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The Food of the Gods

Ihab Hassan

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Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

—Jesus in Revelation (3:20)

We pound the grain, we bale it out.

We sift, we tread,

We wash it — soak, soak;

We boil it all steamy . . .

As soon as the smell rises

God on high is very pleased:

"What smell is this, so strong and good?"

—"Sheng Min," *The Book of Odes* (Chou Period)

All things move or travel, rocks, atoms, stars. But everything that lives, eats. Why? Must swallowing, grotesque act, contain the dire mystery of animal existence? "No beast is a cook," Boswell remarked, but men, like beasts, may eat their kind. They are truly omnivorous, and correspondingly ambiguous in everything they achieve.

Chemists, physicists, biologists, anatomists, dietitians, chefs, your mother and mine, all have their answer. The laws of thermodynamics, of evolution, of pleasure or love, apply. The food chain rises, with photosynthesis, from the ocean floor to the sun. Food is energy. Even the gods eat to maintain their divinity. (That manna in the desert, is it their garbage?) Food is primal, like fire or light.

Food is primal, fundamental, though poor Antonin Artaud, incandescent madman, couldn't

bear the indignity of evacuation. He was not alone. In both real and mock horror, Jonathan Swift cried in a love poem: “Celia shits.” It’s a law of life: what defiles goes out, not in. Anyway, lips, teeth, tongue, throat, esophagus, stomach, duodenum, ileum, cecum, colon, rectum, anus are all in place. Excrement is entropy — but not to a starving dog in Nepal or rice sprouts in a Japanese paddy. And garbage, a character in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* genially argues, incited people to build their civilizations in self-defense — not the other way around. Still, the ascent from matter to, yes, spirit, continues. Everything material rises to converge in mind.

Energy circulates. “Start with the sun,” D. H. Lawrence concludes in *Apocalypse*, “and the rest will slowly, slowly happen.” But why, I wonder, start with a middling, proximate star? The earth ploughs continually through the dust of the universe, and so feeds our dreams.

Food is physical but imaginary too, like lovemaking. Food is light or feces, but also sacred, spiritual like flesh, our portable temple. The chemistry, biology, gastronomy, ethic, esthetic, theology, or *génésiq*ue — that sixth, synesthetic sense postulated by Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin — may be indistinguishable in the longest perspective, where the actual and the possible meet.

In the beginning, God served the universe to itself. Plato, in the *Timaeus*, would have us believe that the Creator — the Demiurge, he called him — concocted the cosmos in a cooking bowl. After charging the earliest gods to “beget living creatures, and give them food and make them grow, and receive them again in death,” the Demiurge “once more into the cup in which he had previously mingled the soul of the universe . . . poured the remains of the elements, and mingled them in much the same manner.”

Cooking as metaphor of creation, food and death from the start. But Plato does not leave it at that. He proceeds minutely to specify various “juices, concerning the affections peculiar to the tongue.” He describes the diverse functions of the digestive tract. And ever the watchful puritan, he warns against “insatiable gluttony,” which might make “the whole [human] race an enemy, to philosophy and culture, and rebellious against the divinest element within us.” Still, “food” and “motion” remain his key metaphors for nurturing the higher aspects of the soul.

How plain, earthy, commensal, Jesus seems by comparison, when he stands at the door (in my epigraph), offering to eat with anyone hungry to hear. How modest in the spirit’s fare when he teaches his disciples to pray: “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). And how scandalous (to the incredulous mind) when he reaffirms the ancient miracle of transubstantiation:

And as they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed and brake it, and gave it to them, and said, Take, eat: this is my body.

And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it.

And he said unto them, This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many. (Mark 14:22-4)

Everything has a history, even mystery. In 1215, Pope Innocent III decreed transubstantiation, once a Gnostic heresy, Christian doctrine. The Eucharist blurs the literal and symbolic in the act of ingesting God. Call it a banquet of immortality, at once mundane and mystical; call it divinity passing through the guts. Jesus repeats himself on the subject:

[V]erily, I say unto you, except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoso eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, has eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, dwells in me, and I in him. (John 6:53-6)

To prepare for this celestial repast, Christians fast, give alms, prove their desert. They empty themselves of tainted victuals to receive heavenly nourishment. They deny themselves food, the staple of one life, for the promise of another and, like Muslims at Ramadan, feel hugely virtuous, if irritable. Then they break the fast. They rediscover friendship or love (*agape*) in communion, as did the disciples at the Last Supper — and doesn't this make the betrayal of Judas Iscariot all the more vile, all the more poignant?

But this communion was never innocent of violence, never impervious to horror. Aztecs “husked” the human heart, like a corncob from its sheath, in their sacrifices. St. Ignatius begged to become “the food of the beasts”: “I am God's wheat,” he cried, “and the teeth of the beasts shall grind me so that I will be a pure bread of Christ” (Romans 4:1). And Catherine of Siena put it even more gruesomely: “The immaculate Lamb is food, table, and servant. . . . And the table is pierced with veins, which run with blood. . . . [W]hen the [spirit] has drunk, it spits up the blood on the heads of its brothers . . . and is thus like Christ.” Indeed, master spirits can thirst for blood; and all of us cook, carve, *live* on the edge of a sharpened knife.

Food, festival, spirit, violence, the sacred: they are all in deepest time and everywhere complicit. The interdictions of certain foods in Hindu, Judaic, Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic religions may have pragmatic consequences — avoiding, say, trichinosis — but their roots in older myths and rituals are undeniable. A weird power, now proscriptive, now prescriptive, sometimes menacing, more often joyous, moves through time and food.

And so, as Edouard de Pomiane reminds us, the *Galette des Rois* reverts to the Roman Saturnalia; at Easter, Russians exchange hard-boiled eggs, saying “*Kristós Voskrése*” (Christ is risen); and on Good Friday, even unbelievers in France eat *morue* (smoked cod). In Burma, Mongolia, China, Tibet, men divine by chicken bones. In the ziggurats of ancient Ur, the king's priests, “elevated cooks,” prepared votive animals that the god's icons could “consume” at a glance; “at least in origin, temples are public kitchens,” Michael Symons insists in *The Pudding That Took a Thousand Cooks*. And in old Athens, cockfights became part of phallic and orgiastic spectacles, featuring Dionysos in his theater, gorgeously clad.

Fertility? Since prehistoric times, sacrificial feasts insured procreation, the fertility of the vegetal, animal, and human worlds. “Because food is the human's

most fundamental resource,” Peter Farb and George Armelagos argue, “offering food or abstaining from it are symbolic ways in all societies of showing devotion to supernatural powers.” Do we not still fling rice like confetti at married couples as we speed them on their honeymoon? Did not the priests of Min — the god had a long, thin, elegant phallus — like Egyptian housewives today, serve lettuce to stimulate the virility of men? And in European folk customs, was not impotence traditionally cured, according to Margaret Visser, “by a hilarious, bawdy salting of the disobliging member by a crowd of women”?

Rice, lettuce, salt? Yes, and oysters, carrot tops, tiger testicles, mandrake roots . . . poppycock! And what about that original apple in Eden, which brought sexual shame in a bite? The list of aphrodisiacs, anaphrodisiacs, stimulants, soporifics, hallucinogens, foods of every kind that calm or prod, deaden or madden, the mind — that list is endless, and reaches back to the first primate, perhaps first zoon, seeking to assuage some pain with a gulp. For, as we all tacitly know, in assimilation there is also acquisition of immaterial qualities — hence cannibalism. And there lies both the creation and maintenance of a moral order.

Too abstract? Let’s say we eat to become what we want, or at least to safeguard our small space in this very strange and perilous place, the universe. And so food becomes the guarantor not only of our personal affections — “Eat!” Mother cries — but also of our pieties, our cultures, our arts.

Did Rome fall with a slow, leaden crash because Claudius, Nero, Caligula, like subsequent emperors, imbibed inordinate quantities of lead from pewter plates and flasks? Never mind. It is enough to know that food drives history as symbol and as substance, as meaning and as edible matter — food is an intellectual thing.

Proust’s tea cake, the famous *madeleine*, opens for him all the gates of memory and brings him to an aesthetic and spiritual apprehension, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, larger than his own, labyrinthine, endlessly resonant past. But your common cook is no stranger to succulent symbols and familiar sentiments: a burned chop can be an expression of spite. Gertrude Stein tells this anecdote about her French cook, H el ene, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*:

H el ene had her opinions, she did not for instance like Matisse. She said a frenchman [sic] should not stay unexpectedly to a meal particularly if he asked the servant beforehand what there was for dinner. She said foreigners had a perfect right to do these things but not a frenchman and Matisse had once done it. So when Miss Stein said to her, Monsieur Matisse is staying for dinner this evening, she would say, in that case I will not make an omelette but fry the eggs. It takes the same number of eggs and the same amount of butter but it shows less respect, and he will understand.

Food represents social status; a meal can be a metaphor for class as well as individual identity; and even fast-food places have their symbols and rituals under the sign of the Golden Arches, degraded as these may be. Dining out is

a personal manifesto as well as a culinary experience. We go to this restaurant or that, choose this table, this course, this wine instead of another, in a riot of semiotic declarations: to flaunt our wealth, power, taste, knowledge, to forge commercial or family alliances, to entertain ourselves or discharge obligations, to court, celebrate, announce. . . . The food, Symons says, is the form that our desire to share takes — hence “the key culinary virtue becomes generosity.” The food, I would insist, is the equivocal impulse of human life to transcend itself, transcend its “material base” — hapless, Marxist phrase — in spiritual pleasures such as love or art, transcend itself even when other sensual pleasures root us to this world. The impulse, let us admit it, is conflictual, mixed.

The *gourmand* at a fine table, de Pomiane asserts, is in harmony with his inner and outer world. It is an insight about an idealized state, too cheerful, if not self-serving, to compel general assent. Still, food, we have seen, engages spirit at every turn, and even reconciles human beings to their mortality, as at wakes. And, of course, it engages art — as in *Finnegans Wake*?

Brillat-Savarin fancied a tenth Muse, Gastréa. He thought all the arts — and sciences too — conspired to heighten the sense of taste. Again, the great cook strains his credibility. But surely he was astute to perceive that the pleasures of the table sublimate themselves into refinements of every kind. See him take a flight of nineteenth-century gallantry:

Nothing is more agreeable to look at than a pretty gourmande in full battle-dress: her napkin is tucked in most sensibly; one of her hands lies on the table; the other carries elegantly carved little morsels to her mouth, or perhaps a partridge wing on which she nibbles; her eyes shine, her lips are soft and moist, her conversation is pleasant, and all her gestures are full of grace; she does not hide that vein of coquetry which women show in everything they do. With so much in her favor, she is utterly irresistible, and Cato the Censor himself would be moved by her.

Roland Barthes, who was more concerned with the pleasures of the text than of the table, nonetheless wrote a long commentary on the learned and lyrical chef. Barthes argued that a “*luisance*,” a nimbus or sheen, irradiates a repast, carrying its light, synesthetically, to other senses and other arts. He speculated that appetite, *gourmandise*, may derive from dream, hallucination sometimes, often from memory, giving rise to “*une imagination prédictive*.” He went farther, postulating “*une sorte de mysticisme du plaisir*.”

That’s poststructuralist sophistication, to which I prefer to add a dash of English-language sense before chewing. In any case, I find precedents to Barthes in ancient Rome or medieval Baghdad. In the tenth century, the Caliph Mustafki expected his guests to comment on his banquets in verse. The poet Ibn al-Mu’tazz obliged, describing an *hors d’oeuvre*:

Here capers grace a sauce vermillion
Whose fragrant odors to the soul are blown . . .
Here pungent garlic meets the eager sight
And whets with savor sharp the appetite,

While olives turn to shadowed night the day,
And salted fish in slices rims the tray . . .

The point is clear, and Leon R. Kass makes it even clearer in his persuasive work, *The Hungry Soul*, which concludes: “the souls of the hungry acquire new hungers of their own, and [cry] for more than nourishment.”

All that is history, you say. Can recovering the “deeper meaning of eating,” as Kass believes, really “help cure our spiritual anorexia” in an age of extremity, in famine as in surfeit? I doubt the general cure but offer some instances of calmer, healing joys.

In 1987, my wife, Sally Hassan, and I visited Australia for the first time. Never mind Crocodile Dundee, we wanted to see Gay Bilson, chef and owner of the Berowra Waters Inn. If you are flush, you take an eight-seater seaplane from Rose Bay, in Sydney Harbor, and fly low over the North Shore: clear, yellow, rippling sand beaches, limpid waters shading from aqua to turquoise to ultramarine, with great swathes of gum forests in the background, dark, blue-hazed, and just menacing enough to recall the unappeasable power of the continent. The plane will land you at the restaurant dock. Otherwise, you must drive for an hour through the cluttered exurbs — garish gas stations, spangled, secondhand car dealers, an edgy four-lane highway, strung out with spiteful stop lights — till you reach Ku-ring-gai National Park. One turn, then another, and you park on a rutted road by an inlet of the Hawkesbury River. You step gingerly down some board steps and wait for the jaunty, restaurant launch to fetch you. Either way, as Gay Bilson will say, “it’s a commitment.” But she will always be there, at the top of the spare, modernist stairway, to greet you with a warm, shy smile. It’s part of *her* commitment.

The building is a long, glass box with plain, scrubbed wood floor, wide louvers like mirror slats, square angles and clean lines everywhere, a few, fine paintings. Say, it’s lunch. You sit at your table and look at the steep hill, curtained with eucalyptus, across the narrow Waters. At first, you think: this is a bit glum. Then you notice the play of shadow on the leaves, skipping sunlight on the cove, the clouds, a billowing, shifting canopy above. You notice the silence, deeper than muted talk or the soft ring of silverware. You sense the power, more absence than presence but power still, and you think: this is where gods dwell, like Ayers Rock, like Delphi or Thebes.

You sit at the table and eat. No fuss, just unblended bliss, or so it seems. Because the experience is primary, the food appears simple. Of course it is not, and yet it is. There is a timeless integrity on every plate that no art can conceal. “It’s food for grownups,” Gay Bilson says in a voice like rustling grain. I am no food writer, and will not sing of this braised tuna with garlic cloves and fried eggplant or that crumbed pig’s ear with sautéed sweetbreads. I will only witness, avow.

Berowra Waters closed in 1995 — to the uproar in the papers, Gay Bilson responded: “It’s only a restaurant, for God’s sake.” She moved to the Bennelong Restaurant in the Sydney Opera House. She moved on from there in 1998 to become restaurateur at large. Who is she in our spiritual and culinary scheme?

Gay Bilson: cropped blond (sometimes red-brown) hair, slate eyes, a shy smile that can turn sad, and withal a fierce intelligence, suffusing her compact frame. It is a *moral* intelligence, moral as much as epicurean. Gay Bilson: a puritan no less than an aesthete, with an unexpected taste for funk, egalitarian yet exacting to the bone. She seems to have read all the books, seen all the paintings, attended all the plays; she listens endlessly to music, which she compares — say, Giorgio Batistelli's *Experimentum Mundi* — arcanelly to food. She knows everyone and inhabits a very private, proud, and vulnerable place. And she harbors a harsh, overconscientious streak. Is it guilt or anger or some secret, spiritual exigency? I know only she is a woman of character, no, a woman of both character and textured temperament — nearly a contradiction.

The *Bulletin*, an Australian weekly, listed her among “Australia’s 10 Most Creative Minds.” (Well, they have media hype Down Under too.) There, the architect Glenn Murcutt writes: “[Gay Bilson] has produced for Australia a cultural layer that has helped make this country a phenomenal place to be in.” (Well, Australians still need to affirm their national identity.) You would expect no less from a woman who says: “If you think about food continually, you might become a great chef, possibly the very best in the world. But you might also become a great bore to people who don’t speak the same food language.” And you would expect no less from a woman who created a banquet around body parts, in conjunction with a major exhibition of Surrealism — a young girl emerged from a tubful of grapes and figs for dessert. This is how Bilson describes the tripes “tablecloth,” over forty meters long and one meter wide:

It was for a table which we would assemble in a room at the National Gallery in Canberra in order to serve a banquet to 80 people who had attended a Symposium on Gastronomy in 1993. More correctly, it was a tablecloth of beef stomachs which is what we bought over the three months before the dinner: whole, uncleaned stomachs, a lesson in physiology, the judge’s cap of honeycomb tripes the least of the four distinct pockets. . . .

This was not a cloth to be eaten off or to be eaten. It was a visual announcement of the dinner’s intention (although this was withheld until the end) which was to explore the body as meat, flesh turned into food. The menu read Stomach/Egg/Flesh/Bone/Skin/Blood/Heart/Milk/Fruit. It was illustrated only with one of Fiona Hall’s Morality Dolls, Gluttony.

This cloth, grotesque to some, was a tablescape of great textural beauty, of varying colors from dirty white through browns to black, large and long enough to have real presence, and as undulating in its folds and pleats as our perception of a lunar landscape, heavy with craters and rolling hills. It was an idea which took such time and imaginative work to realize, was placed on the table and seen for 10 minutes, and then rolled away and placed in the gallery’s waste disposal bins. . . .

The tripes tablecloth was, for me at least, a troubling yet powerful metaphor for all that the meal . . . might be.

Here, it seems to me, grossest matter turns into mind even more than into sense. But I would not say the same about the tripe chapter in Rabelais’s *Gar-*

gantua and Pantagruel. There, we may recall, Gargamelle, great with Gargantua, and refusing to heed the warning of her good man, Grandgousier, devours “sixteen quarters, two bushels, and six pecks” of tripe, leading the author to exclaim: “Oh, what fine faecal matter to swell up inside her!”

On an earlier occasion, in 1990, at the Fifth Symposium of Australian Gastronomy, held at St. Francis Xavier Seminary in the Adelaide foothills, Gay Bilson participated in the closing meal, a Last Supper, recreated as literally as possible by Cheong Liew and Phillip Searle. Michael Symons quoted the Russian existential theologian, Nicolas Berdyaev: “My own bread is only a material question, but my neighbor’s bread is a spiritual question.” And on a later occasion, Bilson’s own event at the 1998 Adelaide International Arts Festival was entitled “Loaves and Fishes,” “an entirely secular event which does not argue with the sacred.” Again, in her words:

It is a response to the festival’s theme and in particular a response to the possibilities of the site: the water of the Torrens and the bank, a public space. The fish are to be grilled over braziers on a barge, not in pretense of fishing, but because the water will act as a gentle proscenium arch and allow a sense of separation. Only lamps will light the work. Rowers will bring baskets of fish to the shore where the bread is waiting. We will distribute the food to those who have bowls. The bowls, simple, unglazed but marked for the event, need to be purchased but the cost is a gesture, only \$5 which simply covers their production cost. They belong to the eaters. *The commercial transaction has been shifted from the food.* The labor is given, and there will be music by the Adelaide Chamber singers. Call it a grace if you like.

“Loaves and Fishes” has nothing and everything to do with a New Testament story.

This language may be secular, but it is hardly unspiritual, though it shades less readily into theology than into art. Chefs are cooks, yes, but also multimedia artists, and even traditional artists sometimes look to food to embody their craft. That is why, in 1994, Anya Gollacio painted the walls of the Karten Schubert Gallery in London with chocolate. That is why Bobby Baker’s “Kitchen Show” was part of the Adelaide Arts Festival in 1992. That is why the works of chef, artist, and magus Phillip Searle, together with Michael Symons, Janni Kyritsis, Tim Park Poy, Alicia Rios, and many others, become as much edible as conceptual art, memorable sometimes in the social context — say, of a Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras — memorable more often as performances in a museum without walls. And indeed, that is why, in 1998, the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Sydney had a full exhibition called “Eat!”, with work by Joseph Beuys, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Majima, Hany Armanious, and many Australian artists.

All right, do not call it art. Call it, as Gay Bilson does, “dalliance with imagination in that world of sensuality and intellect in which the eye, the tongue, the belly, and the brain create new ‘dishes’ together.” Such dalliance, I add, can become like manna, feeding — in a Judeo-Christian conceit — those

who cannot live by bread alone. Not even in Australia, a robustly secular and immigrant culture, which is why I take it for example.

“Food, food, food!” latter-day saints and eternal philistines may cry, “it’s just grub, isn’t it? just an adjunct to survival, pleasure-coated.” But in human beings, pleasure is no small matter. Plato knew this, enough to banish it almost from his Republic. And Freud knew that pleasure builds both civilization and its discontents. It claims “great Eros” as ally, though in the end, as he mooted in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, it “seems actually to serve the death instinct.” Here it is again, in its darkness, this death instinct, primal homeostasis that stalks pleasure, stalks spirit throughout. Should we not, then, ask: are not pleasures of the table, like those of the bed, sometimes complicit in duskier realms? Are they wholly foreign to that melancholy land where, as Keats would have it, “aching Pleasure” turns “to Poison while the bee-mouth sips”? And if so, can pleasure also spiritualize, just as death continually spiritualizes, our brute existence?

I would not assert, as Nietzsche did — he philosophized with a hammer — that hedonism, like masochism, is a “signpost to nihilism.” I have slowly come to trust my own pleasures tolerably. But I know that human beings live by contraries. We brutalize and spiritualize ourselves by terror as we do by pleasure. We defecate in fright, raise flying buttresses in holy dread. In love, we turn into Circe’s swine or imagine Beatrice in Heaven. But let us give pleasure — pleasure of the table too — its due. William Wordsworth, Romantic effusions aside, did not err in his homage “to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves.” Pleasure is no small matter, however frenzied (Plato, Longinus) or night-bred (Freud, Sade).

Lionel Trilling worried. He worried about the “fate of pleasure” when “the high extruded segment” of modern culture abets “an experiment in negative transcendence of the human.” He worried, in short, that an “unillusioned militancy of spirit” might tip decisively the balance of our instincts in favor of destructive impulses. Would he have worried, albeit differently, at the riot of hedonism in our postmodern condition — say, an orgiastic performance by Madonna? Say, a concert of gangsta rap?

The “unillusioned militancy of spirit” in postmodern times comes from cultural terrorists and totalitarians, ideologues of every stripe. But it is not certain that postmodern literature (or art) still insists on “the energy of its desperation,” as Trilling thought in an earlier epoch; it is not certain that it still howls unconditionally for “more life” (Nietzsche). Kitsch and camp, play, parody, and self-reflexiveness — those hallmarks of postmodern culture — promise pleasures less exigent, pleasures altogether of a more frivolous kind. Certainly, they are not sublime in Kant’s sense, inducing more awe than pleasure, appealing to “a higher finality.”

My subject is still food, sometimes the food of the gods. And my point is that no pleasure, even that of a *soufflé Rothschild* or a Mars bar, can be wholly impervious to the underside of the human psyche. There, in that dark underside, spiritual impulses also stir. (*Pace* Rabelais.) Gay Bilson knows it: “It is

the work of cookery in the hands of the alchemical few which allows us this intimation of the sublime worth of the material, something which is so gloriously, so devastatingly dependent on destruction. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.”

Perhaps all this is gluttony garbed in metaphysics. If so, it is a metaphysics felt in the gut and shared among friends. Or call it a spiritual gluttony, with a humanist edge.

I admitted to trusting my pleasures tolerably. That is why dining out, over the years, may have cost me more dollars than accumulating a fair personal library, which overflows several rooms. That is also why I may count more friends among chefs and waiters than among intellectuals — or academics who write articles entitled “Hunger and Ideology,” “Eating Out: Voluptuousness of Dessert,” “A Place at the Counter: The Onus of Oneness,” “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” or “Dining Out: The Hyperreality of Appetite.” I would rather read a menu. In any case, great chefs are often intelligent, erudite. Look at their books, look beyond those gorgeous, succulent colored photos, meant to water the mouth. So much wit, fantasy, humor there, so much mindfulness. And the mindfulness is *generous*, though it aspires to recognition, even commercial success — it means to please and to celebrate.

Is it Saturday night? See them crowd into a bar, a bistro, an upscale restaurant, a temple of gastronomy — Charlie Trotter’s, say? With shouts or whispers, they celebrate: we are here, we are alive, we are mortals. That’s a sound high as prayer, deep as mourning, a small roar on the other side of ubiquitous silence. And is it not why we sometimes mutter grace at a table, in thanks as well as joy?

Forget spirit, if you must. Sitting down to a fine, ordered table is an experience in “*luxe, calme, et volupté*” (Baudelaire), the experience, in microcosm, of a harmonious universe. Or at least the illusion of that experience. Who has not felt it on *some* occasion, at a family meal or in Taillevent? Certainly, pleasures vary, and no one knows how to give them legitimacy beyond human need. (Some say therein lies the loneliness of every heart.) But all may point, beyond that famous pleasure principle, to a mystery more luminous than night.

Let us count, at least, the food of the gods, which they have stingily bestowed on mortals, among the causes of gratified desire, its lineaments sometimes as blessed as any Blake glimpsed on a human face.