

Fermented Delights, Umberto Eco

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MY RELATIONS WITH Piero Camporesi were always very friendly and cordial, marked by a mutual esteem—or at least I hope they were—to the point where I plundered choice quotes from him for my novels *The Name of the Rose* and *The Island of the Day Before* and he asked me to write a preface for the English edition of his book on blood. But we always tended to meet in academic circles—at university course committees, in faculty corridors, or perhaps in the porticoed streets of Bologna—and I never got to know him in any private setting or to visit his library.

So far as I know, Camporesi was a gourmet. He enjoyed good food and I'm told he was a good cook: no surprise for a writer who dedicated so many pages not just to the pains but also the pleasures of the body—to milk, sauces, and dressings. Nor should we expect anything else from someone who once declared (in a newspaper interview in August 1985) that, after having studied Petrarch, the baroque, Alfieri, and Romanticism, his discovery of Pellegrino Artusi toward the end of the 1960s had been devastating.

But my knowledge about Camporesi's passion for food is only bookish; I have dined with him only in the pages of his books.

I am therefore qualified to celebrate Camporesi the gourmet simply as an avid reader of his work. He wrote about squalor, bodily waste, and putrefaction, and at the same time about his lusts and ecstasies. But he did so by delving with his scalpel into the bodies of books, by which I mean into books describing bodies, and—like a latter-day Mondino de Liuzzi—he went about dissecting not corpses stolen from cemeteries, but books unearthed from the musty depths of libraries where they had often languished forgotten, concealing their delights, in the way that the character des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* went about rediscovering in neglected early medieval chronicles "the stammering grace, the often exquisite clumsiness of the monks, stirring the poetical leftovers of antiquity into a pious stew . . . verbs of refined sweetness, substantives smelling of incense, and strange adjectives crudely fashioned out of gold in the delightful barbaric style of Gothic jewellery" (translated by Robert Baldrick).

Of course, if Camporesi had wanted literature in which to lick his lips while savoring excessive intemperate and obsolescent words, he could have turned to such classics of linguistic corruption as that Italian forerunner of Joyce, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, or the macaronic macaroni of Teofilo Folengo, or—if he had wanted to gorge himself on modernity—Carlo Emilio Gadda. Instead he went off in search of unknown texts, or books that were familiar in other respects. Having read Camporesi's works we certainly know much more about blood, bread, wine, and chocolate, in the same way that we learn extraordinary things about hunger, worms, buboes and scrofula, fiber, intestines, vomit, greed, as well as fun fairs and carnivals. But I would venture to suggest that these explorations would be fascinating even if the phenomena he writes about had never actually taken place, even if Camporesi had been telling us about bodies and bodily nourishment of aliens from Venus, somewhere too far away to arouse any sense of attraction or disgust. By which I mean that it is fascinating to know that remote centuries were peopled by bands of vagrants, but more fascinating still to discover this purely flatus vocis, and to read about fake monks, charlatans, rogues,

swindlers, beggars and ragamuffins, lepers and cripples, peddlers, tramps, ballad singers, itinerant clerics, scholar gypsies, cardsharps, jugglers, maimed soldiers, wandering Jews, madmen, fugitives, convicts with docked ears, or sodomites.

It is not pharmaceuticals but lexicography or linguistic history that we are most aware of when reading his descriptions of poppy syrups, ointments, unguents, baths, inhalants, powders, tinctures, spongia somnifera soaked in opium juices, henbane, hemlock, mandrake . . .

We open *The Anatomy of the Senses* (1994) at the first chapter, "The Cursed Cheese." We know that cheese, though it comes from a pure and sweet liquid, milk, is more appetizing the more it tastes of putrefaction, and reminds us of molds and those body odors we usually try to get rid of with foot baths and bidets—and this is well known not only to the glutton but especially to the gourmet. Yet I doubt whether Camporesi would have been able to write twenty-eight pages on the iniquities of cheese by simply sniffing Gorgonzola and Stilton, or letting the taste of formaggio di fossa, Reblochon, Roquefort, or vacherin linger on his tongue. He had to go off exploring forgotten pages of Campanella's *De sensu rerum et magia* or, worse still, retrieving from the seventeenth century, that most neglected period, *Il mercato delle maraviglie di natura* by Nicolò Serpetro, the *Physica subterranea* by Joachim Becher, *De casei nequitia* by Johann Peter Lotichius, and *Intorno ai latticini* by Paolo Boccone, thus superimposing on the actual aroma of cheese this even ranker and more putrid collage of quotations:

For many centuries, many people believed in the intrinsic malevolence of cheese, and its "iniquity" could be detected from its smell, which for many was sickening and nauseating, a sure indicator of dying matter. It was a decomposing residue of degenerate and harmful substances, and a terrible corrupter of humours . . . a foul and fetid thing (*res foetida et foeda*), the excremental part of milk, made up of harmful waste, coagulated from the earthy sludge of the white liquid. Lotichius often uses the verb "to copulate" (*coire*) when referring to the coagulation of these inferior parts of the milk. Butter, on the other hand, constituted the best part; it was an elect, pure, and divine delicacy, termed Jupiter's marrow (*Iovis medulla*).

Cheese, however, was variously described as "something foul, rank, filthy, and decaying" or "a shapeless mass, evil-smelling from the dross of milk, from bits of vegetables and refuse, but a source of nourishment, whether curdled or combined." It was suitable only for "labourers and the lower classes." As "something rustic and filthy," it was not worthy of decent people and honoured citizens; it was, in other words, a food for the ragged peasant who was accustomed to eating "bad foods" . . . Lotichius saw those who ate cheese as sordid and degenerate lovers of putrefied substances. Pre-scientific medicine not only agreed with him, but supplied easy arguments to demonstrate the iniquity of cheese, because the humours could only be disturbed and corrupted by fetid and putrid foods.

Eating them triggered an uncontrollable proliferation of the worms that, even in normal conditions, "teem in the intestines which are their hiding-place." This was the terrible truth: cheese increased the existing putrefaction in the dark meanders of the intestines and the recesses of the human bowels, generating disgusting little monsters . . . Lotichius argued that the propagation of thousands of vile little animals must occur in human intestines, just as the putrefaction spontaneously

created, cow-dung released an abundance of cockroaches, grubs, wasps, and drones, and the dew generated butterflies, ants, locusts, and cicadas.

This process was uncontrolled and astounding in that it did not require copulation and the fertilization of eggs. He could not see how the lower abdomen filled with human manure could possibly avoid fermenting the same profusion of perplexing little animals which were a scourge to humanity . . . Why could not the same thing occur, given that "earthworms and tapeworms all draw their origin from phlegmatic, dense, and rough matter." (translated by Allan Cameron)

And similarly his exploration of forgotten writings did not end at *De spiritu ardente ex lacte bubulo* by the eighteenth-century Nicolaus Oseretskowsky, which tells us how the Tartars got drunk on fermented milk. Only Camporesi, among the few devotees who have read *La vita della Venerabile Madre Maria Margherita Alacoque* of 1784, about the saint who first saw the Sacred Heart of Jesus, could have extracted from her biography the shocking information that this mystic saint, though ready for any mortification of the senses, could not overcome her disgust for cheese, to the extent that she was tempted to abandon monastic life so as to avoid being forced by her vow of obedience to eat that horrible yet humble food, before succeeding in making the supreme sacrifice. Which prompts Camporesi's comment that "the unbelievable conflict led the saint to the verge of suicidal desperation as her tormented soul struggled over a piece of cheese."

Now, I have to say, the story existed and exists in that saint's biography, but heaven only knows how any human being could have had the idea of searching about among those most saintly pages for some lines on cheese. Perhaps Camporesi never ate cheese (a suggestion I make only out of a love of paradox), but he certainly had a voracious appetite for pages and pages of countless books that had ended up goodness knows where—and this was his heavenly and guilty Camembert.

If this suggestion might appear excessive, see how Camporesi can describe an execrable (or at least execrated) food such as cheese with the same ease that he talks about culinary delights that make our mouths water, or about the practices of penitence that would cause any sensitive soul to feel sick. And when discussing Prince Raimondo di Sangro, rather than going off, like everyone else, on an exploration of his mummified monstrosities and chilling displays of nerves, muscles, and veins laid bare, instead he examines his Arcimboldian fancy for counterfeiting food, so that being quite excessively self-indulgent in all things, on certain days [he] ordered an entire dinner to be prepared using nothing but vegetables, on other days nothing but fruit, on yet others nothing but sweet and honeyed dishes, and sometimes dishes all made from milk. He had skilled buffet experts so highly trained in the art of manipulating sweetmeats and dairy products that he could produce marvellous imitations, with milk and honey, of all the dishes the cooks normally make with meat, fish, and many other sorts of animals. They also knew how to counterfeit every kind of fruit in a thousand different ways. (Exotic Brew, 1994, translated by Christopher Woodall)

But likewise, in the same spirit, here he is reading Sebastiano Pauli and his *Prediche quaresimali* (Lenten Sermons), making our hair stand on end while he relishes certain pious recommendations when it comes to a peaceful death:

As soon as this well-constituted and well-organized body is closed in its coffin, it changes colour and becomes yellow and sallow, but it is a

pallor and sallowness that nauseate and incite fear. It then blackens from the head to the feet, and it is covered by a sombre and dismal colour like spent coal. Then it starts to swell in a strange manner across the face, chest, and stomach, and a fetid and greasy mould starts to grow on this sickening swelling, a filthy indication of imminent corruption. Very soon the yellow and swollen stomach starts to rip here an eruption and there a tear, and out of these there flows a slow lava of decaying material and foulness in which bits of that black and rotting flesh are floating.

Here half a maggot-infested eye is carried on a wave, there a cleft lip is putrid and corrupt, and further on there lies a bundle of livid and lacerated bowels. A great quantity of small flies, worms, and other disgusting little animals is generated by this greasy mire, and they swarm and infest the corrupted blood, attach themselves to decomposing flesh, and devour it. One part of these worms rises from the chest, and another from the nostrils, with I don't know what filth and mucus. Still others, covered by putrid matter, enter and leave by the mouth, and the more satiated come and go, and gurgle continuously down in the throat. (The Anatomy of the Senses)

Is there a difference between describing a Trimalchion dinner in a land of plenty (bringing to mind Dario Fo, in *Mistero Buffo*, who froths with pleasure over food he is only dreaming about) or taking delight before the horrid spectacle of the damned in the Lenten sermons of Romolo Marchelli and the descriptions in Padre Segneri's sermon on the spectacle of the lower realm of the damned, who endure the greatest punishment by seeing the Almighty laugh at their suffering?

And yet when they raise their eyes and turn to the great God who lit the fire, they see that He now appears . . . like Nero to them, not because of His injustice but because of His severity, not only does He not wish to console them, or pity them, but what is more He claps His hands together, and with incredible pleasure, He laughs at them. Imagine in what frenzy they are driven, and into what a rage! We are burning and God laughs? Oh most cruel God! . . . We let ourselves be deluded by the man who told us that our greatest torment would have been the sight of God's scornful face. God's laughing face, he should have said, God's laughing face. (The Fear of Hell, 1990, translated by Lucinda Byatt)

I see no difference between the eagerness with which Camporesi savors, in the pages of Giovan Battista Barpo's *Le delizie e i frutti dell'agricoltura e della villa*, the lists of salted beef and lamb, mutton, pork and veal, and then spring lambs, capons, hens and ducks, and then of parsley roots, which, when boiled, floured, and cooked in oil, are just like lampreys; or pasta made from flour, rosewater, saffron, and sugar, with a little malmsey, cut round, like windowpanes, and stuffed with breadcrumbs, apples, carnation flowers, and ground walnuts, while waiting for Easter to bring kid, veal, lamb, asparagus, and squabs and, over the following months, curd cheeses, fresh ricotta, peas, heads of cabbage, boiled beans floured and fried (The Anatomy of the Senses)—between such lists of things dedicated to the palate and other lists dedicated (even though they refer to people) only to the ear—an ear whose eustachian tubes are as voraciously greedy as any throat. Examples of those lists of villains are found in the *Speculum cerretanorum* and other works on villainy: cardsharps, cheats, rascals, villains, wastrels, ne'er-do-wells, tricksters, fraudsters, pimps, fagins, abortionists, sellers of miraculous waters, quacks, pauperes verecundi, prayer vendors, fathers begging with their children, fake-saffron vendors, rogues who cheat other rogues, relic sellers, flour beggars, gropers, baptized Jews,

fake priests, shivering jimmies, bread beggars, rogues feigning madness from tarantula bites, holy-image bearers, fake miracle-workers, usurers, fake paralytics, dealers, street singers, epileptics, false weepers, charlatans, and so on (Il libro dei vagabondi).

Or not very politically correct lists of the defects of women, taken from the pages of Poetiche dicerie overo vaghissime descrittioni by Tommaso Caraffa, which might seem to describe the edible virtues of some extremely rare wild animal:

Do you not know that woman was called the portrait of inconstancy, the model of fragility, the mother of cunning, the symbol of variance, the mistress of malice, the minister of frauds, the inventrix of deception, the friend of simulation and of imperfection itself; since her voice is weak, she is voluble in tongue, tardy in action, fast in anger, steadfast in hatred, quick in envy, readily tired, well-versed in evil, easily prone to lying, like a biting asp nesting in an open field, like dead cinders that conceal a burning ember; a false reef concealed among shallow waters; a prickly thorn covered by lilies and roses; a poisonous snake wrapped in herbs and flowers; a light that fades; a flame that burns out; a glory that falls; a sun eclipsed; a moon that wanes; a star that disappears; a sky that darkens; a shadow that vanishes; and a sea that ruffles. (I balsami di Venere, 1989)

If it is still not clear that Camporesi was a gourmet of lists, see the shameless greed with which he gleefully describes the poor and piteous table of the penitent saints—such as Joseph of Copertino, as found in an eighteenth-century Life, whose table was furnished with herbs, dried fruits, and cooked broad beans sprinkled only with bitterest powder, and who on Friday fed on a herb that was so bitter and disgusting that even to lick it with the tip of the tongue nauseated him for several days. Or the description in the Life of Carlo Girolamo Severoli of Faenza, servant of God, who sprinkled his bread with ashes, which he secretly carried around with him for the purpose, and dipped it into the water used for washing dishes, and sometimes put it to soak in verminous water. Thus, quite rightly,

such was the manner and number of his self-inflictions and abstinences that his appearance was completely transformed: his countenance was pallid and his bones were barely covered by his bloodless skin, so much had he wasted away; a few meagre hairs sprouted from his chin and his frame was bent and transfigured, so that he had become bare like a skeleton, a living image of penitence. He suffered as a consequence most grievously of languidness, fainting, swooning, and a death-like pallor, so extreme that on journeys he was sometimes obliged to stop and he would sink to the ground to recover some little strength in his flagging limbs; or to relieve the pains of a hernia and other ills, for which he refused to seek any remedy. (The Incorruptible Flesh, 1988, translated by Tania Croft-Murray)

If we were to read all of Camporesi's books, one after the other (though they should be savored in small doses), trying to build up a picture of what he is describing, we might become sated and form the suspicion there isn't much difference between an urge to swim in cream and to swim in excrement, so that his work might serve as a Gospel or a Koran for the characters in Ferreri's film *La Grande Bouffe*, at the end of which ingurgitation and evacuation go hand in hand. This would be true if we assumed that Camporesi is talking only of things, rather than realizing that he is talking first and foremost about words—the words Paradise and Inferno, after all, are part of one and the same poem.

Camporesi certainly wanted to be a cultural anthropologist, or historian of everyday life, though he performed this task by probing among long-forgotten works, and in doing so he recounted the vicissitudes of past centuries in relation to the body and food. But not infrequently he highlights parallels between those times and ours—and reflecting on ancient blood rituals and myths he never failed to point out how much blood has been spilled in our own most civilized age, whether it be through holocaust, intifada, genocide, tribal throat-slitting, or massacre, and nor did he ever fail to comment on the perversions of today, from dietary paranoia to mass hedonism, from olfactory decadence to the adulteration of food, as well as the disappearance of the traditional view of hell. He looked back almost nostalgically upon less fastidious and more honest times when you could smell the blood that was spilled, when masochistic mystics kissed leprous ulcers, and excrement was sniffed as part of the sensual panorama of everyday life (I wonder what he would have written about the rubbish piles in Naples).

But this desire to understand the past and the present arose through that form of libido that has been dubbed "librido." Nor could Camporesi savor the aroma of a well-made pie or the stink of a rotting body except through the whiff of paper made from pulped rags, duly watermarked, slightly foxed, and adorned with worm holes, provided it was, as bibliographers would have once said, *de la plus insigne rareté*.

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