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Delightful, Delicious, Disgusting

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## Delightful, Delicious, Disgusting

Encountering an artichoke, one might wonder how the first person to eat that vegetable ever got past the exterior spines and the interior core of throat-raking needles to discover the sweet heart hidden within. Many foodstuffs present similar mysteries, such as rhubarb, whose poison parts surround succulent stems, or vegetables and meats whose toxins require hours of careful flushing before they relinquish edible substances. The vast family of peppers can burn the tissues of the mouth, eyes, and nose so painfully that they are sometimes used as punishment, yet they also have become immensely popular in the diet of many peoples. None of these examples represents bounties of the earth immediately inviting to the palate, and given the sheer difficulty of finding the nutriments to be had from fierce, dangerous, or toxic substances, we might well wonder that human beings ever learned to eat anything beyond the first fruits of the garden of Eden—one of which proved to be the most dangerous of all! The ultimate origin of our diets is lost in the shadows of prehistory and evolution, though one suspects that sheer necessity often prompted discovery of food from forbidding sources. The remarkable thing is not just that we managed to eat, but that we managed and continue to manage to take considerable *pleasure* in foods that present us with challenges to both our senses and our sensibilities. It is the perplexing and elusive nature of this pleasure that will occupy me here, especially the difficult pleasures to be had from what I call “terrible eating.”

Discussing pleasure in eating is a surprisingly delicate theoretical undertaking. Food and the sense of taste are not standard topics for philosophical discussion for reasons that have to do with the nature of this sense and the kind of

pleasures it affords. Since classical antiquity, our philosophical tradition has ranked two senses above the others, elevating sight in particular to the top of the list because of its role in the development of knowledge. Sight is the chief sensory means by which we make discoveries about the world, assess practical decisions, and achieve aesthetic insights. Vision and its companion hearing are philosophically, scientifically, and in common parlance considered the “higher” senses, while touch, taste, and smell are “bodily” senses, and by the long tradition that ranks mind over body, they are also considered “lower” senses. While sight and hearing operate at a distance from their objects, food and drink are taken into the body, providing it life-sustaining nutrition. Indeed, the chief purpose of food is to nourish, and this heavily functional role is another factor that commonly excludes eating from the intellectual interest of the philosopher. Food is *merely* functional, keeping the body healthy so that more important mental business may proceed. Socrates probably speaks for the majority when he declares that a philosopher should care neither for food and drink nor sex (*Phaedo* 64d).

All of the senses can give us pleasure, but again we find a crucial distinction drawn between the “intellectual” pleasures of sight and hearing and the “bodily” pleasures of touch, smell, and taste. Enjoyment of objects of the eyes and ears—beautiful scenes, sounds, works of art—directs attention outward to the world around. The “objective” intentional direction of vision and hearing aids our knowledge of the world and gives us *aesthetic* pleasure. (Indeed, in modern philosophy beauty is actually identified as this particular brand of pleasure.) By contrast, the pleasures of touch, smell, and taste

supposedly direct our attention inward to the state of our own bodies.<sup>1</sup> These senses are considered cognitively dull, and what is more, pursuit of their pleasures leads to self-indulgence, laziness, gluttony, and overall moral degeneration.

The complicated philosophical history of pleasure has posed some obdurate difficulties for those few theorists who have attempted to argue on behalf of the aesthetic dimension of taste and for the comparability of food with works of art. Fine cuisine certainly is to be admired for, among other qualities, the subtle pleasures it delivers. And this has been the chief grounds for defense of the artistry of food and the delicacies of taste invoked by such writers as the gastronome Brillat-Savarin and philosophers David Prall, Kevin Sweeney, and Elizabeth Telfer.<sup>2</sup> They argue—correctly in fact—that a discriminating palate is a result of sophisticated learning and experience, and that the artistry of the great chef or vintner yields subtle qualities in their products that are fully as difficult to discern as are the aesthetic properties of music or painting. While at first this approach seems to put art and food on common ground, it inadvertently subverts and truncates the comparison because gustatory pleasures appear insignificant compared with aesthetic pleasures. The crux of the matter is that the meanings that works of art convey and the insight and understanding they deliver are hardly captured at all in the way we conceive of bodily, sensuous pleasure. Therefore, no matter how refined and subtle is the experience afforded through eating and drinking, it invariably falls short of the more profound aesthetic dimensions of works of art. This view is acknowledged even by those who argue on behalf of food, such as Elizabeth Telfer, who must grant that food is a minor art, if it is art at all.

Yet food and works of art share significant features that are often overlooked if one focuses only on sensuous taste pleasure. The more important similarities lie in the meanings that they capture and convey to the mind as well as the senses. This approach to food does not simply ignore pleasure, however. (Where would be the fun in that?) Rather, I want to argue, *our pleasure responses to tastes are themselves complex cognitive responses that involve highly compressed symbolic recognition*. The concept of pleasure itself will undergo reassessment in the

course of this argument, including that type of pleasure that is often taken to be relatively simple: sense pleasure.

No full and complete sensation is free from an awareness of its object. That is, there is no coherent sensation without cognition—i.e., without taking the object of sensation to be something or other. Different interpretations of the object of taste or smell yield different sense experiences. This is not the claim that one has a sensation that is then interpreted and categorized, but rather, that without a category the sensation itself is inchoate and indistinct, even though very strong smells and tastes may provoke powerful physical responses. (Bear in mind that full flavor necessitates the use of more than one sense, requiring both taste and smell and probably also touch.) For example, certain blue cheeses have a sharp smell that is often described approvingly as “piquant.” This quality when added to salad or fruit enlivens a dish and increases its tastiness. Yet the odor of blue cheese is rather similar to the smell of bile or vomit, and unless one is prepared to encounter cheese, the wafting vapors alone will not register as pleasant at all. Once identified, the sensation comes into focus and takes on its aesthetic properties. In short, the first argument that food has meaning that always enters into its aesthetic properties simply inserts the content or object of sensation into taste experience. A full understanding of taste pleasures and their significance, however, must venture much further than this.

Foods and their tastes may represent and express significance in a distinctively “aesthetic” fashion, and one can elaborate the meanings that foods embody with all manner of examples from the whimsical to the profound by considering Easter eggs, candy canes, birthday cakes, ceremonial meals, and religious rituals.<sup>3</sup> Ceremonies and rituals make use of the most obvious food references (such as the so-called sacred trio of oil, wine, and bread; a butter lamb or hot cross buns on the Easter table; or the array of foods on the Passover seder plate), but virtually any food qualifies. Chicken soup not only has a certain taste, but its bland, oily quality signifies comfort and care. (Think of how what are now called “comfort foods” blend childhood, nourishment, and soothing calm into their very tastes.) At this point, however, I would like to travel down a

thornier path and focus on eating that challenges both sense and sensibility and yields much more difficult pleasures.

One might think we can distinguish that which *tastes good* by looking for the opposite of that which *disgusts*. This is the implicit assumption of those who follow the quite plausible evolutionary or biological model for basic emotions such as disgust. This emotion is often interpreted as an aversion reaction to that which is foul and toxic, thereby protecting the organism by inducing recoil and revulsion. Conversely, the natural disposition to like sweet substances is considered to have its functional roots in the healthful properties of ripe fruits that nourish the organism. When it comes to cuisine, however, the disgusting and the delicious do not always function as opposites. A good deal of recondite and sophisticated eating actually seems to be built upon (or even to be a variation of) that which disgusts, endangers, or repels. Indeed, much of the haute cuisine of a culture retains an element that some people—*both inside and outside that culture*—find revolting. And the revulsion appears to be deliberately approached and overcome—not as a matter of necessity (as might be understandable in times of scarcity), but apparently as a way to increase the depth and potency of taste experience.

No one can stand outside culture and proclaim a neutral list of disgusting foods, and the following does not pretend to be one. With that caveat, I offer a provisional list of disgusting things to eat.<sup>4</sup> I have six categories that fall into two groups: one that singles out the taste experience itself, and the other that considers the nature of the object being eaten. (1) First, there are objects with initially repellent tastes, such as parsnips or cod liver oil. This includes objects that retain a residue of a substance that is disgusting, such as the decay present in gamy meat. (2) There are also a number of foods that are tasty in small quantities but cloy when one eats too much and reaches surfeit. This phenomenon is especially present with the relatively easy enjoyment of sweet things, such as cheesecake or candy. Objects in these two initial categories disgust because of their taste qualities, but there is a longer list of disgusting foodstuffs that refers to the nature of what is eaten, including two pairs of apparent opposites. (3) Objects that are too alien from ourselves and that we recoil from

when we encounter them in nature, such as spiders or snakes. Something repellent to touch is doubly repulsive to touch with the tongue. (4) Or objects that are too close to us, not alien enough. The prime example of this would be another human being. (5) Objects that are insufficiently removed from their natural form—i.e., that appear to be still alive and resisting. Therefore, we prepare our foods, remove meats from their skin, and so on. (6) Objects that have been dead too long and have started to decompose. This category bends back toward the first.

I am sure these initial categories of the disgusting will be controversial, as they should be. Quite apart from the cultural bias that any such list manifests, these are also categories where taste is *deliberately cultivated*. When disgust or revulsion is confronted and overcome, what was at first disgusting can become delicious.

This can come about through a variety of means. The historian of food T. Sarah Peterson recounts how during the sixteenth century, Europeans, desiring to emphasize the continuity of their own culture with that of classical antiquity, diligently altered their customary food habits because of scholarly discoveries about what peoples of ancient Greece and Rome had eaten. This required consuming vast quantities of animal flesh and parts of animals hitherto not commonly eaten and preparing “high” or gamy meat cooked very rare.

Fashion setters crunched on ears; blood from meat nearly oozed from the mouth; livers silken with fat melted on the tongue; and the taste for pronouncedly high meat, decomposed to the fine point just this side of maggots . . . was cultivated in France. . . . By at least the eighteenth century the stylish English were more than partial to them too. Although he considered himself to be in the new French fashion, Richard Bradley, the Cambridge botanist, was aghast at the high meat he was now served. “In many places I have sat down to a Dinner which has sent me out of the Room by the very smell of it.”<sup>5</sup>

This trend was a deliberate cultivation of taste because of the cultural meanings of the foods consumed, but it became internalized quite literally as people’s liking for the new tastes grew. Note the moldability of pleasure out of disgust in these heroic attempts to eat what is initially repulsive (although the case of Bradley demon-

strates that not everyone was persuaded to relish the new fashions in taste).

If it is the case that some of the most important types of cuisine and the cultivation of “good taste” arise out of substances that have a disgust quotient, this is not unique among aesthetic phenomena, and indeed it suggests another common ground that links foods and artworks. Philosophies of art and aesthetics are peppered with examples of what can be termed the paradox of aversion: the attraction to an object that both inspires fear or revulsion and is transformed into something profoundly beautiful, an experience that philosophers from ancient times to the present have analyzed as a type of pleasure. There are three standardly recognized categories where aversions can convert into positive aesthetic experiences: The first and most ancient one concerns tragedy. Aristotle discussed the enjoyment to be found in this poetic form, where the evocation of the painful tragic emotions of pity and terror is the foundation for both catharsis and the aesthetic understanding that he interprets as a pleasure in learning. Second, there is the powerful experience of the sublime, which was widely analyzed in modern philosophy in terms of the conversion of fear into thrilling delight. And more recently theories of horror have tried to comprehend how the disturbing spectacles that mark that genre manage to deliver aesthetic pleasure. I am proposing a fourth category: the conversion of the disgusting into the delicious. Certain encounters with what we might consider particularly profound eating transform an initially aversive—terrible or disgusting—experience into something significant and *savorable*. Though I believe there are special parallels between terrible eating and the experience of the sublime, the conversion of the disgusting into the delicious constitutes its own category. Unlike encounters with sublimity, when we eat, the emotion of fear is remote if present at all, though shadows of disgust may linger. In fact, the presence of disgust might prompt one to compare this fourth conversion to horror rather than sublimity. I hesitate to do this because of the debate over whether the appreciative disgust of horror actually converts to pleasure or requires another explanation.<sup>6</sup> But foods that initially disgust can be transformed into the unqualifiedly delicious.

To amplify this claim and establish some

terms of comparison with more familiar ideas, let us consider a theory of sublimity that analyzes the conversion of pain into delight in ways that are suggestive for understanding the meaning of terrible eating. In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke observes that there are three basic feeling states: pleasure, pain, and an in-between state of indifference.<sup>7</sup> Beauty is a particular species of pleasure, but what he calls the “delight” of the sublime is built upon intense emotional pain, namely, terror:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>8</sup>

Some theorists seeking to resolve the paradoxes of aversion have retreated to the safety of representation to account for the enjoyment in art of subjects, emotions, and situations that in reality are too dreadful to afford any pleasure. (It is the *mimesis* of tragedy that Aristotle believed permits us to enjoy that difficult theatrical form, for example.) But Burke stands out for boldly stating that we need no shield of representation in order to delight in pain, for indeed we are equally fascinated by pains, terrors, and horrors in reality, so long as they do not press too closely. (He offers the shocking speculation that a theater audience would readily forego the pleasures of the best tragedy in order to attend a public execution.) At a sufficient degree of remove that permits safety, human beings are simply fascinated by—and therefore take delight in—all manner of things that terrify, either for their size or might or ferocity or power.

Burke suggests that objects that inspire terror may trigger the ecstatic delight of the sublime because a state of emotional contentment is simply too close to that intermediate state of indifference that lies between pleasure and pain.<sup>9</sup> Just as an unexercised body becomes slack and lethargic, desiring the exertion of its muscles, so the mind can become too relaxed. Encounters with pain, danger, and other fear-provoking situations shake up the mental works in a healthy and enlivening way, even as they cause us to dwell on forces that threaten our safety and raise our mor-

tality to the forefront of awareness. Ironically, the ultimate object of contemplation that is so enlivening is death, and Burke calls the most profound pain an “emissary of this king of terrors.”<sup>10</sup>

Burke’s own catalog of sublime objects includes a large and disorderly collection of examples from natural events to passages from the Bible. He lists various qualities an object might have that inspire terror, awe, reverence, respect, astonishment—all emotions that can be components of the feeling of the sublime. The qualities of vastness, danger, desolation, infinity, great size, difficulty, and magnificence all have their sublime exemplars, and what they share is a degree of power that puts their might above that of a human being. “I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power,” Burke remarks.<sup>11</sup> Things over which we exercise control may be physically stronger than we are, but they are not sublime. A beast of burden may be immense, but it does our bidding and inspires neither fear nor awe. “We have continually about us animals of a strength that is considerable, but not pernicious. Amongst these we never look for the sublime: it comes upon us in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness, in the form of the lion, the tiger, the panther, or rhinoceros.”<sup>12</sup> Animals that are aversive but not fearsome are merely odious and more likely to arouse disgust than sublimity.<sup>13</sup>

Although I aim to make a case for certain parallels between sublimity and terrible eating, there are additional factors that initially seem to separate eating from anything akin to sublime status: In some way or other, the perceiver must achieve some “distance” from the object of the aversive emotion in order to experience delight. Vision and hearing permit the apprehension of terrifying objects from a distance, affording a physical margin of safety from which dread and terror can be converted into delight. By contrast, distance seems to be what taste will not permit because objects of taste are always literally close to one. Touch and taste are contact senses and require reduction of physical distance; even smell quickly disappears as one begins to move away from an object.

Moreover, the reversed power relations that obtain between the objects one eats and the objects that inspire awe and terror would seem to preclude eating experiences from comparability with the sublime. By the time something has

landed on our plate, it is thoroughly subdued; we the eater are in control. Therefore, it would seem there is no possibility that we might encounter qualities that exhibit analogous aesthetic import. But this conclusion relies overmuch on the fact that our dinner poses no immediate danger. Its presence may nonetheless remind us of that king of terrors, as well as other intimations of mortality and loss, evidence that the fourth conversion harbors disturbing and potentially profound aesthetic experience.

This point is bolstered by a brief detour into the role of food and drink in art. Still-life painting, especially the genre known as the gamepiece, has often been used to foreground rot and decay, transience and loss, and ultimate mortality—ideas manifest in forms both frightening and disgusting. These themes appear at their most extreme in the grisly *vanitas* picture, with its grimacing skulls lolling amidst the detritus of human endeavor. Decay and transience is more decoratively present in pretty flower and fruit paintings when they include spotted and browning peaches, spilt drink, and scavenging vermin. The gamepiece with its depiction of blood-stained, disemboweled deer and hare virtually celebrates slaughter, a harvesting of the bounties of nature commemorated in paintings that hang on the walls of tastefully decorated dining rooms.<sup>14</sup> Any worry over an inference from art to practice is assuaged by similar illustrations of dead game and cuts of meat often found in cookbooks, which, while themselves informed by the genres of still-life, provide a segue from paint to plate.

Leon Kass refers to the “great paradox of eating, namely that to preserve their life and form living forms necessarily destroy life and form.”<sup>15</sup> As Margaret Visser observes, “Animals are murdered to produce meat; vegetables are torn up, peeled, and chopped; most of what we eat is treated with fire; and chewing is designed remorselessly to finish what killing and cooking began.”<sup>16</sup> The addition of chewing to this catalogue implicates us all in the process of destruction. Not all of this violence is apt to disturb, and indeed for some people none of it does. But certain meals deliberately harbor an awareness of the fact that to sustain one’s life one takes another. This intuition looms especially close to consciousness when the object of one’s dinner fits into the third category listed above:

another animal whose form is still recognizable, not having been chopped and shaped into hamburger or pâté. One might describe this as a meal that is still uncomfortably *close* to its living state. Indeed, this kind of eating can appear brutal, and one might surmise it disgusts because of the absence of the kind of distance that separates civilized human from brute.

One means to quell this discomfort is to remove the object one is eating from noticeable signs of its origin. Consider the following passage from the novel *Cold Mountain*, by Charles Frazier. This narrative is set in the waning years of the American Civil War at a time when scarcity and winter take vast tolls on the resources of the defeated. At a point toward the end of the story, four characters find themselves stranded snowbound in the mountains, where they have trapped some squirrels and roasted them for dinner.

All they had left was a little bit of grits and five squirrels that Ruby had shot and gutted and skinned. She had skewered them on sticks and roasted them with the heads on over chestnut coals, and that evening Ruby and Stobrod and Inman ate theirs like you would an ear of corn. Ada sat a minute and examined her portion. The front teeth were yellow and long. She was not accustomed to eating things with the teeth still in them. Stobrod watched her and said, That head'll twist right off, if it's bothering you.<sup>17</sup>

This passage does not detail an object of *haute cuisine* but a piece of meat desperately needed to avert starvation, and in context it may seem as if the presence of body parts such as teeth is what renders this meal particularly brutal. Twisting off the head removes some of the uglier evidence of the killing required to sustain human life. And in fact, some instances of developed cuisines do go to extraordinary lengths to remove not only meat but also other foods from their original condition, such as by chopping and stewing or molding or hiding in dough casings such as ravioli or won tons. It would be premature, however, to conclude that *fine dining* is distinguished from *brute eating* by the degree of unrecognizability of its objects or their remove from the apparent natural state in which they lived. Indeed, the dramatic opposite is the case. Consider the elaborate dressings of suckling pigs and boar heads, or the displays of

meats stuffed back into skins that graced the medieval dining table. Indeed, one can discover within those same categories of foods that initially disgust and repel, both the distancing of the disgusting and repellent qualities to make the food palatable, and the cultivating of the disgust and repulsion into a form of deliberate and purposeful dining.<sup>18</sup> Items that disgust at first may be transformed into foods that we savor—for the very qualities that initially repel.

Consider objects with tastes that offend the senses at first, very hot spices and peppers, which burn, and alcohol, which sickens. All of these substances one can learn to like through practice and maturity (for the tongue and its receptors develop into adulthood), and once these tastes are cultivated, substances without them appear bland. Sometimes such tastes are part of one's home cuisine, other times they are cultivated as gustatory fashions change.

These examples represent foods the very tastes of which must be overcome and then cultivated; but those tastes represent only themselves, as it were. They do not have any additional meaning that may be repugnant. But certain foods both vegetable and animal come packaged with toxins or repellent substances that need to be washed away to make the food edible, and the tastes of these substances mean danger or foulness. At the same time, sophisticated preparation often deliberately retains some of the noxious substances. In his *Grande Dictionnaire de Cuisine*, Alexandre Dumas asserts that kidneys are at their best when they are prepared so that a whiff of urine flavor remains in them.<sup>19</sup> In this case, something one would gag to drink is retained as flavoring—but only for the kidney, not for any other meat. It is a reminder of the origin of the food that stays within its very taste. Similarly, gamy meat harbors a flavor of decay that renders it stronger and more pungent.<sup>20</sup> In both these cases, it is not only that the taste initially disgusts, but that it signals the presence of things that have a repugnant meaning: waste and death. Yet, the most sophisticated mode of preparation is one that retains rather than expunges the sense qualities that remind the diner of the borderline state of the food.

Perhaps the most notorious example in this category is *fugu*, the puffer fish, so poisonous that in Japan, where it is commonly eaten, only a licensed chef who knows what organs to remove

and how to get rid of the toxins is permitted to prepare it. Yet reportedly, the most sophisticated diner is also the one prepared to risk the most to savor the taste of *fugu*, for by request enough of the neurotoxin can be left in the fish that the diners' lips and tongue are slightly numbed, reminding them of the presence of danger and death. (And sometimes overwhelming them, for this is a dangerous meal and every year people die from eating *fugu*.)

Some foods are substances so alien that they seem to represent a category that simply should not be consumed. Insects, which in swarms are commonly featured on lists of disgusting items,<sup>21</sup> are quite nourishing and are eaten in many parts of the world. To others, it is nearly impossible to imagine putting them into one's mouth. These differences in eating habits are usually just noted as varieties of cultural practice, but this overlooks something very interesting: Disgusting foods do not appear only in the diet of the Other. We all have categories such as these that we do eat, foods that we recoil from or treat very cautiously in nature that we learn to consume quite readily. That which is disgusting is not just that which other people eat; it appears on our own tables, transformed into the delicious. (Of course, once this transformation occurs it is hard to recall the initial disgust, which is why we ordinarily consider only unfamiliar foods disgusting.)

Perhaps the most interesting conversion of the repellent or disgusting to the delectable occurs when the presentation of foods mimics them in life, for it is then that the attentive eater can hardly fail to notice his participation in a death-dealing activity. In times past, the heads of animals have been considered delicacies and have been brought to the table prepared for eating, but still in their original containers, perhaps decorated or even bejeweled. This taste has passed in North America, though we still carve whole fowl at the table, which are quite recognizable even without their wattles and claws. Though we now often remove the heads and tails of fish, we can buy fish platters that thoughtfully trace heads and tail fins in their design so that the succulent middle can be placed between. All of these devices remind us of the original state of what we eat. Although this reminder often goes unnoticed, at times our realization is enhanced to a point that achieves a

parallel with sublime experience, and sometimes it lapses into horror. Here are two examples.

Richard Gordon Smith was an Englishman who lived in Japan in the early years of the twentieth century. He recounts a meal he requested in a remote part of that country, where he asked the cook at an inn to prepare a carp in the traditional way reserved for the nobility. Delighted at the request, the cook prepared a live fish, still gasping on the plate, surrounded with tasteful symbolic decorations that mimicked the look of the bottom of a sandy ocean. At first it did not occur to Gordon Smith that the fish had already been readied for eating; he writes: "The dish was really pretty in spite of the gasping fish which, however, showed no pain, and there was not a sign of blood or a cut." But the artistry of the chef was only revealed when he dribbled a little soy sauce into the fish's eye:

The effect was not instantaneous: it took a full two minutes as the cook sat over him, chopsticks in hand. All of a sudden and to my unutterable astonishment, the fish gave a convulsive gasp, flicked its tail and flung the whole of its skin on one side of its body over, exposing the underneath of the stomach parts, skinned; the back was cut into pieces about an inch square and a quarter of an inch thick, ready for pulling out and eating. Never in my life have I seen a more barbarous or cruel thing—not even the scenes at Spanish bull fights. Egawa [Smith's Japanese companion] is a delicate-stomached person and as he could eat none, neither could I. It would be simply like taking bites out of a large live fish. I took the knife from my belt and immediately separated the fish's neck vertebrae, much to the cook's astonishment and perhaps disgust.<sup>22</sup>

I wonder if this meal is markedly more cruel than any other. The startling revelation of the flayed body aside, Gordon Smith's revulsion seems to be chiefly a matter of timing. He was invited to eat a being whose life had not yet expired, but had the fish been killed just minutes earlier, the collision of life and death would not have occurred to him. And yet it would have lingered there in the very fresh taste of the recently killed fish. The freshness of fish, the agedness of gamy meat: both announce themselves *in their very tastes* to the reflective diner. (Perhaps Gordon Smith would have been comforted by



Roland Barthes's suggestion that such meals are memorials of sorts: "If Japanese cooking is always performed in front of the eventual diner (a fundamental feature of this cuisine), this is probably because it is important to consecrate by spectacle the death of what is being honored."<sup>23</sup>

My final example also represents the recreation of a meal that is now uncommon and that formerly was prepared only for the elite of a culture. When President François Mitterand knew that he was dying, he resolved to finish his mortal days by eating one final meal that summed up the best that can be presented to the senses. The centerpiece of that meal was ortolan, a small warbler, a migratory wild bird, which is now prohibited by French law from the table. It is said to represent the soul of France, and consuming it is a sin. But Mitterand prevailed in his last wish and served a remarkable meal to more than thirty guests.

The tiny birds are caught in the wild and kept in the dark to fatten. When ready, they are drowned in Armagnac brandy and plucked. They are roasted and served whole, wings and legs tucked in, eyes open. They are brought to the table straight from the fire, and one must consume the entire bird. The diner traditionally eats them with a large linen napkin draped over his head. The napkin traps the aroma of the dish, even as it hides the shame of the feast from the eyes of God.

Mitterand's last meal was re-created and consumed by a curious American writer, Michael Paterniti. Here is his description of eating ortolan:

Here's what I taste: Yes, quidbits of meat and organs; the succulent, tiny strands of flesh between the ribs and tail. I put inside myself the last flowered bit of air and Armagnac in its lungs, the body of rainwater and berries. In there, too, is the ocean and Africa and the dip and plunge in a high wind. And the heart that bursts between my teeth.

It takes time. I'm forced to chew and chew again and again, for what seems like three days. And what happens after chewing for this long—as the mouth full of taste buds and glands does its work—is that I fall into a trance. I don't taste anything anymore, cease to exist as anything but taste itself.

And that's where I want to stay—but then can't because the sweetness of the bird is turning slightly bitter and the bones have announced themselves. When I

think about forcing them down my throat, a wave of nausea passes through me. And that's when, with great difficulty, I swallow everything.<sup>24</sup>

Both these examples involve meals that virtually force the diner to contemplate the sacrifice of his or her dinner. This suggests that part of the experience of this kind of a meal involves an awareness, however underground, of the presence of death amid the continuance of one's own life. And it seems to me most improbable to account for the development of such cuisine simply in terms of the search for a really good taste pleasure. It is better understood as an aesthetic transformation of an aversion into a pleasure—the disgusting into the delicious. Admittedly, such insights are not always very ready to consciousness. Other habits of mind, including the purely practical demands of eating, form insulating layers over these matters, a factor that reminds us of the intensely functional circumstances that remain to distinguish even the most *recherché* foods from artworks.

Animals that qualify as sublime, such as the tiger, the panther, and the rhinoceros, are fearsome precisely because they might attack, kill, and eat *us*. The power relation is reversed when we are the eaters, and one of the privileges of being at the top of the food chain is that we rarely must defend ourselves against becoming another creature's meal. Yet we are certainly edible, and we are as mortal as any other living being. Preparation that foregrounds an awareness of the life and death of our meal does not arouse fear for our own safety, but it prompts meditation on the cycles of life and death that we all undergo by forcing reflection on the very moment where we participate in that cycle. The gasping carp puts us in the presence of death. The fragrances that summon up the life of the ortolan are compressed into its taste, a taste that is both nauseously difficult and ecstatically delectable. It would reach neither extreme were it not for one's intense, bodily awareness of this moment when a life and a death are commemorated in a taste.<sup>25</sup>

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1. The alleged subjectivity of taste is examined at length in chapter 3 of my book *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Cornell University Press, 1999).

2. Jean-Anselme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste* (1825), trans. M. F. K. Fisher (New York: Hermitage Press, 1949); David Prall, *Aesthetic Judgment* (New York: Crowell, 1929); Kevin Sweeney, "Alice's Discriminating Palate," *Philosophy and Literature* 23 (1999); Elizabeth Telfer, *Food for Thought* (London: Routledge, 1996).

3. In *Making Sense of Taste* I elaborate these roles with the use of Nelson Goodman's symbol systems from *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976).

4. This list fits into the more comprehensive rosters of generally disgusting objects compiled by theorists such as William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Harvard University Press, 1997) and Aurel Kolnai, *Disgust* ("Der Ekel," *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* 10 (1929)).

5. T. Sarah Peterson, *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking* (Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 96.

6. Noël Carroll identifies fear and disgust as the two primary emotions of art horror in *The Philosophy of Horror: Or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Unlike some other theorists of horror, Carroll insists that appreciative disgust remains an aversion, which is the price the audience pays for the pleasure of discovery as the plot unfolds.

7. Indifference is important because Burke rejects the idea that pleasure comes about only as the alleviation of a preexisting discomfort, or that pain is the removal of pleasure.

8. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), ed. James T. Boulton (University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), p. 39. "Delight" is the term Burke uses to convey the positive magnetism of the sublime despite its pain; Kant calls this phenomenon "negative pleasure," and the oxymoron he chooses sums up the paradox of aversion.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 134–145. See also Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Oxford University Press), chap. 6.

10. Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 40.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

14. Kenneth Ames, *Death in the Dining Room* (Temple University Press, 1982). See also chap. 5 of *Making Sense of Taste*.

15. Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p. 13.

16. Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York: Penguin, 1991), pp. 3–4.

17. Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), p. 347.

18. Items in the second category, tastes that disgust because of surfeit, seem different from the others, all of which permit scope for the fourth conversion. Surfeit indicates an abuse of taste that requires scaling back rather than exploitation. However, as Scott Waltz pointed out to me, phenomena such as pepper or pie eating contests arguably exploit surfeit for its own pleasures.

19. Alexandre Dumas, *Dumas on Food: Selections from Le Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine*, trans. Alan and Jane Davidson (London: Folio Society, 1978), p. 152.

20. Aurel Kolnai speculates that exaggeration of flavors that results in the "high taste" (*haut goût*) of gamy meat may be a model for the development of an "eroticism of disgust" both literal and aesthetic. See *Disgust*.

21. See Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, chap. 3.

22. Mark Meli drew this account to my attention. Richard Gordon Smith, *Travels in the Land of the Gods: The Japan Diaries of Richard Gordon Smith*, ed. Victoria Manthorpe (New York: Prentice Hall, 1986), p. 205. This part of the diary is from 1906/1907.

23. Roland Barthes, *The Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (1970) (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 20.

24. Michael Paterniti, "The Last Meal," *Esquire* 129, no. 5 (May 1998): 117.

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