from its social dimension. When we are consuming fast food in the privacy of our automobile or in front of the television, or in our communal eating we are preoccupied with private calculations of carbs and calories—in any case, we exclude the properly social dimension. We are also, as Wendell Berry eloquently insists, increasingly cut off from the natural sources of food production, from the planting and nourishing of the sources of food in the setting of the local farm. Food and eating thus increasingly become isolated from natural and social contexts that have traditionally provided them with intelligibility, purpose, and meaning.

#### **A LESSON OF CANNIBALISM: ANCIENT AND MODERN**

Any attempt to recover the proper understanding and proper practice of temperance needs to return to first principles, to some account of what human beings are, of their potentiality for greatness and their vulnerability to vice. In his fine book, *The Hungry Soul*, Leon Kass explains:

Possessed of indeterminate and potentially unlimited appetites, willing and able to appropriate and homogenize nearly anything in the formed world for his own use and satisfaction, man stands in the world not only as its most appreciative beholder but also as its potential tyrant.<sup>3</sup>

As the great classical myths and religious traditions inform us, human beings are peculiar animals, capable at once of being prudent stewards of created things and of being cosmic devourers. Thus, there is need for prohibition and restriction: “man’s protean and indeterminate appetites need to be delimited and constrained.” But negation is misconstrued if it is not predicated upon a clear affirmation of the goods the prohibitions safeguard and protect. Thus, our account of human eating must also “embellish and dignify,” by “shaping virtually every aspect of human eating; it will determine what, when, where, how much, with whom, and in what manner human beings eat” (p. 98).

To recover a language for the significance of various practices of eating, Kass returns to classical myths, such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, and to modern films, such as *Babette’s Feast*. In the *Odyssey*, feasting is an occasion for the exercise of the virtue of hospitality and for storytelling and poetic singing. The latter are more than mere accompaniments, since the tales and songs constitute a communal acknowledgment of the virtues, sacrifices, griefs, thanksgivings, and longings of a particular people. But Homer also

teaches about the virtues of eating by negative example, most dramatically in the characters of the Cyclops, the famous one-eyed monsters who live isolated from the rest of the world, even from members of their species. The bodily constitution of the Cyclops tells much about their characters. "Cyclops single eye lacks a horizon, all depth of perspective and can see only what is immediately before him here and now. His one eye, lined up directly over his mouth seems to serve the mouth rather than the mind" (p. 111). In the famous episode from Homer's epic, a Cyclops, Polyphemus, takes Odysseus and his men captive and threatens to eat them all. In an attempt to reason with the Cyclops, Odysseus appeals to the universally recognized obligation of hospitality. But the Cyclops repudiates such obligations, claiming that his kind "acknowledge no gods," and arrogate to themselves a position superior to that of the gods. By making themselves the "measure of all things," the Cyclops abandon any sense of restraint; it is instructive that Homer would select cannibalism, a vice of eating, to illustrate the tyranny of the Cyclops. The choice illustrates how central eating and hospitality were to ancient cultures.

Tied to brutal behavior and reflected in repulsive physical appearance, the vice of the Cyclops is unmistakable. The Cyclops embody a violation of the orders of nature and of the gods. In our time, artistic repudiation of the very notion of natural and divine order is sometimes celebrated as a sort of liberation; indeed, some artists depict in attractive terms a nihilistic inversion of conventional mores. Perhaps the premier mainstream example of such inversion is the Oscar-winning 1991 film *Silence of the Lambs* featuring Hannibal the cannibal. An aesthetically refined serial killer with a penchant for eating his victims, Dr. Hannibal Lecter (in an Oscar-winning performance by Anthony Hopkins) savors the liver of one victim with a side dish of "fava beans and a fine Chianti." Lecter is the hero or anti-hero of a

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series of novels by Thomas Harris and several very popular films. Whereas Homer depicts the Cyclops as crude and barbaric exceptions to the order of nature and of human society, Harris depicts Lecter as exceptional in the sense of transcendent. He is a sort of Nietzschean super-man who stands beyond good and evil and inspires fear and awe in ordinary human beings, who still hold to an irrational and cowardly order of conventional moral-

ity. An accomplished psychiatrist and expert musician, Lecter turns evil itself into an art form. His acts of evil, especially cannibalism, are blunt and offensive repudiations of any code of justice or hospitality; they are nothing more than opportunities for aesthetic self-expression, which itself involves the culinary consumption of other human beings. If we have witnessed a serious erosion of the classical understanding of eating and hospitality, we still witness the symbolic power of eating.

In Hannibal's world, where the divine, natural, and human orders have utterly dissipated, the only thing that matters is the cultivation and satisfaction of amoral aesthetic taste; all things, including human persons, become mere instruments of cultivated taste. By contrast, in the pagan Homer as in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the "vulnerable stranger reminds us of providence" (p. 103). As Kass astutely observes, the traditional obligation to hospitality "recognizes necessity and generosity, needy vitality and human self-consciousness, and, above all, the importance of preserving yet moderating the distinction between same and other, between one's own and the alien" (p. 107).

#### **SHARING BABETTE'S FEAST**

The most remarkable artistic account of the sensibility Kass thinks we need to recover can be found in *Babette's Feast*, a film based on a short story by Isak Dineson. *Babette's Feast* is set in Denmark amid a small, austere religious community of Protestant Christians, united in their devotion to their founding pastor, whom they honor as "priest and prophet." The founder's beautiful daughters, Martina and Philippa, named after the great reformers Martin Luther and Philipp Melancthon, inevitably attract the attention of worthy suitors. Neither daughter is capable of tearing herself away from devotion to her father and the community he has established. One of Martina's suitors, Lorens Lowenhielm, leaves quickly in frustration and disappointment. Upon his departure, he complains that he has learned from this religious family that "earthly love and marriage" are mere illusions. He vows to devote himself entirely to his career and ends up becoming a decorated General. Another, Achille Papin, a famous Parisian opera singer, discovers a great musical talent in Philippa. She agrees to his offer of vocal training. But the erotic tenderness and worldly longings expressed in a duet from *Don Giovanni* causes her to cut off the relationship. Papin sings Don Giovanni's invitation to Zerlina ("Come, then, with me, my beauty...I'll make you a great lady"). Philippa responds in Zerlina's words: "I tremble, yet I listen, / I'm fearful of my joy; / desire, love, and doubting / are battling in my heart." At the end of the piece, Zerlina yields; but Philippa, "fearful of her joy," is not capable of this. With little inner turmoil, she has her father send Papin on his way.

Many years later, as war envelops Paris and families are torn asunder, Papin sends a friend, Babette, to live with the family he still admires. A

devastated Babette, who has endured the murder of her family, begins work as a cook, preparing the simple meals the sisters insist upon eating. A series of fortuitous events make it possible for Babette to prepare a feast for the entire community, a feast that reveals the elevating and transforming power of the communal meal.

After their father's death, the sisters wish to commemorate the anniversary of his founding of the religious community, a community now afflicted by "testy and querulous" disagreements. What they have in mind is a "modest supper followed by a cup of coffee." Plans change, however, when Babette wins the French lottery and has 10,000 francs at her disposal. She persuades the sisters to let her prepare a French feast. As wine and live sea turtles arrive, the sisters begin to regret their decision, suffer nightmares, and confess to their religious brethren that they may have "exposed" everyone to "evil powers" and a "witches' Sabbath." The mildly shocked brethren call upon the virtues of fortitude, forbearance, and moderation. Out of charity, they consent to partake of the meal but they will do so with complete detachment, "as if they never had the sense of taste." They will speak "no word about food or drinks."

It looks at this point as if the stage is set for an evening of quiet misunderstanding, an evening in which the splendors of the senses will be wasted on a community that identifies religious asceticism with a state of disembodied detachment. But another chance event, the last minute arrival in town of General Lowenhielm, alters the chemistry of the meal. His presence means not only that there will be twelve at the meal but also that a person of cultivation will taste and provide commentary on Babette's feast.

Although cultivated and successful, the General experiences a kind of spiritual vacuity; just before he leaves for the meal, he remarks to himself, "vanity...vanity...all is vanity." The suggestion here is that one can arrive at a sense of the emptiness of created things by at least two quite different routes, by a distortion of religious devotion and by world-weariness.

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But the General is also the first to sense the transforming effects of the feast, as he repeatedly expresses surprise and wonder at the quality of the food and the wine. The dinner is at first characterized by comic incongruity between the General's comments and the non sequitur responses from the other members of the dinner party, who remain steadfast in their com-

mitment not to say a word about food or drink. Finally a woman, who had earlier described the tongue as a source of “unleashed evil,” speaks innocently and happily of the pleasant-tasting wine, which she describes as a kind of lemonade.

The film completely transcends our popular way of framing the debate over appetite, which pits a repressive Puritanism against a celebration of

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the indulgence of untutored desire. If the religious views of this community are in many ways shallow and repressive, the film’s corrective consists not in a repudiation of religion as oppressive. Instead, the film makes clear that bodily goods and sensible pleasures can be vehicles for the manifestation of grace, that is, they can be occasions of communal

transformation. The feast achieves what the sisters’ attempts at moral and religious reform could not; it achieves reconciliation as warm memories of the departed founder flow forth in speeches from those assembled. As the General recounts famous meals at the Parisian restaurant, Café Anglais, where the renowned chef was a woman (Babette of course!) with a gift for transforming dinner into a love affair in which there was no distinction between spiritual and bodily appetite, he offers an education to the other members of the dinner party. Even if they fail to grasp the full philosophical and theological import of his speech, they confirm its truth by the increasing delight they take, not just in the food and drink, but also in one another’s company. The reunification of the community through the feast confirms Wendell Berry’s thesis that “healing is impossible in loneliness; it is the opposite of loneliness. Conviviality is healing. To be healed we must come with all the other creatures to the feast of Creation.”<sup>4</sup>

#### **TOWARD SANCTIFIED EATING**

Here human artistry works in tandem with nature and divine grace. A famous poem by John Donne, entitled “The Exstasie,” captures rather nicely this relationship of soul to body, spirit to matter, in which the higher is made manifest in and through the lower and the lower raised to a participation in the higher. Having described a Platonic union of lovers’ souls beyond the body, he asks why we forbear our bodies? Donne responds,

So must pure lovers soules descend  
t’affections, and to faculties,



that sense may reach and apprehend,  
else a great Prince in prison lies.

To'our bodies turne wee then, that so  
weake men on love reveal'd may looke;  
Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,  
but yet the body is his booke.

In a discussion of “sanctified eating,” Kass highlights the “celebration of Creation—and of its mysterious source” (p. 221). The spark of divinity in the human soul is at once the source of our dignity and a temptation to assume divine status. The key, which the codes of hospitality and the customs surrounding eating as a sacrificial and sacramental bond preserve, is to realize that the rational animal is “only an image.” The great temptation is to make ourselves the measure of all things; modernity, with its elevation of autonomous human choice to supreme status, exacerbates the temptation. The influence of an exalted conception of human autonomy can be seen not just in our endless and increasingly vituperative battles over rights, but also in the erosion of customs, even those customs concerned with the consumption of food. In so far as we view ourselves as cut loose from God, nature, tradition, and community, the traditional practices surrounding food and meals are likely to look increasingly less significant to us. The loss of an appreciation of these customs only increases our sense of abandonment and isolation. The corrective, Kass proposes, is an alternative conception of human dignity. He concludes, “The upright animal, his gaze uplifted and his heart filled with wonder and awe, in fact stands tallest when he freely bows his head.”

## NOTES

1 Wendell Berry, “The Use of Energy,” in Norman Wirzba, ed., *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint Press, 2002), 292.

2 Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 197 (further page citations will be in the text).

3 Leon R. Kass, M.D., *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 98 (further page citations will be in the text).

4 Berry, “The Body and the Earth,” in *The Art of the Commonplace*, 99.



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