“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.”
—Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

When we eat, we don’t just put fuel in an empty stomach; we also participate in a cultural system of symbols and rituals that shape our identities and express our values. Dietary habits and preferences are rooted in the past, in family background, histories of global trade, and traditions linked to national heritage. As consumers, we enter into relation with farmers, cooks, vendors, and food industry workers, as well as with plants and other animals, and these relations raise crucially important economic, environmental, and ethical questions, given that what we put into our own bodies affects countless others and will in fact impact the planet. Perhaps this is why not eating — from boycotts to hunger strikes — has served as such a powerful form of social protest. Food gives nourishment, comfort, and enjoyment: few things can satisfy more than a well-prepared meal, shared in good company. The metaphor of “taste” is also central to discussions of the pleasures we find in art, although paradoxically the culinary arts have never gained the same prestige as fine arts like painting and literature. Examining artistic representations of food and dining may then help clarify and expand our sense of what (if anything) sets works of the imagination apart from the very subjects they depict.

This course will consider the cultural significance of food in a variety of literary genres, chiefly contemporary novels, but also historical and critical studies, a memoir, restaurant reviews, and cookbooks. On the fiction menu: Dahl, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory; Kafka, “The Hunger Artist;” Kang, The Vegetarian (surreal winner of a Man Booker prize); Lanchester, The Debt to Pleasure (narrated by a foodie villain to rival Hannibal Lecter); and Norfolk, John Saturnall’s Feast (a historical novel set in the kitchens of the English gentry).