

Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson

An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the Limits of Digestion

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Working in the early 1990s on the book *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs: An Essay on Melancholy and Cannibalism* (published in English in 2008 by Sternberg Press), we exchanged a few letters with the late Jacques Derrida, who was then working on what he referred to as the “cannibalistic tropes” in hermeneutics and German Idealism. He was grateful for a little fragment by Novalis that we had sent him:

All enjoyment, all taking in and assimilation, is eating, or rather: eating is nothing other than assimilation. All spiritual pleasure can be expressed through eating. In friendship, one really eats of the friend, or feeds on him. It is a genuine trope to substitute the body for the spirit – and, at a commemorative dinner for a friend, to enjoy, with bold, supersensual imagination, his flesh in every bite, and his blood in every gulp. This certainly seems barbaric to the taste of our time – but who forces us to think of precisely the raw, rotting flesh and blood? The physical assimilation is mysterious enough to be a beautiful image of the spiritual *meaning* – and are blood and flesh really so loathsome and ignoble? In truth, there is more here than gold and diamonds, and the time is soon at hand when we will have a higher conception of the organic body.

Who knows how sublime a symbol blood is? It is precisely that which is disgusting in the organic components that points to something very lofty in them. We recoil from them, as if from ghosts, and sense with childish terror a mysterious world in this mix, perhaps an old acquaintance. But to return to the commemorative dinner – can't it be imagined that our friend has turned into a being whose body has now become bread, and whose blood has become wine?¹

The Novalis text was of relevance to him, he claimed, and he had taken it as a point of departure for several seminars. Derrida invited us to see him in his home in the suburbs of Paris, and the following interview, published here for the first time in English, is the result of our lively meeting.

– Daniel Birnbaum, Anders Olsson

Your lecture this year was entitled “The Tropes of Cannibalism.” Could you say a bit about the basic ideas of the lecture?

In *Glas*, my work on Hegel, I had already become interested in the figures of incorporation that are to be found in speculative thought – the very notion of comprehending as a kind of incorporation. The concept of “Erinnerung,” which means both memory and interiorization, plays a key role in Hegel’s philosophy. Spirit incorporates history by assimilating, by remembering its own past. This assimilation acts as a kind of sublimated eating – spirit eats everything that is external and foreign, and thereby transforms it into something internal, something that is its own. Everything shall be incorporated into the great digestive system – nothing is inedible in Hegel’s infinite metabolism.

The figures of incorporation in hermeneutics and speculative philosophy are what I call the “tropes of cannibalism.” Nowhere is this clearer than in Hegel, but these tropes are at work everywhere in Western thought. Eating is, after all, the great mystery of Christianity, the transubstantiation occurs in the act of incorporation itself: bread and wine become the flesh and blood of Christ. But it is not simply God’s body that is incorporated via a mystical eating – it is also his words.

Do you think that interpretation of the Scriptures – biblical hermeneutics – is also a kind of sublimated eating?

Yes, by analogy with the assimilation of the body of Christ in the Holy Communion. It is overarching figures and connections of this sort that I’m trying to map out. Eating God’s words constitutes a parallel to the Holy Sacrament – here too, a divine transubstantiation takes place. And that has left its mark on modern hermeneutics, which of course has its roots in biblical interpretation: little wonder that Gadamer’s philosophy is so marked by terms taken from digestion, that he is such a gluttonous thinker. His hermeneutics is, after all, precisely about assimilating that which is foreign. What is radically alien in the other doesn’t have a chance – it will be digested, melted down in the great tradition, wolfed down mercilessly.

But I would like to point out that this relationship between understanding and eating is in no way specific to a given current in the thought of the West, but can more accurately be regarded as a cultural a priori.

In what sense is this a cultural phenomenon? How different is man’s way of eating from that of animals?

Hegel draws a distinction between man’s relation to the world and animals’ relation to the world as two different forms of eating. Animals have a negative relation to the object because they simply swallow it. Human negativity, however, is reflected: man does not in fact devour the object, but rather incorporates it abstractly, and thereby creates the inner space that is the subject. It is a variation on the old humanist song and dance.

I have become increasingly interested in the philosophical border between man and animal, which also becomes an examination of the traditional boundary between culture and nature. I have chosen to tackle this issue via the thinkers who seem to have questioned the self-sufficiency of humanism most deeply: Heidegger and Lévinas. Despite their critique of a traditional concept of the subject, they remain humanists by insisting on an absolute distinction between humans and animals. The establishment of man’s privileged position requires the sacrifice and devouring of animals. Not even Lévinas is willing to sacrifice the sacrifice.

But in Heidegger, the interpretative act is surely not about interiorizing or incorporating, right?

No, not in any simple way, given that he dissolved the idea of a subjective interiority. But the difference itself between what is one’s own and what is foreign remains – understanding is still an assimilation. Heidegger is not as voracious a philosopher as Hegel; not everything for him can be assimilated. What Heidegger calls the “ontological difference” between “being” (*Sein*) and “beings” (*Seienden*) – which is of course the very essence of his philosophy – indicates such a limit. Being always remains inaccessible. Being is never given as a being, a thing in the world that can be named and captured with the question *What?* Being transcends beings – it evades linguistic naming.

So you take Heidegger’s ontological difference to be the boundary between what can be eaten and what cannot be eaten?

Yes, exactly. The ontological difference is the boundary between what can be assimilated and what is already presupposed in all assimilation, but which itself is inaccessible. This is the most profound and most difficult to comprehend movement in the Heideggerian

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concept of being. Being makes beings accessible in the world, yet itself withdraws. This movement is what Heidegger called *das Ereignis* – the event (or “the coming-about”).

But as far as Heidegger’s qualified humanism is concerned, which transfers the specifically human from man’s interior to his hand, the boundary between human and animal still remains something which is impossible to call into question. It is not a traditional humanism, but a determination of the location – the place (*Dasein*) where meaning can be received. The location is not explicitly determined as Man, but Heidegger nonetheless provides a description of this place that excludes animals. Only man has hands, says Heidegger, and, through the hand, he has access to a world of meaningful action. The ape, however, possesses only “*Greifsorgane*” (organs for grasping) and is therefore excluded from the realm of the human. This distinction between hand and organ for grasping is not something Heidegger arrived at by studying apes in the Black Forest, but rather has a purely stipulative character. Here, as always, humanism rests on the sacrifice of the animal, on the implicit swallowing up of the animal.

Does the symbolic eating always remain an invisible precondition of thought? Or does this set of metaphors become apparent within the work of certain poets or artists?

Yes, of course. I recently saw Peter Greenaway’s film about the cook and the thief – in this, I found a cannibalistic structure of sacrifice that I have seen elsewhere. It is a frightfully clear film. Also, my last three seminars have been dedicated to a fragment of Novalis, in whom one really can find everything. He links the sublime mystery of the Holy Communion to the most base expression of a cannibalistic incorporation of the friend’s body. What matters is “to enjoy, with bold, supersensual imagination, his flesh in every bite, and his blood in every gulp.”

And one can encounter an equally astonishing and explicitly worded insight in Kleist’s “Penthesilea,” where a cannibalistic desire can freely find expression. To love without wanting to devour must surely be anorexic . . .

What are you working on these days?

I am currently focused on the ritual practices that express a culture’s view of food: what one is allowed to eat, what one is not allowed to eat. The various views that different cultures have on excrement – the scatological rites – belong to this complex as well, of course. I

am currently working my way through a vast amount of anthropological material, and am reading theoretical studies related to the perception of eating and defecation – Frazer, Freud, Bataille, and others.

It is a study of more concrete cultural phenomena than those I had worked on earlier. Previously, I documented in great detail the tropes of incorporation in Hegelian discourse. I did this, as I mentioned, in *Glas*. and it was also done by Werner Hamacher in *Pleroma*, with which you are probably familiar. I have looked for similar figures in other philosophies and theoretical discourses as well. In my foreword to Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham’s study on the Wolf Man, I analyzed ingestion in Freud’s theories of mourning and melancholy. And in my text “Economimesis,” I have tried to show how a concept of economy acquired from digestion governs the view of the beautiful in Kantian aesthetics. While the beautiful is a name for the balanced and harmonious metabolism, the closed economy remains threatened from within by disgust, and this analytic of the beautiful falls apart when it reaches the point of disgust and vomiting – a point at which the economy reaches its limit in terms of what is absolutely inassimilable.

As you can see, the actual interest in the metaphor of digestion in speculative thought is nothing new for me – it was twenty years ago that I wrote *Glas*. What I’m doing now is broadening the field of research from the philosophical and speculative to the more generally cultural.

[Our conversation is interrupted when the phone rings. Derrida returns after a few minutes with a smile on his face. It was his friend Emmanuel Lévinas.]

It’s always the same thing. He always thinks I am going to hang up before the conversation is over, and constantly interrupts with anxious exclamations: hello, hello! He who talks about faith in the other . . .

[Derrida now begins discussing his relationship with Lévinas. He emphasizes Lévinas’ deep originality, but also points out what is problematic in his humanism.]

Lévinas, more than anyone else, has emphasized the sovereign inaccessibility of the other. The other can never be understood as presence, but only with concepts like traces and exteriority. He has completely broken with the phenomenological metaphysics of presence – the other can never be understood in a theoretical act, but only by means of ethical responsibility: *I take responsibility for the other*. But this responsibility applies only to the other *human being* – Lévinas’ humanism is based on an exclusion of the animal, just as in Heidegger. The

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biblical commandment “Thou shalt not kill” applies to humans, but leaves out animals. Our culture rests on a structure of sacrifice. We are all mixed up in an eating of flesh – real or symbolic. In the past, I have spoken about the West’s phallic “logocentrism.” Now I would like to broaden this with the prefix carno- (flesh): “carnophallogocentrism.” We are all – vegetarians as well – carnivores in the symbolic sense.

How is this massive project on eating related to deconstruction, as we have come to know it? If understanding can be compared to a kind of eating, what would a deconstructionist reading of a text be?

It would mean respect for that which cannot be eaten – respect for that in a text which cannot be assimilated. My thoughts on the limits of eating follow in their entirety the same schema as my theories on the indeterminate or untranslatable in a text. There is always a remainder that cannot be read, that must remain alien. This residue can never be interrogated as the same, but must be constantly sought out anew, and must continue to be written.

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This conversation took place on October 25, 1990. A portion of the text was previously published in the Swedish newspaper *Expressen* (February 15, 1991). Translated from the Swedish by Brian Manning Delaney.

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Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and tran. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 102-103.

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