



HOME RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION
RENEWING THE CULTURE OF THE HOME

Home Renaissance Foundation

Working Papers

Number 8

Hungry Souls:

From Homer's Cyclops to Fear Factor,
Hannibal the Cannibal and Babette's Feast

By Professor Thomas S. Hibbs
May 2006

**Hungry Souls: From Homer's Cyclops to Fear Factor,
Hannibal the Cannibal and Babette's Feast**
Professor Thomas S. Hibbs¹

An 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. Christ is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard (Mark 2:15-17) and heaven is compared to a banquet (Luke 14:23 and Matthew 22:1-10). *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 the body. *Babette's Feast* argues for a sacramental union of matter and spirit, human and divine. The feast 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.

In marked contrast to this exalted depiction of the potential role of food in human life, contemporary American popular culture is preoccupied with disordered eating and eating disorders: from the food fight in *Animal House* to the celebration of aesthetic cannibalism in the Oscar winning *Silence of the Lambs* to the documentation of American gluttony in *Super-Size Me*, and the gross-out eating contests in *Fear Factor*. The key questions about food and eating are for the most part suppressed in our culture. What would it mean to speak of a proper ordering of eating and a proper appreciation of the role of food in human life? And why do these things matter? Why should we take food and eating as serious matters for human reflection and deliberation? Through an analysis of contemporary American film, philosophical reflections on the human body and the virtue of temperance, and the classic film *Babette's Feast*, we will consider the way the communal enjoyment of food and drink provide more than necessary nourishment for the body.

The obstacles to our recovery of natural and spiritual virtues of eating are many. Increasing numbers of Americans suffer from obesity; 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. The disorders and their palpable effects on human health and well-being are dramatically and humorously driven home in the documentary, *Super Size Me*, in which the director and main character Morgan Spurlock vows to eat three meals a day at McDonald's for one month. After receiving an initial bill of good health from numerous doctors, he embarks upon his adventure in fast food excess and returns to the doctors on a regular basis during the month. Predictably, his weight increases, as do his blood pressure and his cholesterol. More alarmingly, his liver shows signs of toxic shock, his skin becomes discolored, he experiences chest pains, and his libido declines. Appalled and amazed doctors admit that they expected these sorts of symptoms from binge drinking but never from a month of fast food. To underscore the addictive methods of fast food and its advertising, the film humorously juxtaposes images of Ronald McDonald with a soundtrack from Curtis Mayfield singing "Pusher Man."

¹ Dean of the Honors College and Professor of Ethics and Culture Baylor University, Texas, USA

When it comes to food and the body, Americans are given to extremes of overindulgence and of obsession with the stringent requirements of the ideal body. 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 thoughtless indulgence and instant gratification, on the one hand, and puritanical self-denial, on the other. The failure readily to achieve an ideal shape can lead to revulsion toward one's body and toward food itself. We may discern here a secular version of what Wendell Berry identifies as a form of "religious insanity," seeing the victory of the soul in its making a victim of the body.ⁱ Purely negative self-restraint is indistinguishable from "self-hatred." 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.

Even where we come close to understanding and practicing temperance, we still tend to conceive of eating in an individualistic way. The classical tradition, still dominant in many places in Europe and the Middle East, regarding eating is inseparable from its social dimension. Whether our eating is experienced principally in the form of fast food consumed in the privacy of one's automobile or in front of the television, whether even 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 has eloquently insisted, 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.

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 (98).

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" (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 virtues 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" (111). In the famous episode from Homer's epic, a Cyclops, Polyphemus, takes Odysseus and his men captive by Polyphemus 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 series of stories, in the novels of Thomas Harris and a variety of 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 debased 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 morality. 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.

Here, as elsewhere in our culture, the virtues that once formed an intelligibility unity and gave shape and purpose to various human practices are segregated from one another and thus become transformed into some quite alien to the mainstream tradition of the virtues. In such a context, it becomes difficult to give a very rich meaning to the notion of health, since health is, as Wendell Berry astutely notes, in "wholeness" (p. 99). Belonging, signified especially in communal conviviality, is healing. It is interesting that, among the four cardinal virtues, the two instrumental virtues are temperance and courage. But these virtues cannot be understood apart from the overarching order provided by the virtue of justice, an order of communal and individual goods to be

defended by courage and sustained by temperance. Apart from a larger sense of such an order of goods, courage is no longer a virtue needed to preserve and defend human goods. It becomes merely a matter of boldness in the face of what most human beings fear. Is this not precisely what is on display in the competitions of *Fear Factor*? Not slovenly intemperance but calculated and competitive intemperance serves the goal of displaying one's courageous resolve in the face of what is offensive. If virtues are now exhibited by overcoming natural inhibitions to the grotesque, then what sense can be made of our prohibition against the consumption of human flesh?

From that perspective, Hannibal has a point. In his 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" (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" (107).

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 confesses 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.

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.

The sisters wish to commemorate the anniversary of their father's founding of their religious community, a community lately 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. Neither route is the path of temperance, properly understood and practice; neither route allows us to experience communion in the concrete embodied conditions of human life. Like fidelity in marriage, fidelity in the social experience of the common meal “preserves the possibility of devotion against the distractions of novelty,...the possibility of moments when what we have chosen and what we desire are the same. Such a convergence obviously cannot be continuous....But fidelity prepares us for the return of these moments, which give us the highest joy we can know: that of union, communion, atonement (in the root sense of at-one-ment)” (p. 117).

This is precisely the surprising possibility glimpsed by the General in the course of the meal. The General is 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. Here the meal is an occasion for the most human and most philosophical of passions: wonder. 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 commitment not to say a word about food or drink. At one point, 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 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 denigration of embodiment can arise either from religious scruples about the body, which is seen to be a source of evil, and from secular proclamations of the independence of human thought and will from the body, which is construed as raw material or property to be used as the owner sees fit. Following Montaigne, Pascal once quipped that he who tries to make himself an angel ends up as a beast. The forgetfulness of our bodily nature and of the role of the imagination in our complex lives as human beings results not in our transcendence of the human condition but in our enslavement to lower appetites. Walker Percy identified angelism, the denial of our bodily condition, as a distinctively modern heresy.

Aquinas is acutely aware of the bodily conditions of human knowing and acting. Throughout his reflections on human nature, Aquinas highlights the marvellous union of soul and body. 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.

Aquinas provides a complex, rich, and supple metaphysical account of the union of soul and body. In response to the query whether God gave the human body an apt disposition, Aquinas focuses upon the "upright stature" of human beings.ⁱⁱ The consequences for our relationship to the world are telling. In animals, the senses reside primarily in the face; since our face is not turned toward the ground, our senses are not confined to performing biological functions necessary for survival: pursuing food and fending off attackers. Our senses provide avenues for higher-level interaction with nature and other human beings. Beyond any pragmatic purpose, we take delight in the beauty of sensible things.ⁱⁱⁱ We are open to and receptive of the whole: "The subtlety of sight probes the many differences of things... and enables us to gather the truth of all things, both earthly and heavenly." Our mouths do not protrude and are not primarily suited for self-defense and procuring food. If our mouths and tongues were like those of other animals, they would "obstruct speech which is the proper work of reason."

It has sometimes been suggested that Western philosophical reflection about mind is wedded to an abstract and detached model of objectivity, with its penchant for comparing mind

exclusively to sight. Aquinas's emphasis on the embodiment of reason in speech, and on touch as the most human of the senses, undercuts such a model. In response to the question whether the rational soul is united to an appropriate body, he highlights the importance of the sense of touch.^{iv} By comparison with the bodies of other animals, the human body is feeble, that is, less immediately equipped with powers serving the maintenance of life. Instead of a "fixed" set of bodily powers, it has reason and the hand, the organ of organs, able to craft limitless tools. Moreover, the human body is ordered to activities eclipsing that of mere survival: knowledge, communication, and love. For these, it requires an "equable complexion, a mean between contraries," giving it the ability to receive and discriminate an array of sensible qualities. Such a complexion is prominent in the sense of touch, especially in the hand, which actually grasps and takes on the form of the thing held. There is a striking analogy here between the hand's grasping of objects and the intellect's grasping of the forms of the things.^v

The links between touch and intelligence illustrate from yet another vantage point the remarkable union of soul and body. The intellectual soul, we should recall, is the first act of the entire body, animating and informing the whole. This has important ramifications for the sub-rational powers of the human soul. For example, the participation of the lower, sensitive powers in reason is prominent in Aquinas's examination of the passions. Since the passions reside in the sensitive rather than the intellectual appetite, it might seem that they could not be subject to moral appraisal or that the task of ethics would be to create a clear demarcation between reason and passion and then to train reason to check the vagrant impulses of passion. The faulty assumption here is that of an unbridgeable gap between intellect and will, on the one hand, and the sensitive appetite, on the other. Aquinas counters with Aristotle's teaching that, while the lower appetites are not intrinsically rational, they are amenable to rational persuasion and thus may participate in reason.^{vi} Aquinas divides the passions into concupiscible and irascible. The former (which includes love and hatred, joy and sorrow) pertains to sensible good and evil absolutely, while the latter (which encompasses hope and despair, daring and fear) has a more narrow scope: the arduous or difficult good or evil.^{vii} The restricted scope of the irascible passions indicates their auxiliary and subordinate role; they are called into action when we encounter arduous goods or onerous evils. Since they concern a restricted good, they pertain to movement alone, as in struggle or flight, not to repose. Thus the concupiscible powers are prior to the irascible and, among the concupiscible, the first is love, whose inclination to the good is the cause of all the passions.^{viii}

Aquinas's account of human nature provides the metaphysics or anthropology for a proper understanding of a film such as *Babette's Feast*. Pleasure, both bodily and intellectual or spiritual, is natural to human beings. Taking delight in the discrimination of the distinctions of things is woven into the very constitution of our body, as is the communal sharing of that delight through speech. All these themes come together in the communal meal, an event at which the primacy of concupiscible over the irascible passions is made clear. There is certainly a felt and acknowledged need to fend off threats to communal and individual life and a recognition of all the difficulty involved in achieving great goods; all this applies to the irascible appetite. Yet none of this would be worth our effort were it not motivated by a more fundamental love, a desire for human and divine communion, for the feast at which all our longing aims and which scripture never hesitates to use as an image of heaven.

In deploying the meal as symbol, scripture both reveals a dimension of depth latent within our ordinary experience and points us upwards, beyond the symbols themselves, to a divine source, the exemplar of all created things. As M. D. Chenu puts it, “the mental operation proper to symbolism” is a “translatio, a transference or elevation from the visible sphere to the invisible.”^{ix} Aquinas explicitly embraces such an understanding when he describes our indirect access to the divine as involving a “translation of likenesses from sensible things to immaterial substances” (*similitudines rerum sensibilium ad substantias immateriales translatas*).^x This translation from the visible to the invisible mirrors the ecstasy of which Donne speaks and which Aquinas describes: “divine love makes ecstasy in so far as it makes the appetite incline unto lovable things” (“divinus amor facit extasim in quantum scilicet facit appetitum hominis tendere in res amatores,” ST, II-II, 175, 2). Indeed, one of the effects of pleasure on the soul is expansion or dilation.^{xi} The effect can be seen with respect to both the apprehensive and the affective powers of the soul. With regard to the apprehensive power, the soul is said to be enlarged or dilated (*animus hominis dicitur magnificari seu dilatari*); and with regard to the affective powers, they are said to hand themselves over to continue within the object of delight (*sic dilatatur affectus hominis per delectationem, quasi se tradens ad continendum interius rem delectantem*).^{xii}

ⁱ The Body and the Earth, in *The Art of the Commonplace*, p. 115.

ⁱⁱ ST, I, 91, 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ *solus homo delectatur in ipsa pulchritudine sensibilium secundum seipsam*, ST, I, 91, 3, ad 3.

^{iv} ST, I, 76, 5.

^v See Stanley Rosen, “Thought and Touch: A Note on Aristotle’s *De Anima*,” *Phronesis* 6 (1961), 127-137.

^{vi} ST, I-II, 24, 1, ad 2. It is striking that McDowell has nothing to say about the intermediate status of passions between the purely rational and the purely sub-rational.

^{vii} ST, I-II, 23, 1.

^{viii} ST, I-II, 25, 2.

^{ix} Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, translated by Jerome Taylor and Lester Little (Chicago University Press, 1968), p. 138.

^x Exposition of Boethius’s *De Trinitate*, VI, 3.

^{xi} ST, I-II, 33, 1.

^{xii} ST, I-II, 33, 1.