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Somewhere in the lands around Mordor in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam the Hobbits are travelling with their guide, the slimy Gollum. Gollum catches a pair of rabbits and Sam proceeds to cook them. He muses, wishing that he had some nice fried fish and chips to serve his master.¹ The fish and chips here serve as a reminder of the Hobbits' home, a Romantic organic community nestled – burrowed, in fact – into the rolling hills in the west of Middle Earth. And as such, they become a symptom par excellence of the entire fantasy of *The Lord of the Rings*. The novel supplies what in Tolkien's view Britain never had: a national epic, and thus it is a quintessentially Romantic production, simulating a myth and generating a 'feel' of national belonging. Fish and chips, in this context, becomes the ideal national dish. Why not roast beef and bread, the actual diet of choice in the period when nationalism was itself emerging as a philosophical discourse and a political ideology – the Romantic period?

There are, in fact, good reasons in British food history for the choice of fish and chips. Fish and chips were the meal of the industrial working class in the nineteenth century. But as Nick Groom's essay on the subject has demonstrated, they led a shadowy prior existence in literature, filched from the French in the poetry of John Henry Ireland.² Before Ireland, fish and chips were the fantasy food of

anti-French sentiment. Charlotte Smith's novel *Desmond*, set during the French Revolutionary period, employs the dish in a conversation between two gentlemen in Brighton that castigates French customs. On the very the coastal edge of Britain, the upper class defines its difference from the enemy. In terms of how to look at food in its relation to larger social forms such as ideological beliefs, the story of how fish and chips was translated from French into English tells us much. Food is the material embodiment of all kinds of social practices, including the formation of ideology. As a material form, it remains inconsistent with the ideas that surround it. Englishness could never be fully encapsulated in a slice of beef, as Roland Barthes, who wrote on the significance of beef to the French, would have known.

So what are we to make of Tolkien's magical, and to say the least anachronistic, displacement of fish and chips into the fantasy world of Middle Earth, a feudal and pre-feudal realm? Sam's wish for fish and chips seems demotic, if not democratic, evoking the association with the working class and, before that, the French Revolution. If *The Lord of the Rings* is nationalistic, it is so reflexively, almost light-heartedly. Fish and chips signifies nationalism on the fly, improvised belonging, a cheeky substitution for the grander Roast Beef of Old England.

It is the job of food studies to look into

significances such as these, not just to enumerate foods, habits of taste and styles of cooking, drinking and eating. There is a risk that studies of food and diet, especially of the sort favoured by hard-hit contemporary university presses, say nothing of substance about issues that rightly preoccupy the contemporary humanities. The dominant mode is a commercialized version of empiricism, a language that has no patience for the liquidity and subtlety of language, the philosophical problematics of taste and the formation of the subject, the intense and complex issues of race, class, gender and the environment. Fed up with too many Derrida look-alikes, some presses are eating this stuff up.

Studies of food themselves can fulfil an ideological role, taking over where old-fashioned liberal humanist literary criticism left off (or was abandoned). But instead of accounts of *subjects* (Dickens, Hardy), we now have accounts of *objects*. Such studies generate a kind of 'Red Violin' approach to history: in the film *The Red Violin*, a valuable commodity's 'story' is traced as it passes through many hands and historical eras.³ In such treatments history and ideology serve as a less than interesting ever-changing backdrop that highlights the continuing integrity of the (expensive) object. While we have just seen very briefly how an 'object' (even this is reductionist) such as fish and chips can shift radically and blend with a whole new complex of social forces. Just as the point of Leavisite literary criticism was to make you feel that Dickens was right there in the room with you, so the 'Red Violin' approach evokes the taste of a foreign or ancient food in your mouth.⁴

Not that this is a bad aim in itself. Food studies should help us to understand the taste of crystallized nutmeg and what it might have been like to eat roast dormouse with the Romans. But histories of a reified object are just as – to use a food metaphor – crummy as those of a reified subject. There is no real life on the

page, just a vivid simulation of it. As a matter of fact, since the view here is very much along the lines of 'you are what you eat' (a slogan with at least two origins in the Romantic period itself), Red Violin histories are fully reversible. In terms of what you get out of it, it doesn't matter whether you are talking about Dr Johnson or a bowl of oatmeal.

In the Red Violin approach an object remains consistent and inert against a background that likewise becomes consistent and insignificant (the picaresque adventures of the commodity). Against this, a more genuinely materialist approach would be precisely to *dematerialize* the object, to rigorously reduce it to the intersubjective and social fields in which it gains its significance. This dematerialization must avoid, likewise, the diametrically opposite approach, the history of ideas, which is really the Red Violin approach in a more traditional guise (the picaresque adventures of an idea). As Lenin proclaimed, intelligent materialism is closer to intelligent idealism than to unintelligent materialism.⁵

History and the people and things and ideas that make it up are more like mashed potatoes than fruit salad. They are not an assemblage of discrete elements but a fully blended mixture in which it often becomes hard to tell one from the other. The effect of this is not to produce a bland homogeneity, but in fact to suggest the curious flavours of non-identity, difference and contradiction. The past haunts us with its presence and its difference, simultaneously, at this very moment. If you want to know how people ate in the nineteenth century; better, if you want to know how they *felt* about how they ate, just go to Burger King. We are living inside the fantasy of the nineteenth-century European agricultural working class, immiserated and hungry, trekking across America with nothing but a corned beef hunk and a dream of fullness. What was an ideological fantasy object has actually, subject to delays and technological and cultural

modifications, become a reality in the diet of the modern consumer, threatened from all sides with obesity and the injunction to enjoy. The American dream was partly one of a huge, pure, white piece of bread, completely consistently white, fluffy, like a melting pillow of bliss; and a piece of meat, bloody and massive; and not even needing to eat with cutlery but just being able to stuff your face. If you want to study nineteenth-century eating, just look around you.

Food studies is now emerging as a set of interdisciplinary concerns, through history, anthropology and literary criticism, and more recently in other areas of the humanities such as philosophy and cultural studies. It does not need to be hamstrung by the all too scholarly habit of dumbing down one's discourse for the beleaguered book market. It will, inevitably, encounter the pressures of modern commercial life, and be tempted to convert them into easy intellectual solutions, producing what amounts to not much more than annotated kitsch. To enter fully into intellectual life, food studies must bite.

What this will require is that food studies develop and maintain a strong vein of metacritical commentary, a connoisseurship of criticism itself. Discovering and analyzing the history and culture of foodstuffs and dietary practices is the primary aim. But there must also be a reflection on the ways these histories and cultures are described. Some work is already being done in the history and theory of philosophy that bodes well for this metacritical level of exploration. Denise Gigante and David Clark have investigated the ways in which food plays a pivotal, rather than decorative, role in the thinking of Kant and Hegel. This research leads them to conclude that eating and taste are bound up with the formation of the (idea of the) human subject (in Morton, *Cultures of Taste*, pp. 115–40, 183–202). Carolyn Korsmeyer has investigated how food and eating played a central role in the formation of

the eighteenth-century discourse of taste.⁶ We cannot just assume, as in *The Red Violin*, that people stay the same while the things around them shift, like so much scenery. Both the subjects and the objects of consumption are subject to change.

A small example will suffice here. The Romantic period witnessed the development of a whole new range of consumer choices and styles. The eighteenth century had witnessed the emergence of consumer society. By the Romantic period, it became possible to *be* (or if you prefer, to *act* the role of) consumerist. Consumerism is a curiously reflexive mode of consumption that may not seem all that strange now that we are living in its wake.

Consumerism is in part interested in how one appears *as* a certain type of consumer others. One doesn't just eat carrots, one styles oneself as a carrot eater. This idea can be taken a notch further. There is such a thing as reflexive consumerism.⁷ In modern society we are all potential reflexive consumerists, a type that in the Romantic period was restricted to a certain avant-garde (Baudelaire, de Quincey ...). The reflexive consumer is interested in what it feels like to experience a certain form of consumerism – window-shopping if you like, in the shopping mall of subjectivity. The flâneur was born. There is a certain sense in which we are now all flâneurs whether we like it or not. Objective social forms (television advertising, the internet, malls) have made it impossible not to be a reflexive consumerist. This reflexive form enables the conspicuous display of *not-eating*, as in the cases of vegetarianism or boycotting sugar.

The title of Emily Jenkins's *Tongue First* indicates the kind of approach adopted by the reflexive consumerist, or bohemian, in the nineteenth-century phraseology.⁸ The idea is to dive into a new form of subjectivity by consuming a previously avoided substance (in this case, heroin), or acting a different sort of role. This dive is vicarious. There is always a

lifeline, in the form of a certain ironic or cynical distance towards the role being played. This is the quintessence of the Romantic poetic voice. Wordsworth is always describing the revolutions of his ideas of himself around an intense experience or 'spot of time', or recollecting overflows of powerful emotion in tranquillity.

When accounting for hedonistic consumption practices, such as drug use (and *all* such practices are hedonistic to some extent), it is thus important to consider the role of the subject. The drug itself may be very compelling as a fantasy object of the historian's own prose. But unless we learn something about *how* it was consumed, we learn very little about it at all. In general, what goes for drugs is the same for any object of research in food studies. It is impossible, in fact, to adopt a *Red Violin* approach, since food is already, as food, a part of human social interaction. It is never just the hard or slippery nugget of reality on your plate.

We could even go so far as to say that *even as* that morsel of seemingly objective reality, food is already a social form. This is not a matter of subjectivity versus objectivity. The fantasy that is food is 'hard wired' into the food itself. Consider the McDonalds meal, the subject of Morgan Spurlock's documentary, *Supersize Me*.⁹ As I argued above, to eat McDonalds is to eat the fantasy foodstuffs of the Victorian working class. The ultimate fantasy substance for consumerism is Coca Cola, 'the real thing' or as Kant would have said, the *Ding an Sich*, which you are supposed to drink reflexively, 'just for the taste of it' – a taste that at Slavoj Zizek has recently described as the taste of thirst itself. The allure of Coke as an eloquent expression of the commodity form is reflected in the elaborate lengths to which the Corporation has gone to create the illusion of a top-secret formula, carried around the world by a man with a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist. The substance supposed to have the ultimate 'taste' turns out to have no taste at all,

insofar as it merely stands in for a lumpen version of Kantian taste.¹⁰

In addition to the fact that food is a potent ideological symbol, it is evident that it literally embodies the environment in which it was made. The drumstick legs of free-range chickens are much more robust than flimsy factory ones. When Keats asks to be given a beaker full of the warm south ('On a Grecian Urn') he will not be disappointed when he tastes an actual glass of wine, since the location of the vineyard does contribute to its taste. Indeed, there is an enormous discourse on the topic, that of *terroir*. Food studies is here to stay, and there is a huge range of topics it needs to address. The essays in this collection go some way towards further illuminating the roles of food and drink in the Romantic period. ■

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NOTES

1. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Unwin, 1954, 1977), II, 262–3.
2. Nick Groom, 'William Henry Ireland: From Forgery to Fish 'n' Chips', in Timothy Morton, ed., *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism* (London and New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 21–40.
3. Francois Girard, dir., *Le violon rouge (The Red Violin)*, Lion's Gate, 1999 (French, 1998)).
4. For further discussion, see Bruce Robbins, 'Commodity Histories', *PMLA* 120.2 (March, 2005), 454–63.
5. V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 38.276
6. Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).
7. Timothy Morton, *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 5, 9–11.
8. Emily Jenkins, *Tongue First: Adventures in Physical Culture* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998).
9. Morgan Spurlock (dir.), *Supersize Me* (Hart Sharp Video, 2004).
10. Slavoj Zizek, 'Coke as *Objet Petit a*', in *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), pp. 21–40.