

2 - Nice to Eat with You: Acts of Communion

PERHAPS YOU'VE HEARD THE ANECDOTE about Sigmund Freud. One day one of his students, or assistants, or some such hanger-on, was teasing him about his fondness for cigars, referring to their obvious phallic nature. The great man responded simply that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." I don't really care if the story is true or not. Actually, I think I prefer that it be apocryphal, since made-up anecdotes have their own kind of truth. Still, it is equally true that just as cigars may be just cigars, so sometimes they are not.

Same with meals in life and, of course, in literature. Sometimes a meal is just a meal, and eating with others is simply eating with others. More often than not, though, it's not. Once or twice a semester at least, I will stop discussion of the story or play under consideration to intone (and I invariably intone in bold): whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion. For some reasons, this is often met with a slightly scandalized look, communion having for many readers one and only one meaning. While that meaning is very important, it is not the only one. Nor, for that matter, does Christianity have a lock on the practice. Nearly every religion has some liturgical or social ritual involving the coming together of the faithful to share sustenance. So I have to explain that just as intercourse has meanings other than sexual, or at least did at one time, so not all communions are holy. In fact, literary versions of communion can interpret the word in quite a variety of ways.

Here's the thing to remember about communions of all kinds: in the real world, breaking bread together is an act of sharing and peace, since if you're breaking bread you're not breaking heads. One generally invites one's friends to dinner, unless one is trying to get on the good side of enemies or employers. We're quite particular about those with whom we break bread. We may not, for instance, accept a dinner invitation from someone we don't care for. The act of taking food into our bodies is so personal that we really only want to do it with people we're very comfortable with. As with any convention, this one can be violated. A tribal leader or Mafia don, say, may invite his enemies to lunch and then have them killed. In most areas, however, such behavior is considered very bad form. Generally, eating with another is a way of saying, "I'm with you, I like you, we form a community together." And that is a form of communion.

So too in literature. And in literature, there is another reason: writing a meal scene is so difficult, and so inherently uninteresting, that there really needs to be some compelling reason to include one in the story. And that reason has to do with how characters are getting along. Or not getting along. Come on, food is food. What can you say about fried chicken that you haven't already heard, said, seen, thought? And eating is eating, with some slight variations of table manners. To put characters, then, in this mundane, overused, fairly boring situation, something more has to be happening than simply beef, forks, and goblets.

So what kind of communion? And what kind of result can it achieve? Any kind you can think of.

Let's consider an example that will never be confused with religious communion, the eating scene in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), which, as one of my students once remarked, "sure doesn't look like church." Specifically, Tom and his lady friend, Mrs. Waters, dine at an inn, chomping, gnawing, sucking on bones, licking fingers; a more leering, slurping, groaning, and, in short, sexual meal has never been consumed. While it doesn't feel particularly important thematically and, moreover, it's as far from traditional notions of communion as we can get, it nevertheless constitutes a shared experience. What else is the eating about in that scene except consuming the other's body? Think of it as a consuming desire. Or two of them. And in the case of the movie version of *Tom Jones* starring Albert Finney

(1963), there's another reason. Tony Richardson, the director, couldn't openly show sex as, well, sex. There were still taboos in film in the early sixties. So what he does is show something else as sex. And it's probably dirtier than all but two or three sex scenes ever filmed. When those two finish swilling ale and slurping on drumsticks and sucking fingers and generally wallowing and moaning, the audience wants to lie back and smoke. But what is this expression of desire except a kind of communion, very private, admittedly, and decidedly not holy? I want to be with you, you want to be with me, let us share the experience. And that's the point: communion doesn't need to be holy. Or even decent.

How about a slightly more sedate example? The late Raymond Carver wrote a story, "Cathedral" (1981), about a guy with real hang-ups: included among the many things the narrator is bigoted against are people with disabilities, minorities, those different from himself, and all parts of his wife's past in which he does not share. Now the only reason to give a character a serious hang-up is to give him the chance to get over it. He may fail, but he gets the chance. It's the Code of the West. When our unnamed narrator reveals to us from the first moment that a blind man, a friend of his wife's, is coming to visit, we're not surprised that he doesn't like the prospect at all. We know immediately that our man has to overcome disliking everyone who is different. And by the end he does, when he and the blind man sit together to draw a cathedral so the blind man can get a sense of what one looks like. To do that, they have to touch, hold hands even, and there's no way the narrator would have been able to do that at the start of the story. Carver's problem, then, is how to get from the nasty, prejudiced, narrow-minded person of the opening page to the point where he can actually have a blind man's hand on his own at the ending. The answer is food.

Every coach I ever had would say, when we faced a superior opposing team, that they put on their pants one leg at a time, just like everybody else. What those coaches could have said, in all accuracy, is that those supermen shovel in the pasta just like the rest of us. Or in Carver's story, meat loaf. When the narrator watches the blind man eating - competent, busy, hungry, and, well, normal - he begins to gain a new respect for him. The three of them, husband, wife, and visitor, ravenously consume the meat loaf, potatoes, and vegetables, and in the course of that experience our narrator finds his antipathy toward the blind man beginning to break down. He discovers he has something in common with this stranger - eating as a fundamental element of life - that there is a bond between them.

What about the dope they smoke afterward?

Passing a joint doesn't quite resemble the wafer and the chalice, does it? But thinking symbolically, where's the difference, really? Please note, I am not suggesting that illicit drugs are required to break down social barriers. On the other hand, here is a substance they take into their bodies in a shared, almost ritualistic experience. Once again, the act says, "I'm with you, I share this moment with you, I feel a bond of community with you." It may be a moment of even greater trust. In any case, the alcohol at supper and the marijuana after combine to relax the narrator so he can receive the full force of his insight, so he can share in the drawing of a cathedral (which, incidentally, is a place of communion).

What about when they don't? What if dinner turns ugly or doesn't happen at all?

A different outcome, but the same logic, I think. If a well-run meal or snack portends good things for community and understanding, then the failed meal stands as a bad sign. It happens all the time on television shows. Two people are at dinner and a third comes up, quite unwished for, and one or more of the first two refuse to eat. They place their napkins on their plates, or say something about losing their appetite, or simply get up and walk away. Immediately we know what they think about the

interloper. Think of all those movies where a soldier shares his C rations with a comrade, or a boy his sandwich with a stray dog; from the overwhelming message of loyalty, kinship, and generosity, you get a sense of how strong a value we place on the comradeship of the table. What if we see two people having dinner, then, but one of them is plotting, or bringing about the demise of the other? In that case, our revulsion at the act of murder is reinforced by our sense that a very important propriety, namely that one should not do evil to one's dinner companions, is being violated.

Or consider Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982). The mother tries and tries to have a family dinner, and every time she fails. Someone can't make it, someone gets called away, some minor disaster befalls the table. Not until her death can her children assemble around a table at the restaurant and achieve dinner; at that point, of course, the body and blood they symbolically share are hers. Her life - and her death - become part of their common experience.

For the full effect of dining together, consider James Joyce's story "The Dead" (1914). This wonderful story is centered around a dinner party on the Feast of the Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas. All kinds of disparate drives and desires enact themselves during the dancing and dinner, and hostilities and alliances are revealed. The main character, Gabriel Conroy, must learn that he is not superior to everyone else; during the course of the evening he receives a series of small shocks to his ego that collectively demonstrate that he is very much part of the more general social fabric. The table and dishes of food themselves are lavishly described as Joyce lures us into the atmosphere:

A fat brown goose lay at one end of the table and at the other end, on a bed of creased paper strewn with sprigs of parsley, lay a great ham, stripped of its outer skin and peppered over with crust crumbs, a neat paper frill round its shin and beside this was a round of spiced beef. Between these rival ends ran parallel lines of side-dishes: two little minsters of jelly, red and yellow; a shallow dish full of blocks of blancmange and red jam, a large green leaf-shaped dish with a stalk-shaped handle, on which lay bunches of purple raisins and peeled almonds, a companion dish on which lay a solid rectangle of Smyrna figs, a dish of custard topped with grated nutmeg, a small bowl full of chocolates and sweets wrapped in gold and silver papers and a glass vase in which stood some tall celery stalks. In the centre of the table there stood, as sentries to a fruit-stand which upheld a pyramid of oranges and American apples, two squat old-fashioned decanters of cut glass, one containing port and the other dark sherry. On the closed square piano a pudding in a huge yellow dish lay in waiting and behind it were three squads of bottles of stout and ale and minerals, drawn up according to the colours of their uniforms, the first two black, with brown and red labels, the third and smallest squad white, with transverse green sashes.

No writer ever took such care about food and drink, so marshaled his forces to create a military effect of armies drawn up as if for battle: ranks, files, "rival ends," sentries, squads, sashes. Such a paragraph would not be created without having some purpose, some ulterior motive. Now, Joyce being Joyce, he has about five different purposes, one not being enough for genius. His main goal, though, is to draw us into that moment, to pull our chairs up to that table so that we are utterly convinced of the reality of the meal. At the same time, he wants to convey the sense of tension and conflict that has been running through the evening - there are a host of us-against-them and you-against-me moments earlier and even during the meal - and this tension will stand at odds with the sharing of this sumptuous and, given the holiday, unifying meal. He does this for a very simple, very profound reason: we need to be part of that communion. It would be easy for us simply to laugh at Freddy Malins, the resident drunkard, and his dotty mother, to shrug off the table talk about operas and singers we've never heard of, merely to snicker at the flirtations among the younger people, to discount the tension Gabriel feels over the speech of gratitude he's obliged to make at meal's end. But we can't maintain our distance because the

elaborate setting of this scene makes us feel as if we're seated at that table. So we notice, a little before Gabriel does, since he's lost in his own reality, that we're all in this together, that in fact we share something.

The thing we share is our death. Everyone in that room, from old and frail Aunt Julia to the youngest music student, will die. Not tonight, but someday. Once you recognize that fact (and we've been given a head start by the title, whereas Gabriel doesn't know his evening has a title), it's smooth sledding. Next to our mortality, which comes to great and small equally, all the differences in our lives are mere surface details. When the snow comes at the end of the story, in a beautiful and moving passage, it covers, equally, "all the living and the dead." Of course it does, we think, the snow is just like death. We're already prepared, having shared in the communion meal Joyce has laid out for us, a communion not of death, but of what comes before. Of life.