

“To Eat Is a Compromise”: Theory, Identity, and Dietary Politics after Kafka

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Abstract:

"La faim, c'est moi"- hunger is me- confesses Amélie Nothomb's heroine in *Biographie de la faim* (The Biography of Hunger) (22). A strange statement, of course, but no stranger than the Flaubertian dictum it evokes. So what exactly does Nothomb acknowledge here? More to the point: what does it mean to suspect that one's identity gels around hunger (20), that, more generally, being is insatiable, grounded by a fundamental and ever-replenished "insufficiency" (*satus* is Latin for "enough," as the reader will recall)?

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Article:

“La faim, c’est moi”—hunger is me—confesses Amélie Nothomb’s heroine in *Biographie de la faim* (*The Biography of Hunger*) (22). A strange statement, of course, but no stranger than the Flaubertian dictum it evokes. So what exactly does Nothomb acknowledge here? More to the point: what does it mean to suspect that one’s identity gels around hunger (20), that, more generally, *being is insatiable*, grounded by a fundamental and ever-replenished “insufficiency” (*satus* is Latin for “enough,” as the reader will recall)?

It means, to be sure, a number of things. Here, I want to touch, rather briefly, only on some of them in an attempt to whet a certain appetite for theory (no pun intended), more precisely, to remake theory’s case in a fast globalizing world less and less resembling Franz Kafka’s and yet still falling under the critical jurisdiction of what Henry Sussman has so aptly called Kafka’s “hungry artistry” (282). After all, here and elsewhere, Nothomb arguably follows in the same “minor” tradition of place and displacement, ethnicity and language, ethnos and logos, logos and pathos, cogito and affect, couples decoupled from one another and from their time-honored

affiliations only to be redeployed in vaster, world-shattering, and epoch-making reconfigurations.

Before proceeding, two more preliminary questions bear raising. The first: how do we theorize these worldly structures at the dawn of the twenty-first century? (To rephrase: what is their *raison d'être*?) And the second: what role can, and perhaps should, theory play in or in conjunction with said structures? Let me propose right away that, for these broader interrogations and for theory in general, hunger is *not* a pretext, a rhetorical sleight of hand. I said earlier that I was not joking about theory and our appetite, our hunger for it, and I will say it again. For, from Kafka's haunting "A Hunger Artist" to Emmanuel Levinas' mid-1970s Sorbonne lectures and to Jacques Derrida's "Eating Well" essay and his analytic of "carnophallogocentrism" more broadly, then from Antonin Artaud's reflexions on theater and culture to Paul Auster's essays and fictions from *The New York Trilogy* (1987) and *Hand to Mouth* (1997) and to Chang-rae Lee 2010 novel *The Surrendered*, an entire modernity, complete with its postmodern aftermath, specifically associates eating, or not eating, rather, in its various forms, and being; *esse*, "to be," and its other—or the "other" *esse*, if you will—to "eat," for the infinitives of *edo*, "I eat," and *sum*, "I am," are, as the same reader will remember, identical in Latin.

We can start, then, from either end to re-theorize theory for the late-global age. Let us say we begin with the "sum"—with who or what I am, with Madame Bovary (*c'est moi*), or with the cogito (*ergo sum*), or with what that *sum*, that *summa* or summation of being, according to Nothomb, that is, with hunger. Supposing we do so, two things come into focus.

The first is this, and we know it from Kafka, and before him from Knut Hamsun's no less disturbing 1890 novel *Hunger: hunger is poiesis*; my hunger has a poetic force to it (from the Greek *poiein*), makes me, and it does so aporetically, so to speak, by almost unmaking me as the overwhelming need furiously wells up in me and drags me on the brink of nonbeing, as Auster observes in his essay "The Art of Hunger" (1993, 18). Accordingly, starvation is a metonymy for death, and we will see momentarily, with some help from Levinas, why this notion is *not* to be dismissed offhand.

But we are not there yet. Where we are, though, is a premise for the enlightening proximity of death as absence, as lack—Lacanian *manque*—or want, for which, again, dietary deprivation serves as a provisional synecdoche. This premise is hunger as a staging area of the cogito, as bodily protocol of self-perception, self-evaluation, and self-identification; hunger as a feeling or sensation, as an affective space where we come to terms with ourselves. Through hunger, *cogito ergo sum* lends itself to a reading as *esurio ergo sum*, "I am hungry, therefore I am." My hunger constitutes, if not my ontological essence, then a somatic disposition affording intimations of that essence. The fasting phenomenology of *esse*, from *edo*, is the odd fulcrum of *essentia*, carries and forefronts my essence. This fulcrum, this support or hinge on which my being's meaning turns as I experience my hunger is my body, corporeality as agent, site, and infrastructure of a

cogito where intellect and affect collapse into one and so fashion me as an entity, carve out my identity.

The second and surely more noteworthy thing is this: my food cravings, the painful sensation of missing something, hence the desire for something that I need inside me in order to persevere in being what I will have been—Spinoza’s *conatus essendi*—takes this de-finition into a necessarily ethical domain. What happens in this domain is key. Here, the world reveals itself as home to other bodies beyond mine, to others and otherness generally, thus rendering hunger a somatic preamble to transindividual relatedness and with it, to a responsibility where apathy, indifference, is philosophically impossible and irresponsible because pathos, feeling (“I feel hunger,” “I am hungry”) is or must be felt as feeling for an other, as care, and empathy. This is a shared world and the world of sharing alike; a world into which our hungry bodies take us, from solipsistic pathos—and how pathetic is *that* feeling!—to the world of compassion; from being onto oneself, *egologically*, to the worldly ecology of being-with, to the *Mitsein* reset on an ethical basis.

While the ethical retrofitting of the Heideggerian *Mitsein* is Levinas’ unquestionably momentous accomplishment, we would do well to remember in this context that the Stoics had already taught that “to exist is to be a body” (Long and Sedley 7). But to be a body, they further suggested, does not mean simply to be *in* a body, within a carnal shell. What puts us in a body by the same token inscribes us into the world of bodies. Being in a body is being in the world, with others. As third-century BC philosopher Cleanthes argued, corporeality represents the keystone of universal interaction (*sympatheia*) both inside individual bodies, where soul and flesh touch on one another by virtue of their shared materiality, and among separate somatic entities (272). In all actuality, “separate” may not be the best word choice since the Stoic cosmos makes up a “sympathetic” ensemble held together, the same Stoics thought, by a “relation [of] mutual intermingling” (Zeller 136) and since, again, bodies “intermingle” owing to their physicality. Nor does this intermingling cease where political bodies traditionally do, at the national borders, for example. It is intrinsically transnational and transcultural, making us “all...members of one body” (328). Given that, still according to the Stoics, “one and the same nature has fashioned [us] all from the same elements for the same destiny” (328), we all participate in the “*logos* that draws everything together across time and space” (Spanneut 14). This is true cosmically—we are one with the natural cosmos—as it is politically; “all men are brethren,” proclaims Epictetus (Zeller 328).

Stoic universalism is not without its pitfalls. But what I want to highlight in this *logos* is not its universal rationality but the *bodily relationality* that, across and beyond Stoicism, underwrites our dealings with one another. Roughly speaking, we make and have contacts, “keep in touch” insofar as we are (in) bodies. Vice versa, our bodies supply us with encounter venues and communication tools. We have bodies, live, and develop a self as long as we “make contact” and so live up to what the body structurally is, to its “tangibility,” as a character in Auster’s novel *Sunset Park* (2010) puts it. We are “tangible,” and so is the world with us in it because, Bing Nathan contends, we, no less than the world, are endowed with bodies and because those

bodies feel and suffer as they are touched by whoever and whatever surrounds them (Auster 173). Thus, growth, successful metabolism—the very narrative of individuation—boils down to an incorporation of exchanges, negotiations, and relations, so much so that *our* bodies, which, by force of habit, we deem as fundamentally belonging to us and ending with us, representing and being us most intimately and exclusively, these bodies, I say, cohere around, reference, and honor *those not us*. It is the dialogue with those presences that our bodies body forth. The conversation would be unthinkable, and so would be thinking itself, if it were not for the *pathos* of “tangibility,” for physical contact. As the Stoics also assure us, there is no depth without surface, no “principle” without substance, no spirit without a body shaping it, hence no territory without limit and no access without its threshold and the trials of crossing. This is what Derrida says throughout his career and once more at its end in his book *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, where truth, being, and selfhood are closely tied into the “haptical” (from the Greek *haptomai*, “to touch”) and haptical themes: corporeality, finitude, and liminality. It is “tangentially”—and yet how substantially—by contact with other bodies that we reach, he emphasizes, “a limit *at the limit*” (297) that we “go the limit” and so, in “extreme,” geoculturally and epistemologically “liminal” situations, we learn about the world and ourselves. These bodies open windows into unexplored versions of the world and ultimately into the world itself as a whole above and beyond whatever “ties us down” to our “finite” bodies, as Nancy has repeatedly argued, or to the collective (ethnic, racial, religious, etc.) bodies to which we are supposed to belong and be confined.

Now, what Levinas proposes in his 1976 essay “Sécularisation et faim” (“Secularization and Hunger”) and in a series of texts later published in his collection *Dieu, la mort et le temps* (*God, Death, and Time*), especially in a little text entitled “Don Quichotte, l’ensorcellement et la faim” (“Don Quixote, Bewitching, and Hunger”), participates in the same pre-(and already post) Cartesian somato-logy. In this line of thought, as it were, the cogitant body at once teaches and touches, is at once self-reflective and launches relations toward other bodies of flesh and thought, and their worlds. One can hardly imagine a more personal, more *private*, more intimately and more deeply corporeal feeling than hunger, a more egotistical and more immediately survivalist reduction of the world to *my* needs, to my need for food, to *myself*. Nonetheless, Levinas argues, in this very paroxysm of self-preserving self-centeredness, my body feels for an another; bodily feeling becomes or is on the verge of becoming fellow-feeling. When I am hungry, Levinas posits, the hunger engrained in my own *conatus essendi*, *my* hunger is, as hunger, sensitive to, and already “touched” by, somebody else’s hunger. Then, the “other man’s hunger” wakes us in turn from our ethical siesta, breaks the drowsiness of the culturally gluttonous and the morally overstuffed. This wakeup call is a call to an other presence and, by the same token, a call to responsibility.

It goes without saying, many of us—individual, groups, institutions, and so forth—choose to turn a deaf ear to this call. Too bad for the world, but also too bad for them, Levinas would reply. For, in its malnourished moments, in its moments of lack or fasting, in its hunger strikes or in its

bouts with anorexia, the hungry body must nevertheless reckon with that without which the self in general cannot complete what Levinas calls the individuation process—the self cannot be or become itself, proves unable to round itself off. In its hour of need, the starving body whispers to the self what the self is or, more precisely, what the self lacks in order to be, much like the dying body is the self's “moment of truth”—of course, that truth unveils itself in and as an other, for death is always an other's: once I experience death, I can no longer conceptualize it. I think about it only as a witness to somebody else's death; whatever revelations I might obtain, I owe them to others.

One can say, analogously, that, in a narrow sense, one cannot be without food, and even more narrowly, that one cannot be a writer, one cannot write on an empty stomach, as Auster tells us. More broadly, in the food shortage or lack itself, another lack or need asserts itself, another prerequisite of the self—the other himself or herself. Hunger is, at the end of the day, hunger of others, Nothomb states it bluntly. Epitome of all longings, yearnings, and cravings, the desire for that something inside me fundamentally missing is the burning desire for an other. Fullness—including the fullness of being—cannot be a solipsistic project. To be full is, indeed, to contain, to touch and be touched by Whitmanesque multitudes. The truly full one is never full of himself or herself, and it is hunger's merit, along these lines, to help us get a grip on our ontological plenitude as indebted to others, on the text of being as existential intertextuality.

It is in this sense that, today more than ever, being hungry, *our* hunger, more exactly, may be seized on as a *theoretical predisposition*. You do not have enough; you need more, hunger tells you, and, no doubt, in the country of the overfed, as Auster also maintains, there is always the risk to overconsume in response, while, not unlike the audience of Kafka's starving artist, paying little attention to those who go hungry for reasons not so theoretical. The mindless circus goes on in Kafka, mainstream America in Auster, so uninterested in the downtrodden, the disposed, and the underfed, so insensitive to the Levinasian “hunger of the other man,” dramatize, however, a multiply *self-detrimental* position. Needless to say, they are uncaring and un-sympathetic. But their soporific self-sufficiency, which Kafka and Levinas describe via a tropology of culinary excess, indexes a broader opacity and subsequently, especially in the Thoreauvian withdrawal and self-deprivation of Auster's novels, the artist's refusal to play along, to accept the sociopolitical status quo underpinning this satiated blindness to an other's presence and needs. Hunger, Levinas concludes his Don Quixote piece, acts out a particular, secularizing, bodily form of transcendence in that it carries us out of ourselves and opens us up and onto the world, onto its nature, and meanings.

This is a theoretical moment, Levinas would insist, as I do here by following his lead. This is, it seems to me, the moment of theory par excellence, today more than ever; the moment of *theoria* in its original sense of transcendental seeing as discriminate looking at, as seeing across or through. Hunger is a theoretical state or mode of being—and, incidentally, to that extent we would be well advised to avoid theorizing in the after-lunch hours. Hunger and theory go together, I would posit, insofar as, *qua* deprivation, hunger awakens us to the world's “non-

spatial exteriority.” This transcendence begins, as Levinas stresses, in the body but takes us beyond it and thus lays bare the world as togetherness and mutual obligation, the world as it is today in the age of ever-thickening networks, more than at any point in the planet’s history. This transcendence is horizontal, so to speak; the theory resting on it operates laterally, “secularly,” Levinas remarks. And yet, this theory may help us pose, albeit in human terms, the most divine of questions—the question of those not us or not here and now with us but whose place and present afford our presence.

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