Introduction

Why Read Food in Modern Japanese Literature?

Towards the end of Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s novel Tade kuu mushi (1929, trans. Some Prefer Nettles, 1955) the protagonist Kaname and his wife, Misako, visit Misako’s father in Kyoto to discuss their marriage, which has been on the rocks. After years of inertia and hesitation, the couple has finally decided to make a move towards formal separation and divorce. Realizing this, Misako’s father wants to talk to Kaname first, then take his daughter to a restaurant for a quiet chat. Before leaving Kaname in the house, the old man asks his young, “doll-like” mistress, O-Isa, to ensure that his son-in-law is looked after well.

“What can you offer your guest?”

“What can you offer your guest?”

“What can you offer your guest?”

“Nothing decent.”

“Nothing decent.”

“Nothing decent.”

“The salmon roe?”

“The salmon roe?”

“The salmon roe?”

“I thought I might deep-fry the salmon roe.”

“I thought I might deep-fry the salmon roe.”

“I thought I might deep-fry the salmon roe.”

“And what else?”

“And what else?”

“And what else?”

“Baked trout—”

“Baked trout—”

“Baked trout—”

“And?”

“And?”

“And?”

“And a salad.”

“And a salad.”

“And a salad.”

“Well, Kaname, the food to go with it doesn’t sound very promising, but maybe you could stay and have a few drinks.”

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“Poor Kaname gets the booby prize.”

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“Really, now,” Kaname protested, “the cook is better than the cook at the Hyōtei. I’ll have myself a feast.”
I begin this book on food, eating, and cooking in modern Japanese literature by quoting this passage not because at first sight it contains anything breathtaking or illuminating, but because it refers to food that seems quite simple and yet has many things to tell us. In fact, as we shall see shortly, the seemingly simple and ordinary may turn out to be surprisingly complex, once we pay attention to it.

When food appears in literature, what can we read in it? And how much can we, and should we, read into it? How has that food in the text been read by various readers over time? What factors affect our reading? Why, indeed, should we bother to pay attention to food in literature? These are the questions this book attempts to answer by examining wide-ranging examples taken from Japanese literary texts written since the beginning of the twentieth century. The food we read may well be closely related to the food in the actual, physical world. Or it may be symbolic or metaphysical food.

That food is no simple matter has been widely recognized—in fields such as anthropology, sociology, food science, semiotics, history, political science, and economics, as well as in literary, film, and cultural studies. Food nourishes and poisons; it soothes and tortures, divides as well as unites individuals and groups of people. Food is essential, but it can also be seen as optional, superfluous, or extravagant. Food plays important roles in various types of rituals. It also serves as a means of communicating and acting out our religious, political, philosophical, and cultural views or of expressing a range of emotions. Food may be an object of intense desire, admiration, addiction, craving, fear, disgust, and loathing, or it may be ignored or rejected either intentionally or unintentionally. Food involves production, distribution, preparation, and consumption, and in each process there are rules, taboos, structures, order, customs, styles, fashions, and conventions to create, to follow, or to break. Food has been discovered, invented, classified, and scrutinized, as well as enjoyed, consumed, and devoured. It is, to borrow Gaye Poole’s words, “a polysemous signifier that articulates in concrete terms what is very often internal, vague, abstract.”

The situation becomes more complicated when the subject is not actual food but food within literary texts, for literature, like food, is “endlessly interpretable,” to quote Terry Eagleton, and food, like literature, “looks like an object but is actually a relationship.” It lends itself to no finite or definitive interpretations. The relationship implied within activities surrounding food covers a variety of areas and dimensions both concrete and abstract—not merely interpersonal relations but also the relation between nature and culture, the physical and the spiritual as well as between the individual and society and between production
and reception. Food is “a window on the political,” for “food practices are implicated in a complex field of relationships, expectations, and choices that are contested, negotiated, and often unequal.”

Such relations are often discussed as binary pairs “such as cooked/raw, center/periphery, voice/writing, spirit/flesh, art (culture)/nature, male/female, content/form, proper/improper, literal/metaphorical, public/private, work/home, production/consumption, author/reader, host/guest, familiar/foreign, classic/grotesque, high/low, autonomy/relatedness,” as Maggie Kilgour lists them in her study of metaphors of incorporation From Communion to Cannibalism, along with the pair she herself focuses on: “inside/outside.” These binary pairs themselves, however, are not the focus of this book; rather, I seek, among other things, to contribute to the questioning of such dichotomies by studying examples of ambiguity and merging where the hierarchy habitually implied in these pairs—the presumption that the first member of each pair is in some way prior to, or privileged over, the second—is subverted and undone. In this focus on food, readers will discover “the surprising and intriguing variety of ways that food and eating may function as a code, a sign system, a leitmotif of fascinating complexity, to expand the possible repertoire of readings.” Needless to say, if some prior sociocultural and linguistic knowledge is needed to understand a text, this is also the case if we are to understand the complex relationships involved in the particular food in the text.

The Subtle Taste of Nettles

Let us see how this is so in the case of Tade kuu mushi, the title of which symbolically indicates the importance of multiplicity and relativity: there is no such thing as absolute or universal values or criteria for taste and desire. Even the short passage quoted above suggests multiple relationships involving food. To appreciate the complexity fully, it is essential to understand not only intratextual but extratextual (e.g., sociohistorical and cultural) contexts. Hyōtei, for instance, the restaurant Misako’s father is taking her to, is an existing traditional Japanese-style restaurant in Nanzenji, the up-market part of Kyoto containing the famous Zen temple of the same name. Even if the reader has never heard of the restaurant, at least it is clear from the text that it is a famous restaurant in Kyoto, and within walking distance of Misako’s father’s house. The old man tells his mistress, O-Hisa, to phone the restaurant, expecting that a nice quiet room will be available for him for that same evening. He is obviously a regular customer. The novel does not include the actual dining scene at the restaurant be-
cause the primary focus is placed on Kaname rather than on Misako, her father, or O-Hisa. The reader can assume, however, that on this occasion, with such an atmosphere of doom hanging over her marriage, like the very weather on that evening, thick and oppressive, neither father nor daughter is likely to enjoy what the famous restaurant has to offer—the delicacies, the fine pottery, the elegant interior, the garden, the service, the tranquility, all of which are in any case not new to this privileged pair.

O-Hisa says she cannot offer Kaname anything “decent.” However, from a number of earlier episodes the reader knows that the young woman has been trained meticulously by Misako’s father according to his peculiarly and stubbornly old-fashioned taste. As we shall see in later chapters, a man teaching a woman how to cook is by no means an uncommon motif, and in many cases it is also linked to a sexual relationship. The link is evident in this text, too, although it never goes beyond allusion and implication. Even if the food O-Hisa cooks for the evening will not be as elaborate as the dinner served at Hyōtei, it undoubtedly is going to be more than “decent,” with carefully selected ingredients cooked and served efficiently and with care. Kaname is more and more attracted to this young woman, not as a specific individual, but as a type. This is indeed a “feast” for him.

The reader of the English version, however, may find the menu odd because the significance of local specialities is lost in translation. What is sacrificed is of course the important cultural specificity (Kyoto) of the original items, as discussed below.

Tanizaki is a devoted advocate and a champion practitioner of ambiguity, or to use the key term in his “how to write” book,10 ganchiku (implications, overtones, connotations). His writing and the food in his writing are both certainly “polysemous” and “endlessly interpretable.” What is interesting, as we shall see, is that Tanizakian ambiguity emerges not out of chaos and disorder but out of the way the seemingly neat and schematic dichotomies he presents or implies (thus, at least at first sight, confirming Kilgour’s “binary pairs”11) are actually subverted. David Pollack proposes two major defining axes in this novel: “a traditional opposition between the Kantō (Eastern) and Kansai (Western) regions of Japan” on the one hand and on the other the cultural difference within Kansai, from the “traditional morality” of Kyoto to its opposite, “the modern and entirely amoral ‘foreign’ culture of Kobe.”11 O-Hisa represents the old aesthetic, that of traditional and overtly submissive Japan, associated with Kyoto and its language and culture, including music, theater, and cooking. She cooks and serves—if she does not herself eat—Kyoto-style food, as instructed by Misako’s father. The lengths they both go to and the pride he takes in her cooking
are evident in the following passage, in which the father wants the couple to stay longer.

“And O-Hisa spent all yesterday evening and this morning getting the lunch ready,” the old man persisted. “We can’t possibly eat it by ourselves.”

“It’s nothing, really. Don’t stay just for that.” O-Hisa had been quite outside the conversation, listening as a child would listen to grownups, but at the old man’s remark she somewhat uncomfortably readjusted the lid to hide the mosaic-like array inside the square box. Even the boiling of an egg was likely to call forth a lecture from the old man, and the training of his young mistress had involved a long course in cooking. Now, however, no one except O-Hisa could cook a decent meal, and he was clearly anxious to show her off.12

Again, this cuisine, though this is hidden by the translation, is in Kyoto style; what is given as “the boiling of an egg” in the translation is in the original text the cooking of another Kansai product, Kōya dōfu (diced tofu frozen and then dried to preserve it, named after Kōyasan, where it originated).13

In contrast, Misako represents, according to Pollack’s schema, the “modern inauthentic Japan” associated with Tokyo, rather than with the “entirely amoral” Kobe, the topos that is represented by Louise, a Eurasian prostitute Kaname regularly visits. The food Misako eats, however, suggests that she has connections—superficially but regularly—with “amoral” and “foreign” Kobe. Her usual breakfast consists of toast and, perhaps to most readers’ surprise, liver sausages from a German butcher in Kobe. While eating her late breakfast cooked and served by her maid, she flirts—or pretends to flirt—with Kaname’s cousin and old family friend Takanatsu, who happens to be staying with them.14 The food associated with Takanatsu, by the way, is garlic, indicating his close connection with China, or more specifically, Shanghai. Misako cannot stand the houseguest’s odor, and openly complains to him about it.

Both food and literature, then, are intimately, perhaps inextricably, connected to specific cultures and societies. At the same time there would seem to be some apparently fundamental or “natural” aspects of both that are universal. The line between culture and “nature,” between the specific and the universal, however, is often vague and ambiguous. Similarly, the supposedly clear boundaries between two cultures also become blurred. In Tade kuu mushi food is used almost as a stereotypical sociocultural identifier in the binary pairs of Kantō/Kansai, East/West, Japan/China, traditional/modern, sexual/asexual, vegetarian/carnivorous, young/old, and so on. As many critics have noted,15 however, binaries such as these are merged, transgressed, and redefined or reinvented in Tanizaki’s
literature. A foreign land becomes a new home (Kyoto in the case of Misako’s father, China in the case of Takanatsu), and past and future may become present (e.g., Misako’s father reconstructing and living the past; Kaname possibly following in his footsteps). Some parts of Kansai remind Kaname of the old Tokyo of his childhood, thus blurring the Kantō/Kansai division. We may also note that even though Misako eats German liver sausages with a knife and a fork, to do so she sits at *chabudai*, a low table, in a Japanese-style room. Even the authentic-seeming O-Hisa, the “doll-like” Kyoto woman, is in fact a creation of Misako’s father, who, though a Tokyoite, teaches the native Kyoto woman how to cook Kyoto dishes and generally how to behave like an ideal premodern Kyoto woman. Kaname thinks that O-Hisa must surely have an occasional urge for a movie instead of the puppet theater and a steak instead of braised bracken.

Food and cooking are also linked closely to gender and sexuality. Referring to Freud and others, Carole Counihan reminds us that “food and sex are analogous instinctive needs,” both connoting intimacy as well as danger, and that therefore they are “surrounded with rules and taboos.” Counihan also asserts, “In all cultures, women’s primary responsibilities involve food provisioning and the bearing and rearing of children. . . . Women are food to the fetus and infant, and the breasts can be sources of both sexual pleasure and food.” In *Tade kuu mushi* we see clearly marked gender roles that are linked to sex. Most prominently in the case of Misako’s father and O-Hisa, the roles are carefully planned, studied, rehearsed, and performed—in this case under the direction of the old man, and with the full cooperation of the young woman. Furthermore, social norms and boundaries are often blurred or transgressed. O-Hisa, younger than any of the other main characters, may look like an asexual child or a classic doll, yet at the same time she plays the roles of concubine, mother (to the old man rather than to Misako or Kaname), housekeeper, entertainer, and many others. Misako, too, has to fill contesting roles and positions. While her husband finds her sexually uninteresting, her lover, Aso, obviously has a different opinion. Takanatsu, who knows about Misako’s ongoing affair and her husband’s full sanction, sees her as “a chaste wife and a virtuous mother” underneath, and only pretending to be flirtatious when she offers him a piece of sausage by directly putting it into his mouth with her fork. The novel tells us again and again that simple dichotomy never works.

Misako’s father’s plans for the evening in the last part of the novel include the use of food as a gift that he hopes may work to solve the marital problem between Kaname and Misako. By taking his daughter to Hyōtei while letting O-Hisa entertain Kaname, the father hopes not only to talk to Misako privately but also to detain her for long enough to make it too late for the younger couple to
go home: they will have to sleep in the same room in Misako’s father’s house. The reader knows, however, that the father’s scheme will not work; Kaname simply enjoys O-Hisa’s “feast.” Perhaps it is an overreading to note that one of the dishes, the grilled ayu, is almost always garnished with tade.

Neglected Dishes

The above discussion is a very small sample of what we can read in food in Tade kuu mushi, and yet this novel is no more food-oriented than others of Tanizaki’s. More generally, food abounds in modern Japanese literature—though not every sample may be appetizing. Despite this abundance, and despite its diversity, the theme of food in Japanese literature has been neglected for decades, primarily because food and eating have only recently begun to attract serious academic attention. “Food and eating have not until very recently generally merited a ‘sociology of’ to themselves.” This historical neglect is based on disgust, on a fear of food and eating, on a view that they are banal, feminine, embodied, impure, unclean, and uncivilized. The perception of food as a “feminine” concern is also noted by a number of scholars.

Sociology is by no means alone in neglecting food. Kilgour attributes the origin of her book From Communion to Cannibalism to a discovery she made as an undergraduate student: “I happened to read Ovid, Dante, and Melville at the same time and began wondering why there were so many cannibals running around literature, and even more, why no one else had seemed to notice.” Even food and eating in Chinese literature, which one might expect to have been studied in great detail, remained an “unexplored topic” until the appearance of Gang Yue’s study The Mouth That Begs in 1999. While the last two examples might be considered to be special cases of silence and neglect rooted specifically in the taboo on cannibalism, Gaye Poole remarks that the neglect is much more general. She says that despite the fact that food “plays much more than an accidental or incidental role, . . . it is rarely referred to in critical discussions of theatre, performance or film.” Why? Poole suggests that “because food is so embedded in life . . . and therefore may be taken for granted, the multiplicity of meanings generated by its inclusion may not always be fully conscious.”

In addition to these general factors, there seems to be another set of reasons for the neglect of food in Japanese literature, as the following comment by writer and renowned gastronome Kaikō Takeshi suggests. In “Nihon no sakka-tachi no shokuyoyoku” (The Appetite of Japanese Writers), written in the late 1970s, Kaikō laments the fact that eating, unlike drinking, has tended to be treated
“as an illegitimate child, or as a concubine or a mistress” in literature.\(^3\) The significance of the thematic of drinking is certainly evident in both modern and classic Japanese literature. In contrast, eating has enjoyed much less prominence; for centuries it was regarded as vulgar and unmanly to talk about food, let alone to celebrate the pleasures of eating or cooking. Kaikō is by no means alone in finding this regrettable.\(^3\) One might read Kaikō’s metaphor of illegitimacy as implicitly, and perhaps inadvertently, supporting the notion of “serious” or “legitimate” literature as being the domain of the adult male rather than of women and children. The other side of the same coin is the notion that food and cooking belong to women. Clearly, the marginalization of food as a serious subject in the academic and literary worlds has had to do with gender issues. Intertwined with these issues, other important factors have brought about the general neglect of food in Japanese literature. These concern the development of the shōsetsu and its language, and bundan (literary world)\(^3\) politics.

In his Shōsetsu shinzui (The Essence of the Novel, 1885) Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859–1935) adopts the term shōsetsu as the translation for “the novel” in its (arguably) European sense. What he had in mind here was the realistic novel as opposed to romance and fantasy. Adopting a Sino-Japanese word (or even inventing one) as an equivalent for a European term was common practice in the discourse of Meiji intellectuals.\(^3\) On the surface it seems to indicate a double cultural borrowing—first from China and then from Europe. When one sees a cultural product such as the shōsetsu, and in fact, some food such as Japanese “curry,” “hamburger,” and “croquette” merely as an adaptation of an external model, it may seem an unauthentic, inaccurate, and distorted imitation. From another perspective, however, it can be regarded as an innovation, and even as evidence of the flexibility of Japanese culture in adapting itself to new needs and circumstances. Hence what may seem to be merely imitative about Japanese culture (including food and literature) may just as easily appear to constitute its originality—and vice versa.

In fact, Shōyō’s use of the term shōsetsu does not necessarily correspond neatly to “the novel” in the European sense. Furthermore, his juxtaposition (see note 33) of existing terms such as monogatari not only blurs the difference between traditional prose fiction and the shōsetsu but also symbolically predicts, on the one hand, the continuity with the past, despite Shōyō’s advocacy of the modernization of Japanese literature, and on the other hand, the almost amorphous open-endedness of this new genre. As we shall see, the actual works subsumed under the term shōsetsu in the twentieth century include not only novels but short stories and fiction in general, as well as works that might be categorized in the European sense as (auto)biographies, essays, travelogues, journals,
and so on. Indeed, Noguchi concludes his *Ichigo no jiten: shōsetsu* (A Dictionary of One Word: Shōsetsu) with the following remarks:

[Shōsetsu] is printed literature for reading (as opposed to monogatari); with no metric or rhythmic constraints (as opposed to poetry); and with the freedom to use the imagination (as opposed to documentary); moreover *through predation it has ingested* essays, criticism, biography and other neighboring genres. With the continuous modification of its form according to its environment, this prose art has enjoyed a favorable reception in bourgeois society to date.34

One cannot but notice Noguchi’s food metaphor: “predation,” “ingested”—texts eating and incorporating other texts.

One of the key issues in this book is the notion of “textual cannibalism” and other intertextual relationships. The Brazilian critic Haroldo de Campos writes, “In Latin America as well as in Europe, writing will increasingly mean rewriting, digesting, masticating.”35 This, presumably, is true of other literatures, and it is certainly true of modern Japanese literature. Some critics, of course, see this negatively. Fredric Jameson, for example, laments that literature “no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type, but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts . . . in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books.”36 My position here is to recognize the significance of the textual cannibalism, and more broadly intertextuality, which includes not merely quotation, allusion, parody, and pastiche (itself a culinary term)37 but also critical reading and creative transformation within the text. I noted earlier that in our reading of food in literature it is important to pay attention to various intratextual and extratextual relationships. It is equally important, and rewarding, too, to consider intertextual relationships, or, to use Genette’s term, transtextuality, that is, everything that situates one text in relation to other texts.38 The texts that are rewritten, digested, and masticated include not only published literary texts but also oral or visual texts, private texts, nonliterary texts, and discourses. Texts within texts (i.e., consumed by other texts) also contain other sets of texts, which in their turn have incorporated other texts, and so on.39 Our reading, then, reveals *some* of the texts embedded and transformed within other texts—but, it goes without saying, only some, since it would be impossible (and in any event pointless) to try to trace this “textual food chain” back to the original act of ingestion.

Despite this “predatory” and in fact omnivorous nature of the *shōsetsu*, food and eating, both in concrete and metaphorical senses, have long been neglected and marginalized in Japan, as Kaikō claimed. The single most important reason
for this seems to be the central position given in the bundan and in conventional literary history to the kind of shōsetsu proposed by Shōyō and produced, with modifications, by other writers in late Meiji and Taishō. As Noguchi notes, the shōsetsu in fact includes and incorporates an extremely wide variety of writing. For decades, however, only some of this writing has been treated as real, serious, and legitimate shōsetsu.

Shōyō advocated the modern Japanese shōsetsu, which, under his guidance and with careful planning on the part of the writers, would “finally surpass the European novel and take a glorious place on the altar of the arts along with painting, music and poetry.” What Shōyō identified as the “essence” of the novel is the realistic, or mimetic, depiction of “human emotions” and the supposedly objective and unembellished depiction of life “as it is.” It is not difficult to see in this focus on human emotions, rather than on society, the harbinger of an unengaged, apolitical tendency to accept the status quo, if only by default. Shōyō’s idea of the shōsetsu was passed down to what has long been regarded as the mainstream of modern Japanese literature, namely so-called naturalist (shizen shugi) writing and the shishōsetsu (or watakushi shōsetsu, usually translated as the “I novel”). Of particular importance is the shared emphasis on the realistic depiction of life. The principle of objective depiction was combined with a series of popular shizen shugi motifs such as the discovery of “self” or “interiority,” the dissection of unpalatable “truths” such as carnal desire, loneliness, disappointment, and “confession.”

Just as shōsetsu was given by Shōyō as a translated term for the novel, shizen shugi (literally, “nature” + “ism”) had models in various types of European naturalism. Nevertheless, as many have pointed out, shizen shugi is remarkably different from (or, according to some critics, inferior to) European, especially Zolaist naturalism, just as the shōsetsu is different from the novel. One of the major differences is the lesser degree of interest in the natural and social sciences. With a few exceptions shizen shugi texts were little concerned, for instance, with the institution of the family or other aspects of the social system; instead their focus was on the immediate milieu of the writer-protagonist and his (his, since both the author of the text and the protagonist, who is usually very much like his creator, are almost invariably male) search for self. The “self” supposedly discovered by shizen shugi writers is enclosed in the even narrower and more immediately recognizable surroundings of the writer, and exposed in detail to the reader in the Taishō shishōsetsu. Noguchi calls this genre “the shōsetsu of watakushi by watakushi for watakushi,” with a note that the watakushi is neither an “implied I” nor a simple “explicit I” but a “displayed I,” so to speak.
Another characteristic common to shizen shugi and shishōsetsu is the disdain for clear plot, structure, dramatic events, arresting metaphor, and generally what one might regard as novelististic devices and techniques. Any attempt to entertain the reader is frowned upon. In his famous (or notorious) 1925 apologia for the shishōsetsu, Kume Masao (1891–1952) insisted that War and Peace, Crime and Punishment, and Madame Bovary are, after all, great pieces of popular (and vulgar) fiction and that however skillful Balzac, for example, may be, his works of fiction are nothing but fabrications and are therefore less trustworthy than his personal comments about the difficulty of writing. The rejection of “fabrication” is sometimes likened to a rejection of elaborate and systematic cooking: ordinary raw ingredients are presented with little or no cooking, and the chef seems to pride himself on the total absence of sugar, spices, and other taste enhancers from his dishes. “The expert in depicting unsavory dishes” is the title awarded to the naturalist Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943) by the literary and culinary commentator Arashiyama Kōzaburō in his collection of essays on eccentric eating habits among modern Japanese writers. Arashiyama’s chapter on Tōson is subtitled “Wizened Apples,” the special taste of which Tōson admired. Arashiyama’s jocose award not only foregrounds the elements of food and cooking in shizen shugi–shishōsetsu writing but also recognizes Tōson’s mastery of this particular kind of writing. The reference to wizened apples urges the reader to contrast them with the fresh and juicy apple in Tōson’s prenaturalist poem “Hatsukoi” (First Love, 1896), one of the most celebrated poems in modern Japanese literature. Tōson, however, abandoned the romantic and poetic apple and instead developed a taste for wizened apples. It is not that the fresh apple and the youthful love became faded and wizened with age; it was Tōson’s choice and his mission to pursue the seemingly prosaic and unappetizing.

Unsurprisingly, the kind of writing/cooking advocated and practiced by the shizen shugi–shishōsetsu writers is not “to everyone’s taste.” As a matter of fact, as we shall see, both contemporaries of writers affiliated with these literary modes and later critics have leveled scathing criticism at them, often sparking full-scale literary debates. Nevertheless, one must reiterate that the Shōyō–shizen shugi–shishōsetsu lineage has been regarded, if sometimes grudgingly, as forming the very core of modern Japanese fiction. Paradoxically, many of the canonical shizen shugi and shishōsetsu texts have been forgotten by the reading public, while writers such as Sōseki, Ōgai, and Tanizaki, who were labeled nonnaturalists or antinaturalists at the time and were regarded by their detractors as being popular (i.e., vulgar), pedantic, or insincere, are still read widely.
The shizen shugi–shishōsetsu debate is in fact much more complex than my outline would suggest, and has been the subject of a number of major works by scholars such as Karatani Kōjin, Edward Fowler, Irmela Hiijiya-Kirschneriet, Tomi Suzuki, and Suzuki Sadami. For our purposes, it will suffice to say that the construct (however controversial) of what counts as “mainstream” has worked against reading and writing about food. And such is the autobiographizing nature of the shizen shugi–shishōsetsu, which constitutes the “mainstream,” that even when critics do interest themselves in a textualized food, the urge to explain biographically takes over. The fresh apple of the much beloved “First Love” has not escaped such an approach on the part of Tōson specialists: “diligent research has revealed that when Tōson was nine or ten the lady in the house next door used to pick apples and throw them to him.”46 Even Kaikō’s essay drawing attention to food in Japanese literature is titled “Nihon no sakka-tachi no shokuyoku” (The Appetite of Japanese Writers), betraying the highly conventional author-centered interest. Arashiyama’s book also adheres to the tradition: ultimately he is interested in what and how each writer ate (and lived) rather than in what and how they wrote about food or eating.47 My reservations about this sort of exegesis do not mean that biographical considerations will be absent from the chapters that follow. Biographical interest, however, does not lie at the center, biography being only one of the many tools available to contextualize food in literature.

The Menu

The chapters that follow set out to show the diverse ways in which the shōsetsu genre has dealt with the themes of food, eating, and cooking. Despite the neglect outlined above, food, as I have said, is everywhere in Japanese literature. The texts I consider have been selected not for their canonicity but for their relevance to the particular issue under discussion. A careful balance has had to be struck between texts that are readily available in translation and those that are obscure and inaccessible. I shall also discuss their reception—how other readers have read a particular text and how these readings have varied synchronically and have changed over time. I do not adhere to one or two particular theories or methods, for I am more interested in multiplicity than in unity. To quote Louis Marin’s Introduction to Food for Thought:

I have not been primarily concerned in these readings with erecting a general theory of power, language or representation; that task has already been
admiringly undertaken in several disciplines. . . . I have instead sought to transmit the surprise and amazement that may be derived from a careful and attentive description, summary, or reading of certain texts. . . .

In the first five chapters, texts dating from Meiji to present will be examined to illustrate historical changes and variations in the treatment of a specific topic relating to food. The topic of the first chapter is food and eating in various “literary” diaries, which range from the nonfictive to fictive, from private to public, and from poetic to prosaic. The texts examined reveal how the physical and financial conditions of the diarists, their gender, and sociohistorical factors shape or affect their desire to eat and to write. At the same time, this first chapter shows numerous instances of multiple, often conflicting, readings of the same text, proving that there are many approaches other than the conventional author-centered one.

The second and third chapters focus on “down-to-earth eating and writing,” or the notion of food and literature as a necessity for all rather than a luxury for the few. The advocacy of the “down-to-earth” appears again and again throughout the century, with specific historical and ideological implications. Some texts clearly exhibit certain naturalist characteristics, and yet they present what is absent from the shizen shugi–shishōsetsu “mainstream” in both political and literary senses. Chapter 2 concentrates on prewar texts, including examples of late-Meiji “peasant” literature and the “proletarian” writings as well as children’s literature of the 1920s and 1930s. I show how food in the prewar examples is a marker of class divisions. The recurrent motif is of workers engaged in food production being starved, and devoured, by capitalists. Chapter 3 examines gender-specific hunger in women’s texts, the survival strategies of marginalized people both during and after the war, and warnings against the affluence and environmental destruction of postindustrialized Japan.

Chapter 4 turns to the theme of cannibalism in serious and popular novels. Some of the texts are based, if loosely, on historical cases of survival or pathological cannibalism, while others are purely imaginative. Key issues in these stories include ethical questions about the drive to survive, colonization, and cultural identity. The treatment of these issues, the style, and the form vary greatly, but almost all of these texts show clear signs of texts “eating” other texts, a tendency that is closely related to another common and prominent element—the question of cross-cultural contact.

Chapter 5 looks at a number of texts, mainly fictional, in which the quest for gastronomic gratification is a dominant theme. As we have already seen, the existence of such literature had long been completely overlooked; it is only in the
last few decades that both contemporary and earlier, long-forgotten “gourmet novels” have attracted some attention. What is evident here, particularly in prewar stories of this type, is the tendency to subvert the “mainstream” shishō-setsu and to present a variety of alternatives. Postwar examples, on the other hand, either advocate or resist the democratization and popularization of the gastronomic quest (to adopt a shorthand term for it). Like cannibalism, the gastronomic quest as a literary theme is deeply implicated with cultural identity, and a certain textual cannibalism is also evident.

Although each of the above chapters touches on issues concerning gender, such as how women’s appetite for eating and writing was affected by modernization, nationalism, and democratization, chapter 6 deals specifically with food and eating in contemporary women’s texts. Some of these texts celebrate the inclusiveness of eating (and of writing), while others deal with the fear of eating. This fear or disgust can be seen as a warning against what the complacent “gourmet boom” of the 1980s and 1990s concealed: the dangers of the market economy, environmental destruction, and continuing gender biases. Intertextual criticism frequently appears in these texts: just as eating can distort or destroy the body, the discourse on food in the canonical literature and media can be manipulative and unreliable. Bulimia and anorexia not only appear as the afflictions of some of the female protagonists but also symbolically indicate their craving for, or rejection of, knowledge and information as food.