

Tasting Modernism: An Introduction

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# Tasting Modernism

An Introduction

J. MICHELLE COGLAN

Proust remembering the “squat, plump little cakes” he’d eaten as a child; sights of “bananas ripe and green, and ginger root/cocoa in pods and alligator pears” summoning West Indian climes in “The Tropics of New York”; the typist neatly laying out her tinned supper in *The Waste Land*; a loosely fictionalized Zelda Fitzgerald devouring tomato sandwiches in *The Beautiful and the Damned*; the hustle of produce markets on the South Side of Chicago in *So Big*; the endless rounds of “bulley bottled peas and pseudo-cottage bread [that is] the menu of Anglo-India” in *A Passage to India*; Archibald McLeish’s suggestion in “Ars Poetica” that “a poem should be palpable and mute / as a globed fruit”—for all that it was bent on refashioning aesthetic taste and has most been remembered for longing to abstract itself from realism’s fixation on everyday matters, modernism nevertheless gave us a host of iconic images of taste in a no less gustatory sense. “Tasting Modernism” is, then, a project of reattuning ourselves to modernism’s gustatory designs (and appetites); it’s also about reconsidering how the culinary life of modernism might speak to our own moment’s hypermediated obsession with—and no less charged anxieties about—how and what we eat.

If the title of this special issue functions as a call to taste (or retaste) modernism, the issue itself first took shape as a panel at the 2012 annual meeting of the Modernist Studies Association that aimed to provide a forum to explore the spectacular nature of culinary modernism and to rethink modernist food writing in its broadest sense. In the past two decades, food matters have become an increasingly pressing site of

cultural and environmental concern, even as food study has become a vital site of interdisciplinary critical inquiry. As the humanities have begun to take the ecology of eating seriously, literary scholars have recently turned their attention to the way that modernist writers such as Henry James, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Claude McKay, and Lorine Niedecker digested—and experimented with—emerging food cultures and the global food politics of their day, even as an array of midtwentieth-century food writers, most notably M. F. K. Fisher and Alice B. Toklas, adapted modernist techniques for their culinary designs.<sup>1</sup> My aim for this issue was, then, at once to address these issues and to encourage a broader range of questions about the relationship between not simply food and modernism but rather modernist forms and the aesthetics, politics, and science of modern food. How does literature archive or refashion our pleasures or ambivalences about what and why we eat? In what ways might food essays, culinary manifestoes, and cookbooks reflect—or intervene in—wider debates on literary taste, cultural ideologies, and food politics? What does culinary experimentation or indigestion taste like, and how does it pop up across a range of modernist forms, from little magazines and avant-garde films to experimental performance and hard-boiled pulp? And finally, what are the afterlives of modernist food—and modernist food writing—in contemporary American culture?

That such questions are being asked of modernism only now has, in my reading, much to do with the matter of taste. For all that the recent high-tech culinary sensation formerly known as molecular gastronomy has adopted modernism as its cultural ensign, with former Microsoft chief technology officer-turned-gastronome Nathan Myhrvold rebranding the movement “modernist cuisine” and claiming that its high-end gastronomical experimentation most recalls modernism’s ecstatic rupture with past artistic conventions, food matters, whether in the gastronomical or agricultural sense, were, until very recently, largely taken to be altogether beyond—or, rather, beneath—modernism’s artistic purview.<sup>2</sup> Our failure to register the full spectrum of modernism’s sensory palate is not, however, simple misapprehension; rather, I take it instead to be a measure of the way that *taste* itself has for so long been an undervalued somatic register and underhistoricized sensory feeling.

Critics have long recognized that modernism was constituted by sensory overload and upheaval; as Sarah Danius aptly notes, “high-

modernist aesthetics is inseparable from a historically specific crisis of the senses, a sensory crisis sparked by, among other things, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century technological innovations, particularly technologies of perception.<sup>3</sup> Yet that crisis of perception has most often been figured in the *visual sense*; as Karen Jacobs and others have argued, modernity was marked by the confluence of at once deep-seated anxiety about what the eyes can (and can't) see—a philosophical skepticism that Martin Jay termed the “crisis of ocularcentrism”—and the emergence of technologies such as cinematography that fundamentally shifted visual perception and thereby paradoxically reenshrined its primacy over the other senses.<sup>4</sup> But ongoing critical attention to the visual-cultural landscape of modernism and to the ocular modes of modernity nevertheless reinscribes the way that taste, in particular, has long been a marginalized sensory experience.<sup>5</sup> As Erica Fretwell has recently reminded us, nineteenth-century accounts of sensory perception afforded “the tongue . . . no place in the philosophy of taste,” and even Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomical masterpiece *The Physiology of Taste* “deemed taste the most primitive sense.”<sup>6</sup> The Kantian demarcation of taste as “clearheaded [aesthetic] judgment” untethered to “the body’s indelicate, urgent demands” lived on, as Jennifer Fleissner points out, in work on eating by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social scientists such as Robertson Smith and Marcel Mauss that “emphasize[d] not appetite but the socially unifying aspects of a meal”—distinctions that Fleissner persuasively suggests continue to shape (or, rather, delimit) critical attention to “acts of eating.”<sup>7</sup> To taste modernism now is to take up her call to recover how modernist writers like James might meditate on (or even upend) the long-standing critical divide between gustatory experience and aesthetic practice as well as between sensory experience and aesthetic discrimination. But it’s also to begin to take fuller stock of the ways in which taste as a sensuous feeling (and mode of perception) was itself reconfigured in the modernist period by global food politics and crises—by, in other words, modernity’s shifting agricultural, technological, and gastronomic as well as visual landscape.

If this issue builds on recent work to take food and modernism seriously, it also grows out of recent work to make modernism new by reconsidering the borders and trajectories of modernist cultural production. In so doing, this “new modernist studies” has begun to re-think, in Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz’s terms, “the definitions,

locations, and producers of ‘modernism.’”<sup>8</sup> The essays that follow thus examine a variety of recognizably modernist genres—among them, memoir, novels, and Dadaist collage—produced by canonical modernist figures like Ernest Hemingway but also by radical pulp writers like Guy Endore, late modernist thriller writers like Graham Greene, and contemporary Dada-esque bioartists, as well as work by David Wong Louie from the 1990s that can’t be categorized as modernist as such but that nevertheless recalls (and returns us to) modernism’s fascination with wayward objects and affections. And while these essays do not address more traditional forms of culinary literature such as the modernist cookbook, they do begin to adumbrate the wider contours of what modernist food writing looks and tastes like—not to mention which forms it unexpectedly shapes. Taken together, these essays offer new coordinates for charting both the material terrain and the afterlife of modernism’s culinary concerns—as well as its alimentary unconscious.

Catherine Keyser’s essay, “An All-Too-Moveable Feast: Ernest Hemingway and the Stakes of Terroir,” shows how expatriate modernism was vitally if unexpectedly shaped by its commitment to agricultural cultivation and regional tastes. But this locavorism *avant la lettre* was, as she points out, deeply symptomatic of the ways local European foodways were increasingly reshaped by the effects of agricultural industrialization and globalization in the early twentieth century. Tracking Hemingway’s attention to local food culture across novels such *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), short stories such as “Out of Season” (1925), and in his late-career memoir of modernist Paris (and his own brand of modernism) *A Moveable Feast* (1964), Keyser ultimately stakes out the ways that much of modernist style itself might best be understood in light of terroir’s “aspiration to reshape the individual’s relationship to a global commodity system through the rigorous testing of the palate and retraining attention on local terrain”—even as Hemingway compels our attention, finally, to “move beyond the pleasures of regional flavor and into the geopolitics of industrial impersonality.”

If Keyser considers the way that global food matters fundamentally shape the literary practice and political stakes of modernism as we know it, my essay, “Tasting Horror: Radical Forms of Feeding in Guy Endore’s *The Werewolf of Paris*,” turns to the ecology and politics of eating in pre-Popular Front radical pulp fiction. While Endore’s 1933 best-seller has been variously celebrated as the definitive werewolf novel and

a masterpiece of leftist agitprop, its particular blend of sensational proletarian fiction has nevertheless proved hard to fully metabolize. Critics bent on recovering radical fiction from the 1930s give only passing mention to its remarkable repackaging of the Paris Commune of 1871, while horror critics tend to view the novel's hybrid form—part radical historical fiction, part sensational pulp—as merely an unnecessary diversion from its gory horror plot. I argue, instead, that we might best read this experimental novel as a form of modernist food writing. For as I show, the novel consistently “attends to and refigures the matter of nineteenth-century famine and feeding”—matters of alimentary precarity that were of no less pressing a moment for Endore's Depression-era readers. Taking fuller account of the work of hunger in this novel allows us to register, finally, how *The Werewolf of Paris* “remobilizes horror as an unlikely conduit for leftist memory, and suggests that monstrous forms of feeding provided unexpectedly radical avenues for critiquing contemporary food politics at home and abroad in the 1930s.”

The specter of austerity and the effects of wartime rationing resurface in Kate M. Nash's essay, “Consuming War in Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*.” Although critics have largely overlooked the role of food in Greene's 1943 thriller, its plot pivotally turns on a cake containing images of smuggled documents, and the novel itself devotes ongoing attention to culinary matters and spaces. Nash suggests this sustained interest in rationed ingredients, repurposed foodstuffs, and reappropriated kitchens crucially indexes and refashions the British Ministry of Food's own explicit conscription of the kitchen as a front in the war on Fascism in its wartime propaganda. But where this front was figured primarily to be a women's battlefield and thereby served as a restabilization of gender divisions unsettled by war, Nash traces how Greene's repurposing of the kitchen front interrogates at once wartime austerity measures and the mobilization of such gendered narratives. Most suggestively, she argues that “while the intended effect of the logic of such food propaganda may have been to create stability and a gendered order in the wake of war, Greene's novel reveals how that very same propaganda inadvertently calls reproduced narratives of identity, and of masculinity specifically, into question.”

Where Nash's essay turns attention to the ways midcentury modernists critiqued the wartime militarization of the kitchen, Allison Carruth's “The Green Avant-Garde: Food Hackers and Cyberagrarians” examines

contemporary bioart—or “food hacking”—in the age of agribusiness. Reconsidering the relationship between Dadaist aesthetic practices and culinary forms like the recipe, Carruth argues that modern-day biohackers like Zack Denfeld and Cat Kramer who draw on “provocative uses of technology to foster new public forums for social activism and experimentation” both recall and reanimate Dadaist forms in ways that help reattune us to “just how significant matters of taste and cultivation (or eating and farming) are to modernism writ large.” Yet as she shows, in little magazines like *Food Phreaking*, speculative projects like Community Meat Lab, and high-tech experiments like growBot’s Cheese Computing, this new culinary avant-garde movement also reinvents alimentary modernism by scrambling the borders of “avant-garde art and food science” and by more radically imagining alternative food futures. (It is worth remarking here that we are fortunate to have Denfeld, of the Center for Genomic Gastronomy, as this issue’s guest media editor. As we’ll see, his section brings together a range of contemporary art and design projects that examine agricultural production, food insecurity, and technological advancement in ways that at once echo modernist concerns about emergent regimes of agricultural efficiency and refashion earlier modes of critical culinary engagement to new ends.)

If the alimentary experimentation by groups like the Center for Genomic Gastronomy pushes the boundaries of biotechnology and slows food in ways that invite us to redefine technological and gustatory innovation, Anne Anlin Cheng’s essay, “Sushi, Otters, Mermaids: Race at the Intersection of Food and Animal,” turns us to the consumptive limits of scholarship (and human ontology) by way of a reading of sushi and David Wong Louie’s 1992 short story “Bottles of Beaujolais” that invites us to reconsider “what it means to be reading for and chewing on race.” As she points out, Louie’s surreal story, which centers on the romance plot between an unnamed sushi chef in training, a woman named Luna, and the otter inhabiting the sushi restaurant’s aquarium, has been difficult to digest precisely because it “refuses the racial and generic appetites that fuel much of the making of Asian American literature.” But if “Bottles of Beaujolais” underscores the ways in which sushi functions as an emblematic “technology of racial formation,” Cheng shows how it also works to unnervingly decenter the hierarchy of special difference and “the logic of biological taxonomy itself.” She thus unsettles the boundaries of food studies, animal studies, and critical race studies in light of

Louie's provocation to reread sushi "as a food, a commodity, a cultural marker, a racial sign, an affect, a metaphor for species difference, and, finally, potentially, as a critical agency" and thereby asks us to rethink, "Who is a human, and what is it that we eat?"

Over two decades ago Maud Ellmann suggested in *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* that we might reread the health food boom of the 1970s as a legacy of (rather than departure from) the Vietnam War: "In a sense the war had come home, for now it was our bodies that were under siege, rather than those of the Vietnamese; and only the most unremitting vigilance could save us from the chemicals bombarding us from every supermarket shelf."<sup>9</sup> More recently, Kyla Wazana Tompkins has argued in her groundbreaking work *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* that contemporary "foodie culture is founded on problematic racial politics . . . and insufficiently theorized attachments to 'local' or organic foodways, attachments that sometimes suspiciously echo nativist ideological formations"—in other words, eating cultures and racial formations that can in fact be traced back to the long nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> To taste modernism now is, finally, to remember that its appetites, anxieties, and innovations are at once more foreign and more familiar than we might otherwise have recalled.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**J. Michelle Coghlan** is a lecturer in American literature at the University of Manchester (UK). Her forthcoming book, *Sensational Internationalism in the Edinburgh Critical Studies in Atlantic Literatures and Cultures series* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press), recovers the spectacular afterlife of the Paris Commune in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century US literary, visual, and performance culture. Her project in progress, "Culinary Designs," chronicles the rise of food writing and the making of American taste in the long nineteenth century. Her recent work has appeared in *Arizona Quarterly*; the *Henry James Review*; *Must Read: Rediscovering American Bestsellers*, ed. Sarah Churchwell and Thomas Ruys Smith (London: Continuum, 2012); and *Transforming Henry James*, ed. Anna De Biasio, Anna Despotopoulou, and Donatella Izzo (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

#### NOTES

I'm indebted to Stephanie Foote and Stephanie LeMenager for so enthusiastically making a home for this special issue in *Resilience's* pages and to Paula Salvio, whose paper enriched our MSA discussion and who first suggested a second life for the con-

versation. I also want to express great gratitude to each of my contributors as well as to guest media editor Zack Denfeld, managing editor Megan Condis, and our pool of anonymous second readers, all of whom have made my work on this issue a pure pleasure from start to finish. My superb research assistants, Christopher Vardy and Tom Froh, merit much appreciation for their assistance with the final details of getting this to press, as does my dear colleague Anastasia Valassopoulous for doling out invaluable practical advice on numerous occasions. And—finally—many thanks to Adrienne Brown, Sonya Posmentier, Greg Londe, Lindsay Reckson, and Jonathan Eburne for being the keenest of sounding boards for the earliest incarnation of all of this.

1. Over two decades ago, Maud Ellmann examined the ways that hunger animated the art of modernists such as Joyce, Yeats, and Kafka; see *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Recently, Allison Carruth's groundbreaking work has most directly articulated the ways late modernist writers digested global food politics while also drawing attention to the link between midcentury food writing and modernist aesthetics; see "War Rations and the Food Politics of Late Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 16, no. 4 (2009): 767–95; and *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 49–89. For a further discussion of modernism's culinary concerns, see, for example, Sonya Posmentier's excellent analysis of agricultural cultivation and aesthetic taste in "The Provision Ground in New York: Claude McKay and the Form of Memory," *American Literature* 84, no. 2 (2012): 273–300; Jennifer Fleissner's pathbreaking reading of Fletcherism as a dietary and aesthetic practice in "Henry James and the Art of Eating," *ELH* 75, no. 1 (2008): 27–62; and Lawrence S. Rainey's fascinating turn to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses on food and the "girl-worker of day" in "Eliot among the Typists: Writing *The Waste Land*," *Modernism/modernity* 12, no. 1 (2005): 27–84.

2. The talk that Jennifer Burns Levin presented as part of the "Tasting Modernism" panel, "Modernist Cuisine for Moderns," problematized but also celebrated Mhyrvold's use of the "modernist" label throughout his introduction to the six-volume, award-winning cookbook series *Modernist Cuisine: The Art and Science of Cooking* (2011). For more on ways that the "modernist" moniker has caught on in contemporary food writing on restaurants like eBulli, see Carruth's "The Green Avant-Garde: Food Hackers and Cyber Farmers" in this issue.

3. Sarah Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 3.

4. Karen Jacobs, *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 2. See also Martin Jay's account of occularcentrism in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Judith Brown's discussion of modernist fascination and visual technology in *Glamour in Six Dimensions: Modernism and the Radiance of Form* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); and Anne Anlin Cheng's

reading of the visual and haptic registers of modernist “sheen” in *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

5. In her seminal study of modernism’s sensory realignment, Danius devotes only four passing mentions to taste, and her chapter on Proust’s sensory education notably centers on the eye rather than the tongue. See in *Senses of Modernism*. But while taste remains largely overlooked in discussions of the modern formation of the senses, the recent publication of Abbie Garrington’s *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013) suggests greater attention has begun to be paid to modernist sensory feeling and formation beyond the visual realm.

6. Erica Fretwell, “Emily Dickinson in Domingo,” *J19* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 73.

7. Fleissner, “Henry James and the Art of Eating,” 28–29.

8. Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, “Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New,” *Bad Modernisms* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

9. Ellmann, *Hunger Artists*, 9.

10. Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 2.