

**Not just Porridge:
English Literati at Table**

edited by

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Francesca Orestano

Introduction

Food tasted and described: a kind of literary history

This book was concocted during the meetings and debates held in the attic cells of the former convent near the church of St Alexander, today part of the Department of Foreign Languages, in Milan. A group of young English literature scholars (a couple a bit less young) used to meet there and discuss literature and food, prompted by the theme that EXPO was ubiquitously advertising – ‘Food for the planet, energy for life’. Gradually, unexpectedly, the first ideas kept growing into a common project, overflowing across the centuries, involving more authors, books, recipes. Now that the task is completed, offering a survey that embraces medieval culinary adventures as well as today’s predicament with junk food and exotic frozen substances, one may suggest that it does not just offer a map of cookery in England across the centuries, but that in its very idiosyncratic and humble way it also provides a kind of literary history, albeit told from a gastronomic perspective.

It is a literary canon *sui generis*: having been established by analysing the food preferences and discourses of famous men and women of letters, by poets and novelists. Our book lingers on the threshold of the kitchen rather than in the classroom: closer to the cooking range than to library shelves and their precious tomes. But the material from which these essays are made is also, undeniably, the ingredient – the crumbs, the leftovers? – of whatever exists in texts of a more elevated literary genre and authoritative reputation.

The first essay by Cristina Paravano focuses, in a light but scholarly way, on Roger of Ware, and offers a portrait of a late fourteenth century masterchef. He is not a secondary character in the group of pilgrims described by Geoffrey Chaucer, the ‘father’ of English literature. On the road between London and Canterbury the cook often has his say and the journey is enriched by aromas and ingredients of recipes that announce a local food culture, but also keen to mix local products with spices imported from distant countries, creating unusual combinations. This adventurous attitude towards the exotic in matters of food is even more clear in the contribution of Margaret ‘Maggie’ Rose. Caliban’s dinner on the one hand reminds the reader that in the sixteenth century in England poor people

went foraging, and foraging in the fields and open country provided them with a variety of edible vegetables. Their meat diet was very limited. On the other hand, the island colonised by Prospero suggests that there are new and exotic types of food, such as ground nuts – potatoes already? – that Caliban digs from the earth, plus berries, monkeys to be roasted, and strange scumels. This is the age of Shakespeare, with its division into the King and the poor, slaves and masters, domestic and exotic: the island contains and reveals those social and cultural tensions that will flare up in the conflict between King and Parliament, and in the war that will mark the central decades of the 17th century.

But these problems do not seem to affect Izaak Walton, who composes his fishing manual, *The Compleat Angler* (1653), in the heat of the war. Walton strolls along his placid stream, thinking about pike and trout, devices for angling, hooks and bait: and then he gives us a wonderful recipe for carp. Take the carp, scour him clean, open the fish and place inside some small bundles of Marjoram, Thyme, Parsley, a sprig of Rosemary, some Onions, a few pickled Oysters and three Anchovies.

Then pour upon your Carp as much claret wine as will onely [sic] cover him; and season your claret well with salt, Cloves and Mace, and the rinds of Oranges and Lemons, cover your pot and set it on a quick fire, till it be sufficiently boiled; then take out the Carp and lay it with the broth into the dish, and pour upon it a quarter of a pound of fresh butter melted and beaten, with half a dozen spoonfuls of the broth, the yolks of two or three eggs, and some of the herbs shred, garnish your dish with Lemons and so serve it up.

Everything is fresh and local: but the French claret wine, cloves and mace, and the rinds of oranges and lemons, altogether suggest that frequent exchanges and imported products shape the English taste. Increasingly, commerce becomes the factor that places England at the centre of the world. Thus Joseph Addison in the *Spectator* (1711, n. 69) can describe London as ‘this metropolis a kind of emporium for the whole earth’. And he explains to the readers of one of the first European periodicals, that while nature spreads her products everywhere, England is the place where they are enjoyed, owing to its intense commerce with distant countries:

The food often grows in one country, and the sauce in another. The fruits of Portugal are corrected by the products of Barbadoes: the infusion of a China plant sweetened with the pith of an Indian cane. The Philippick Islands give a flavour to our European bowls.

Tea, spices, cane sugar. Even though English weather does not help, and local berries are very sour, exotic delights like peaches, figs, apricots and melons come to the island, the centre indeed of a global market.

Natural historians tell us, that no fruit grows originally among us, besides hips, and haws, acorns and pig-nuts, with other delicacies of the like nature; that our climate of itself, and without the assistances of art, can make no further advances towards a plum than to a sloe, and carries an apple to no greater a perfection than a crab; that our melons, our peaches, our figs, our apricots, and cherries, are strangers among us, imported in different ages, and naturalised in our English gardens; and that they would all degenerate and fall away into the trash of our own country, if they were wholly neglected by the planter, and left to the mercy of our sun and soil.

Merchants, natural historians, scholars in botanical science, geographers channel towards England an unceasing flux of information, specimens of seeds and plants:

Our ships are laden with the harvest of every climate; our tables are stored with spices, and oils, and wines: [...]. My friend Sir Andrew calls the vineyards of France our gardens: the spice-islands our hot-beds; [...]. Nature indeed furnishes us with the bare necessities of life, but traffick gives us greater variety of what is useful, and at the same time supplies us with everything that is convenient and ornamental. Nor is it the least part of this our happiness, that whilst we enjoy the remotest products of the north and south, we are free from those extremities of weather which give them birth; that our eyes are refreshed with the green fields of Britain, at the same time that our palates are feasted with fruits that rise between the tropicks.

All over the 'green fields of Britain' there are gardens and intensive cultivations: hot greenhouses enable delicate vegetables from faraway lands to be grown, for the tables of the wealthy. Alexander Pope describes the ceremony of coffee-making in *The Rape of the Lock*: a hot, scented and aromatic drink is sipped in China cups, by dainty bejewelled ladies, between card games and other amusements typical of Queen Anne's day. Our poet could well describe the fashionable liquor, being himself a gourmet, and, as the legend goes, meeting his death through an excess of potted lampreys.

Giovanni Iamartino shows that from the limited perspective of food it is possible to paint a fresco of a whole century. This happens when the subject of the investigation is Samuel Johnson, the man of letters who 'is' the eighteenth century, as our Johnson scholar reminds us at the opening of his essay. Not only does Johnson appear as the genial editor of the *Dictionary*, where the entries devoted to food abound, but he also offers his biographers – Iamartino culls rich material from four biographies – a remarkable amount of reflections on food, and on mankind. With typical philosophical shrewdness and culinary wit, acknowledging his preferences but

keeping his appetite under control, Dr Johnson provides the features of a detailed cultural landscape. The context is London, already a modern, swinging city where he often dines out, invited by friends, or at a restaurant; where it is possible to buy food already cooked, take-away food indeed, and where dining out means to share conversation as well as food, so that a serious subject can be debated while tasting the best lamb or veal – and avoiding porridge and vegetables.

Poised between appetite and sensibility, Chiara Biscella draws a portrait of Jane Austen, the writer who even today enjoys an unceasing dialogue with her fans, in the many blogs devoted to her works. In her novels Austen cleverly orchestrates dinners and tea ceremonies, where, together with the movements of teapots and trays of sweets, we can follow the development of social relationships – not always marked by sweetness. Above steaming cups of tea, glances, words, whispers and reticent silences are observed. The formal sequence of the necessary actions required for the preparation and consumption of a cup of tea – actions belonging to a ritual that even today denotes Englishness (despite the replacement of cups with mugs, and of tea leaves, once religiously kept in the tea caddy, with practical tea bags) – allows Austen’s heroines to hide cautiously in the background, but without missing for an instant the drama that is unfolding on the drawing room public stage. Far from these mundane contexts, the Romantics enjoy their rural pleasures.

Anna Rudelli knowledgeably describes the environment and the typical day of the Wordsworth siblings at Dove Cottage, in the Lake District. As one suspected, the sister of the poet is responsible for the domestic ménage. In the kitchen garden Dorothy grows beans, peas and various vegetables, picks gooseberries; at home, she makes bread, savoury pies and sweet biscuits, and she cooks the pike and bream that William occasionally catches in the lake. The romantic group around the Wordsworths often enjoys excursions among the picturesque Cumberland hills, lakes and waterfalls: on such occasions Dorothy prepares sandwiches, filled with cold meat, using the leftovers from previous meals. Hers is a careful domestic economy, or rather ecology, where nothing goes wasted: and it will be so even when they move from the small uncomfortable Dove Cottage to the commodious and larger Rydal Mount. But not all the poets live in the quiet, rural environment of the Lakes: much more inclined to travelling, Byron and Shelley share, albeit differently, a conception of the human animal that eschews cannibalism, hence the non-consumption of animal meat. Shelley, as Marco Canani reminds us in an essay full of critical hints for further research, transposes his notion of feral instinct into a philosophy of life. The poet is wholly in favour of a vegetarian diet, followed with a strict, almost religious conviction. The description of Shelley, intent on munching pieces of bread even when he reads in the library, at the university, or converses with friends, is one that stays in our mind, together with

that circle of crumbs spread on the floor, all around his armchair. Bread, oranges, dried raisins, honey and biscuits: Shelley has definitely a sweet tooth, but Canani also sets an accent on a whole period when vegetarianism and the vegetarian diet had an increasing number of votaries.

Not so for Isabella Beeton. Universally known for her *Book of Household Management*, a weighty volume of over 1000 pages published in 1861, this young writer offered a compendium for the Victorian household where the question of food is indeed central. The subject was treated by means of practical recipes, indexed, so that beside the list of ingredients and cooking method there was also to be found the cost of the preparation and the ideal season in which to obtain a successful result. Illustrations in colour completed the volume. In the pages of Mrs Beeton, introduced by Beatrice Moja in all their rich and modern complexity, we spot the Victorian way of life, and especially of those middle-class families keen on appropriating the secrets and esoteric jargon of the celebrated French chefs operating in aristocratic mansions. But the accent also fell on saving. Canned food was cheaper than fresh produce, and Mrs Beeton proposes clever imitations of costly dishes: just like Lewis Carroll who in *Alice in Wonderland* mentions a Mock Turtle that looks – and probably tasted – very much like veal. The Victorian mistress celebrates Christmas festivities with the flames of a Christmas pudding: but after this family gathering, she is also intent on cooking for the poor gallons of beneficent soup, and on feeding a special diet to invalids. A very angel in the house, a stronghold of the domestic sanctuary, according to Mrs Beeton.

Dickens instead, as we might predict from his writings, speaks at first from the streets of London. Much later in his life, and already a famous writer, he describes one of those restaurants that have sprouted like mushrooms together with the modern railway system. Introduced by Claudia Cremonesi, who has written excellent pages on the subject, a very young Boz takes pleasure in whatever is cooked in the streets, and describes with great gusto the stalls and street vendors with their enticing display of ready-cooked food. From the early morning until late evening, muffins, and steak and kidney pies inundate the busy streets of London with their tempting aromas. Many years later, a mature Dickens, dressed as the uncommercial traveller, looks for a restaurant between one train and the next. But restaurants in London seem to fall below any acceptable standard, especially those new establishments near the railway stations. Definitely for Dickens the street food tasted during his youth was inimitable. And let us not forget, in this context, the divorced wife of the great writer. Catherine Dickens, under the pseudonym of Lady Maria Clutterbuck, would produce a cookbook entitled *What Shall We Have for Dinner?* (1851). Her selection of menus would go through five editions until 1860.

In the last decades of the century, and in the following one, England becomes the home of a famous expatriate, Henry James. During his first years abroad he feels deep nostalgia for food from New England; he considers with suspicion the menus of the Continent (Italians fry too much!); but despite these shortcomings James is also tormented by a nightmare, of putting on too much weight. A meat eater, but also very keen on sweets, the American expatriate undergoes very laborious digestive processes. He likes eating practically everything, and especially the tasty condiments and rich sauces accompanying a good roast beef. In desperation, he eventually relies on a diet guru, a certain Mr Fletcher, whose method consists of imposing a very long chewing process for each morsel of food. The practical result is that James ends up by eating alone. Elena Ogliari describes with wit and gusto all these aspects, altogether offering a modern and touching portrayal of James's digestive drama. The writer will eventually abandon Fletcherism, to return, fat and joyously free, to the pleasures of conviviality and good food.

There are not two writers more different than Arnold Bennett and Lytton Strachey. Karin Mosca puts them side by side in her essay, using the omelette as a bridge between the two. Bennett, a materialist writer according to Virginia Woolf, belongs to the school of the realistic detail; Strachey seasons his biographies with doses of pungent irony, Freudian insights, pitiless stabs at the subjects he portrays. The former dines at the Savoy: the latter likes his milk and biscuits in bed. But both speak about the omelette, albeit from two very different viewpoints. Karin Mosca cleverly follows this game of mirrors, and the character of the two men of letters. Behind the positions taken by Bennett and Strachey, as far as the omelette is concerned, we may now describe the dawning of a new century, a less Victorian England, less bent on domestic rituals and willing to build up an *entente cordiale* with the seductive French cuisine.

At the same time, however, a distinct note had sounded in the work of John Ruskin. In *The Ethics of the Dust* (1866), Ruskin had been the advocate of a healthy attitude to food, of a modern awareness of its value inseparable from the notion of waste. Matching the knowledge of past tradition to modern science, Ruskin had also traced the path to our present notions about food culture, adding to it a remarkable international note, that set English cuisine at the centre of a map made of diverse traditions, rather than enclosing it within the insularity of national recipes:

Cookery means the knowledge [...] of all herbs and fruits and balms and spices, and all that is healing and sweet in the fields and groves and savoury in meats. It means carefulness, and inventiveness, and watchfulness, and willingness, and readiness of appliance; it means the economy of your

great-grandmothers, and the science of the modern chemists; it means much tasting, and no wasting; it means English thoroughness, and French art, and Arabian hospitality [...].

With Maria Cristina Mancini we move to James Joyce's eternal Ireland. Here Leopold Bloom, on a very special day, strolls along the streets of Dublin, allowing the reader to peep into butcher shops where delicious kidney, to be cooked in butter, is displayed; to enter restaurants of a popular kind, and restaurants for vegetarians, where people eat in haste and pints of ale are imbibed. The vagabond Bloom, in his adventurous circumnavigation, led by chance and appetite, ends up by eating a gorgonzola sandwich, with a glass of Burgundy. In pages that blend gastronomy and critical insights, we follow our modern Ulysses who closes his long day with a bedtime drink of hot chocolate.

Virginia Woolf is a different case. Born to a wealthy family of the upper middle class, the writer provides a striking example of the dramatic changes that mark twentieth century culture. In her life there won't be as many servants as in the past, and cooks sweating in the hot and dark inferno of the kitchen, in the basement: Woolf learns to cook, buys a modern cooking range, and next to her activity as a writer she can make bread, and some good dishes. Food, however, is also part of her writing: it figures as a persuasive strategy to support university education for women in *A Room of One's Own*. Here she sets a genial comparison between the lunch fare and the dinner of two colleges, in Oxbridge, one for men, the other for women. But her life is also marked by two wars, and two periods in which food has to be rationed. Virginia and Leonard celebrate the end of World War One by eating, at last, some chocolate.

Meanwhile other authors, who write for a young readership, celebrate a serene, enchanted world, peopled by funny stuffed animals. These are the protagonists of the books by A. A. Milne – escapist stories, as defined by the critic Peter Hunt – where in a reassuring wood lots of honey and malt biscuits are eaten. These books are typical of the 1920s, when England looks back with nostalgia to its ancient rural community life, trying to forget about the European waste land. Francesca Gorini deconstructs the diet of the bear Winnie-the-Pooh, in the context of what was considered healthy food for children, while the essay of Angela Anna Iuliucci is devoted to a much less reassuring author, the Roald Dahl of *Revolting Rhymes* (1982). Despite being a children's writer, Dahl directly enters the frightening area of the gothic. Iuliucci, who has already scanned that critical area, comparing visual and verbal texts, detects in Dahl's work, and especially in his *Revolting Recipes* – recipes based on worms, beetles, and similar disgusting dainties – a subtle play between irony and critique of the adult world, and its

strange recipes. These are rewritten with an attitude of parody and desecration, typical of many modern children's literature texts.

Finally, the last two essays take the reader to the threshold of contemporary literature and food culture. Ilaria Parini writes on *The Diary of Bridget Jones* (1996), a modern anti-heroine who makes up for her sentimental disappointments with orgies of ready-made food – junk food indeed – and almost daily decisions to go on a diet. The passages that Parini includes in her excellent essay signal that a remarkable change has occurred in that very London where Dickens used to celebrate street food. Here and now, instead, on the shelves of a supermarket, Bridget is seduced by the coloured wrappings that represent what the consumer should find inside. But those seductive images find their counterpoint on the other side of the box, where the carbohydrates, fat and sugar of the chosen food are listed.

Dalila Forni explores with critical acumen the question of today's food from the perspective of a young girl, the protagonist of the novel *Coraline* (2002) by Neil Gaiman. How can she make the correct choice between her real mother and the 'other mother' hiding behind a magic door? How can she choose between the frozen food, warmed up by her mother in the microwave oven, and a mother who seems keen on cooking good, traditional recipes? And what about Coraline's father, bent on strange culinary experiments? The road to the correct choice, that leads to the discovery of true family values beyond the traditionally defined roles, is also the road to maturity, where fantasy is dismissed to return to reality – even if this may not always be completely satisfying. Today, microwaved food and frozen food are the customary choice for families who can share precious moments of intimacy for only a limited time in the evening. This essay is the last one in an itinerary that reflects several centuries of food culture in England, but also indirectly traces a literary history, with a formidable sequence of authors, humours and cultural contexts.

Last but not least, our literary gastronomical identity is underlined by complementing each essay with one or more recipes, culled from contemporary cooking manuals, or directly taken from the authors' biographies. These recipes (sometime with metric measurements, sometime using cups, spoons, liquid or solid ounces) may still be attempted by the curious reader who intends to give body and taste to the authors and to the aromas of the periods examined in the book.

Many thanks to Marco Modenesi, both from the authors and the editors: from the very beginning he has generously supported our project. Thanks to all the contributors, the English literature scholars but especially the young ones, who have accepted the challenge of writing essays at once light and well-informed. Thanks above all to Manana Odisheli and Michael Vickers, who have genially

promoted the fortunes of this book across the Channel; to Stefano Raimondi, of Mimesis, who has granted the rights to our English publisher, David Davison, to whom our final expressions of gratitude are justly due.

This book is an immigrant. Crossing the Channel, it has received a warm welcome, and that kind of substantial and expert help that allows a foreign product to exist into a new cultural milieu, and in a different language. We are aware that best practice in operations like this requires that a text translated into English be read by a native English speaker prior to publication: Michael Vickers – again, very generously and kindly – performed this task.

Francesca Orestano
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