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Incensed

Food Smells and Ethnic Tension

What have we here? a man or a fish? dead or alive? A fish: he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; a kind of not of the newest Poor-John. A strange fish! Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver: there would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man.

—Trinculo, upon seeing Caliban, Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act II, Scene II

The Caliban of the Senses

The history of food has largely been written as the history of taste, at the expense of the other senses. Whereas we associate the sense of taste with cultivation and choice, smells inspire visceral feelings of pleasure or revulsion. Ignoring the nose, culinary history has emphasized the mouth's gustatory explorations. The bold explorer finds a new flavor in a foreign bazaar; the chowhound finds the last unknown fish taco stand in San Diego. Smell, however, enjoys a less heroic role as the sense that registers our distaste with the foreign. Soaring "above" a figurative menu of physical sensations, the diner experiences the pleasures of taste herself: the ability to choose, *gustibus non disputandum est*, to decide what is of interest. One selects what goes in the mouth, but one cannot always choose what enters the nose. A British diplomat in Japan, toward the end of the nineteenth century, could comment only on the awful scent of their food; he declined to report on its taste.¹ Perhaps, he never got close enough to sample a dish.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant regarded smell as our most ignoble sense, a lingering vestige of our animal natures. Kant was not completely wrong about smell, which is much weaker in humans than it is in lower animals such as rats; in the course of our evolution, it became less and less important. And Kant's hierarchy is more or less what we all implicitly

believe, as we place the civilized above the animal. Smell is an uncultivated, flatulent Caliban when compared with the Prospero of vision: so authoritative in its ability to survey and thereby master the world. As a report from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute puts it, "Being civilized and human means, for one thing, that our lives are not ruled by smells. The social behavior of most animals is controlled by smells and other chemical signals."² Shakespeare's Caliban represents brute strength and a tendency to be driven by those instincts that the educated Prospero can control. When something touches me through my "least cultivated sense"—as low as an instinct—it also evokes my least cultivated, more animal responses.

And smell certainly seems to tap our worst instincts. The history of racism is full of complaints about the way that a particular group's cooking smells. Xenophobia, it would seem, is fueled by smell-based slurs. But in a world full of potential offenses (bad manners, bad religion, bad art), why obsess about food smells? Smell reminds us that sensation and physical experience are not simply about taste and pleasure but also about distaste. It summons up our prejudices and mocks our proposals to conquer them once and for all.

I have heard the possibly apocryphal story that Khrushchev couldn't stand the smell of the pork skins with black bean sauce that Chairman Mao loved to eat, and he said as much in public. This pronouncement allegedly was made during a famous meeting between the leaders of the world's largest Communist regimes, where polite, diplomatic intentions stood no chance against a smell's ability to affront. As this story has it, our will to come together along ideological lines, upon which civilization depends, is threatened by food smells—although the reader can be assured that the pig skins did not jeopardize Sino-Soviet relations. Even if the story turns out not to be true, its juxtaposition of high politics with a gut human reaction somehow rings true; yes, this is exactly what smells can do, replacing our diplomatic intentions with crude outbursts.

Smell of Hate: The *Foetor Judaicus*

The belief that Jewish bodies exude a foul odor, the *Foetor Judaicus*, was common among medieval Europeans. The *Foetor Judaicus* provides an excellent example of smell imagined as the sense registering distaste; it seems only natural to complain about someone's smell. The evil personality traits ascribed to Jews were assumed to relate to actual physical characteristics. It is worth noting that this belief parallels contemporary psychiatrists' linking of depression with brain chemistry or the homeopath's use of certain foods to treat physical ailments.

Despite its Latin name, the *Foetor Judaicus* was a belief held not only by educated elites but also by common people. A few scholars did provide excellent representations of it, however. The historian Eric Zafran has traced the belief, as articulated by the eighteenth-century writer Appellius, back to a medieval Arabic scholar named Abu Ma'shar. Ma'shar was not a theorist of anti-Semitism but rather a commentator on what Appellius called the Saturnine personality, which Appellius blamed for the degeneracy, and foul odor, of the Jew. Zafran writes,

The "stinking wind" mentioned by Abu Ma'shar was already in Roman times an established feature of the Saturnine personality. This belief in a Saturnine or melancholic odour, "foetidus," was later enlarged upon by Guido Bonatti who characterized it as "goatlike." Jews too, according to medieval belief, had a characteristic stench, the "*Foetor Judaicus*" which would only vanish upon baptism. Further this "Jewish odour" was also often described as goatlike.³

Jews fell under the astrological sign of the god Saturn. Interestingly, Saturn also consorted with pigs, as Jews were depicted as doing in engraved images called *Judensau*. Stench here symbolizes an entire personality type. Melancholia was not thought of as what we now call "depression" but as willful sloth, the refusal to become a participating member of society. Ironically, one stank from not working as much as one would stink from doing heavy lifting. Goats and Jews were seen as producing nothing and as living off the scraps, literal or figurative, that European Christian society cast off.

The crucial link between this olfactory Jewish personality and the Mao story is that an offensive smell is blamed for, and comes to symbolize, a barrier between people. Perhaps, this barrier is not really between East and West, or Christian and Jew, but between what we want to call civilization and barbarism. Civilization means comfort, familiarity, and to have it, we must first have that slippery term "culture." In its most literal meaning, culture is the cultivation of crops.

To be cultured is to be fed by a particular set of foodstuffs. As John Lanchester puts it in his novel *The Debt to Pleasure*, "For the Romans, a barbarian was someone who wore trousers, had a beard and ate butter."⁴ To smell wrong meant to have been fed wrong, to be beyond the bounds of the known, and thus to be a threat.

The association so often drawn between smell and barbarism could also explain the tradition of accusing recent immigrants of cooking disgusting food, as with Indians and Pakistanis in England, Algerians in France, Turks in Germany, or immigrant groups in America.

The Anxiety of Smell Differences

In his novel *Middlesex* Jeffrey Eugenides paints a scene from the first half of America's twentieth century: immigrants on a boat from Europe to Ellis Island identify one another not by sight but by smell. Garlic eaters bear the bulb's scent on their hands or produce it in their sweat. And all this in close, shipboard quarters:

They tried...to tolerate the smells. Passengers had brought on board all manner of spices and sweetmeats, tinned sardines, octopus in wine sauce, legs of lamb preserved with garlic cloves. In those days you could identify a person's nationality by smell. Lying on her back with eyes closed, Desdemona could detect the telltale oniony aroma of a Hungarian woman on her right, and the raw-meat smell of an Armenian on her left. (And they, in turn, could peg Desdemona as a Hellene by her aroma of garlic and yogurt.)⁵

Here is an olfactory version of the anxiety of small differences: while another person's odor is intolerable, we are also unhappy about being odor bearers ourselves. Any person still tied to the Old World through the scent of its cuisine is somehow not yet fully American. Eugenides's Desdemona realizes that she, like her shipmates, is ethnically marked. Thus, in the America that was then hypothesized as a melting pot, each element of the stew still bore a trace of its national origin. There was no American odor or odors, simply the desire not to be recognized by the scent of one's first home.

The Indian American writer S. Mitra Kalita gives us another example of olfactory fear. Growing up in West Windsor, New Jersey, in the 1970s and 1980s, Kalita describes dining with her parents in their home but concealing the aroma of their food by spraying air freshener before her non-Indian playmates came over. Like Eugenides's Desdemona, Kalita has implicitly hypothesized a deodorized American identity to which she can aspire. Civilization is identified here not with a particular smell but with the lack thereof.

This, in turn, brings up an interesting point: in a suburban environment such as Kalita's, smell is a carefully controlled phenomenon. Or, at least, it has been ever since the industry of deodorization boomed in the 1950s. The deodorized suburb can be contrasted against the tenement houses inhabited by many immigrants around the turn of the century, where odors from bodies, plumbing, laundry, and horses all mingled. In the mid-twentieth century American suburb, potential sources of odor are relatively under control: flowers, perfume, sweat from jogging, the smell of fresh-cut grass, and the smell of cooking. Food smells then become one of the primary mediums through which the Caliban of the senses reenters our lives. And the reverse is also true: in an increasingly deodorized world, olfactory experience is ever more closely identified with food.

Maimie Pinzer and the *Foetor Judaicus*

Other examples spring up from letters written by immigrants, the first by Maimie Pinzer, an early twentieth-century Jewish immigrant and onetime prostitute in Philadelphia. Similar to Desdemona and Kalita, Pinzer was a woman caught between the foodways of her ancestors and the desire to become American. In a 1911 letter to a friend, Pinzer wrote of her dislike of the smells made by her landlords' cooking:

I also objected to the very pungent odors that came up from the kitchen. They use garlic and onions and cabbage in their food, and I could not stand it, for it always permeated my room as well as the halls.⁶

Maimie's talk of permeation recalls the invasive quality of the sense of smell, the way it produces an experience of having been invaded. Her dislike, expressed in this fairly casual reference in a friendly note, tells a familiar story of American immigration. Maimie writes of her apartment, newly rented from the offensive garlic eaters:

My chief objection to the place was that the people from whom we rented were Jewish of a very low order, and they persisted in being friendly to such a degree that I had no privacy; and while I have complained to you that I was miserably lonesome, still, I prefer to be entirely alone than to associate with plebeian people.

Open anti-Semitism was unremarkable in Maimie's period, but she was herself Jewish, the child of immigrants who would have been accustomed to garlic and stronger smells. Yet there is an aspect of her internal anti-Semitism that is a common part of the modern Jewish experience. Her fear of a violation of privacy recalls the tribulations of

Jews in cramped Lower East Side tenement houses; Maimie has struggled to improve her lot, and also to Americanize, placing more and more value on personal privacy in terms of both space and smells. Her fear of a physical contagion emanating from fellow Jews is, in a sense, an episode of the narcissism of small differences. Such close proximity—and to people she is trying to rise above—maddens Maimie. In her irritation she fixates on the shared cultural tradition from which she hopes to get some distance.

Fear of garlic is, of course, a far cry from the *Foetor Judaicus*. Yet it suggests that the *Foetor* enjoyed a certain ghost-life in the popular imagination—perhaps the full-blown idea that Jews emanated a foul odor did not exist, but there was certainly the view that their food and personal habits violated civilized standards. That Jews would internalize the idea of the bad Jewish odor and respond accordingly means that this part of anti-Semitic ideology enjoyed some kind of success. Having internalized anti-Semitic instincts, Pinzer then took part in the same bourgeois deodorization that had been her ancestors' bane.

The *Foetor Judaicus* itself did not go away during the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. It simply went underground, appearing occasionally in the works of intellectuals like Arthur Schopenhauer or the novelist Oskar Panizza.⁷ And it resurfaced in even more infamous fashion in the doctrines of racist anti-Semitism. As Jay Geller points out in his essay "The Aromatics of Jewish Difference," in Germany smell had been linked with Eastern European Jews during the nineteenth century and earlier, even as the sense of smell itself was denigrated as reflecting a part of life inferior to those higher realms of the visual and the aural.⁸ Jews themselves thus belonged to the lower part of life—not a part of the bourgeois garden of the higher senses. As Geller puts it, "Pleasant smells do not exist as part of the urban landscape."⁹ The bourgeois family's dinner, presumably, was deodorized in comparison with the dinners of the eastern Jews, who streamed into Berlin in the late nineteenth century, escaping pogroms or simply seeking economic opportunity. Pinzer's anti-Semitism can be explained, if not excused, by the bourgeois imagination and Jewish class ascendancy in America: European prejudices playing out on new shores.

The Vulnerable Sense

Smell's ability to offend and our tendency to express distaste for someone through a vocabulary of scents can be partly explained by causes that lie in the biological rather than the cultural. Unlike vision, but like taste, smell involves a

physical penetration of the body: small particles strike receptors within the nose and trigger a reception apparatus in the brain. As current science understands it, the process is fairly simple: molecules of materials appropriately called *volatile* (this means that their structure is unstable, and they “off-gas” evaporated particulate matter) are blown through the air and enter our bodies, hitting receptor cells that channel signals to the brain. Organic matter happens to be more prone to evaporation than inorganic; flowers and food are more prone to produce scent than is metal or stone.

From this evaporation we are invaded, in harsh contrast with the choice contained in the idea of taste, the decision whether to drink this Burgundy or eat that burrito. Smell is more like hearing in its passivity, its nature as a channel of vulnerability, a mechanism by which we both know our environment and know that we are at its mercy.

And nothing reminds us of this vulnerability faster than other people’s bodies and the molecular traces of the food that has sustained them. Permeability is a basic condition of the alimentary process upon which life depends. One thing eats another and is sustained. When we smell the traces of cooking on someone, we are permeated by a trace of what plugs them into the food chain. Smell thus acts as a physical reminder of the way that we ourselves are earthly, as much like Caliban as we are like Prospero. And yet not like Caliban at all; he embodied physical strength, the ability to make it on a harsh, uncivilized island.

The vast industry of smell design and production, the power behind perfume counters and even behind the success of fast-food french fries, suggests that scent has been rendered civil and tame. The smell of food, however, reminds us that

we have always had only a fantasy of controlling the senses. The suburban scene, with its manicured lawns and bottles of aerosol deodorant, seems like the tactical answer to the boatloads of European immigrants: no scent of the old soil in the new land. But smells resurface and remind us not only of our vulnerable natures but also of living culinary traditions, to which we are tied in the body as well as at the table. Smells remind us that neither our traditions nor our corporeal natures can be civilized away. ☹

NOTES

1. See Richard Hosking, “That Fishy Abomination Known as Japanese Food,” in Harlan Walker, ed., *Food on the Move*, Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, 1996 Proceedings.
2. www.hhmi.org/senses, 2004.
3. Eric Zafran, “Saturn and the Jews,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 42 (1979): 16–27.
4. John Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 142.
5. Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (New York: Picador, 2002), 65.
6. Sue Davidson and Ruth Rosen, eds., *The Maimie Papers: Letters from an Ex-prostitute* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1996), 19.
7. For the *Foetor Judaicus* in Oskar Panizza’s fiction, see *The Operated Jew: Two Tales of Anti-Semitism*, Jack David Zipes, trans. (New York: Routledge, 1991). For Schopenhauer’s excerpt from his *On Religion*, see *The Will to Live: Selected Writings of Arthur Schopenhauer*, Richard Taylor, ed. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1967).
8. Jay Geller, “The Aromatics of Jewish Difference,” in Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, eds., *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
9. Geller, “Aromatics of Jewish Difference,” 211.