

Lesa Scholl, *Food Restraint and Fasting in Victorian Religion and Literature*. London, New York, and Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2022. 168 pp. ISBN: 9781350256552, 1350256552.

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In Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), Arun, a young student at a university in Massachusetts is horrified when he learns of a complex and distressing eating disorder which plagues Melanie Patton, the daughter of the American family he boards with during summer. While his distress at his discovery of Melanie's deeply personal eating disorder reveals his own sheltered exposure as someone who enjoys the privileges accorded to his gender in a rural Indian setting, it also reveals the anguish and alienation associated with such dietary concerns in the twentieth century. In contrast, and not only in terms of its geographic and socio-temporal context, Lesa Scholl's brilliant work *Food Restraint and Fasting in Victorian Religion and Literature* (2022) explores the ground-breaking idea of how fasting in Victorian England was a means to "reinforce community connection and community aid" through theological motivations and challenges the arguably conventional "image of the faster cloistered away physically and publicly" (138).

The insightful and comprehensive *Food Restraint and Fasting in Victorian Religion and Literature* traces the early origins and motivations for food restraint in Victorian England through a critical and detailed evaluation of the socio-political, religious and economic climate of a century which was characterised by "changing economic structures and philosophies," the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the revival of Anglicanism, which adopted a structured approach to fasting, through the Tractarian Movement (5). Scholl states that her work

...combines theology, ethics, nutrition and economics to ask questions not just about why some Victorians showed restraint, but what constituted restraint, and what counted as excess—either overeating or undereating—from a dietary perspective (4).

Her work presents a fascinating and sagacious study of how four popular Victorian women writers, Elizabeth Gaskell, Christina Rossetti, Josephine Butler, and Alice Meynell incorporated their personal responses to the religious and social discourses around food restraint and fasting into their writings. Scholl's work liberates fasting from solely being one's idiosyncratic theological choices to more political, social and economic ones, as indicated by her citation of Amartya Sen who interprets poverty not "in terms of what exists" but rather who has control over what exists and for whom the "privilege of choice" is a reality (47).

Coherently structured and critically executed, Scholl's extensive introduction is divided into three clear sections which situate Anglicanism's approach to food restraint amidst the various contextual and personal concerns of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Scholl offers a perceptive interpretation of how Anglicanism's approach to fasting posits an "ethical shift toward active compassion and self-reflection" by combining "moral (external) and ethical (internal) convictions" (10). Scholl furthers her argument by examining the 18th Tract of Edward Pusey's *Tracts for the Times, Thoughts on the Benefits of the System of Fasting* (1833) which invokes the "communal act" of fasting, thereby connecting individual theological beliefs with the social and communal aspects of religion (10). In addition, she also invokes how fasting is embedded in "gendered" concerns by drawing attention to "famous cases in the nineteenth century of 'fasting girls,'" some of whom met tragic endings such as Jane Plymley whose decision to fast emerged from "an ethical consciousness" but led her to die of starvation at the age of twenty (11, 11, 12). This makes her exploration of the works of Gaskell, Rossetti, Butler, and Meynell all the more essential, poignant, and compelling. Divided into four clear sections, each of which is devoted to one writer, Scholl studies how their engagement with "practical

theology—whether through exegesis, parable or hagiography” (18) emerges in their writing in relation to “elegant economy” (43) a term synonymous with food restraint and fasting.

Chapter One, “Elizabeth Gaskell, ethical economics and ethical eating,” investigates the writer’s “unitarian” albeit “ecumenical” approach to the complexities around dietary choices and the ethics and necessity of being answerable for “social imbalances” (25). Scholl critically evaluates the ideas around food restraint which emerge in Gaskell’s fictional narratives such as *Ruth* (1853), *Cranford* (1853), and *North and South* (1854), before adroitly establishing a link with the next chapter on Rossetti. Despite belonging to different schools of theological thought, Scholl suggests how Gaskell’s writing “values common Feeling...through food restraint” and Rossetti’s through communal empathy and “the unity of the Body of Christ” (43).

In Chapter Two, “Christina Rossetti, spiritual growth and social justice,” Scholl dedicates herself to an examination of the thus far neglected study of the influence of “Eastern Orthodox theology” (49) in Rossetti’s work, whose approach to “spiritual practices” (48) was entwined with “social justice practices” (48) and underscores how Rossetti subscribes to the views of Evans and Pusey “to recognise one’s connection to the Body of Christ and, crucially, one’s divine responsibility to care for that Body as well as one’s own” (48). Fasting for Rossetti becomes a means to achieve social justice rather than being a sanctimonious celebration or a harsh physical punishment of the self. Scholl evaluates Rossetti’s approach by analysing her conversation poem, “The Face of the Deep,” where the poet makes this connection between food and the body of Christ very clear through an imagined dialogue between Christ and “a devout,” which reinforces the “social, outward focus of fasting,” of which a “benefit in health” is a lawful “secondary motive” (61, 60, 61). For Rossetti, then, Scholl observes, fasting is as

much a means of primarily achieving social equity (secondary to its perceived health benefits), as it is about her commitment to “materialist theology” (72).

In Chapter Three, “Josephine Butler’s Hagiography and Social Prophecy” Scholl’s focal point is on Butler, who embraces the “practical” approach to theology adopted by both Gaskell and Rossetti by approaching Christ’s “acts and words” as promoters of “social justice” (78). Scholl asserts that Butler employs the “conventional hagiography of Catharine of Siena,” who could “not eat without pain,” to explore her own spirituality and “provoke a cultural response in her contemporaries” (89, 90, 89). Scholl posits that she would like to disengage her reading of Catharine of Siena’s dietary choices away from the “twentieth century lenses of eating disorders” although she acknowledges that they might well have existed before their medical existence (91). Inspired by Gaskell’s *Ruth*, Butler interprets fasting as a means to undermine her own privilege and “provide agency and equality to others” (103).

Roman Catholicism and Christian Socialism co-exist within Alice Meynell, who, Scholl contends, imbibed her “sense of ethics, social justice and social action” into her “frugal” (112) dietary choices (112). Butler possesses a great deal of empathy for those less privileged than her to “make real room for the poor,” something which Scholl observes unites Anglicanism and Orthodox Christianity as well as Meynell’s Roman Catholicism (113).

Scholl’s precise and informative conclusion succinctly serves up her line of argument throughout this work—of how an individual’s health both determines and is “determined by” the “social body” and how the religious and theological impetus behind fasting is a means of bringing people together rather than pushing them apart (138). The works of the incredibly popular writers Scholl examines is a testament not just to the public appeal of literature but indeed to the public nature of the private and often religious act of fasting. This pioneering book offers a turning point in the way in which we decipher the ambivalent approaches to

fasting in Victorian England but also passes the baton of research on to academics interested in the culture of fasting across centuries and cultures. Lucid and powerful, it engages the reader from the opening chapters and offers several novel insights into the works of four established writers. In future, it would be very rewarding to perhaps see comparative approaches to food restraint across a plethora of geographic and temporal contexts.

Works Cited

Desai Anita. *Fasting, Feasting*. London: Vintage Classics, 2018 (1999).