



On Savoring

Some features of an ethics of tasting, good and bad

By William Eaton

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[I]t is muttered that whenever any government wants to dupe the peasants, it promises the abolition of the wine tax, and as soon as it has duped the peasants, it retains or reintroduces the wine tax. In the wine tax the peasant tastes the bouquet of the government . . .

— Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*

It tastes twice the price. — An advertisement for wine, 2014

Relatively early one sunny Saturday morning I bicycled down the southern slope of Paris and across the Seine to meet up with a friend who lived not far from the river. As I was crossing behind Notre Dame, the streets and sidewalks were so empty and the river so calm, it seemed as if Paris and I were back in the Middle Ages, the water like a moat between the stone walls. Later that day my friend and I got stuck in a traffic jam along a commercial strip in the northern suburbs. My first reaction was to be annoyed. We would not have been stuck there had my friend, who was driving, not taken a wrong turn. I was looking forward to being back in the city, alone in a quiet café with the translation of *Robinson Crusoe* that I had in my backpack. But then I thought—we had traveled out of Paris to see another part of France; well, were we not, in this traffic jam in a commercial strip, indeed seeing, and not just seeing but feeling in our bones, in our frustration and dismay, a part of France?

I am reminded of a passage in Camus's *La peste*. He is reproducing a page from one of his character's notebooks:

Question: comment faire pour ne pas perdre son temps? . . .

Question: How to avoid wasting one's time? Answer: experience the full extent of it. How to do this? Spend one's days in a dentist's waiting room in an uncomfortable chair; spend Sunday afternoons on one's balcony; listen to meetings being held in a language one does not know; when traveling choose the longest and most inconvenient rail itineraries and, of course, remain

standing the entire trip; wait in line to buy tickets for shows and then not use the tickets; etc.

What is this essay?

The present text may be thought of as preliminary sketches of a way of life: devoted to savoring. Painting the painting remains for a later date, or for someone who is a painter rather than a draughtsman. I would also stress here at the outset the awkwardness of this piece—the ways in which its various views of its subject will fit or-and not fit together. Of course awkwardness is commonly thought a negative quality, and one that a master craftsman avoids. And thus an assumption of the present piece is that something may be seen or felt through embracing awkwardness and its juxtapositions, and this something may bring us ideas, intellectual stimulation, that might be ignored when reading more polished, or seemingly more polished, texts. This is also to champion, along with savoring, thought provocation. As if to propose that, if in our world the only product to which no one is allergic—the consensus definition of the good—is white sugar, it may be past time for some thought provocation, and for less refined texts.*

A life dedicated to savoring the life one was living could be a life well lived.

As at a particular spot on a piece of drawing paper, I began work on this essay a year or so ago with this simple idea: In Paris restaurants one eats better than in New York restaurants, or, more precisely, than in Manhattan restaurants. This statement is not

* In a brief *Zeteo* text, “**On Nakedness and Awkwardness**” (June 2014), I touched on the power of the “awkwardness” of a Rubens portrait of his second wife, H el ene Fourment. I would note, too, Manet’s audacious *D ejjeuner sur l’herbe*, in which the awkwardnesses include not only the fact that the picnicking woman is naked while her male companions are fully clothed, but also the fact that the woman crouching in the background is, from the perspective of Renaissance perspective, rather oversized. In Rubens’s case, as John Berger wrote in *Ways of Seeing*, the “awkwardness”—the displacement of Mme Fourment’s thighs in relation to her torso—may have been done subconsciously. In Manet’s case, the awkwardnesses seem quite intentional. In both cases, the results have communicated powerfully down through the ages.

necessarily true, and certainly not true for all tastes. Some readers may have already begun disagreeing, recalling bad meals they have had in Paris, protesting that you can't get *real* hamburgers, New York pizza, thick steaks, or good "ethnic" (not French) food in Paris. New York water is not what it used to be—too much chlorine-and-pipe taste now? Only in certain neighborhoods do we still get the delicious (sweet?), naturally purified water we used to enjoy everywhere. But we remain in this more fortunate than Parisians, with their calcium-laden tap water.

Nonetheless, Paris's appearance in this text is hardly accidental. The city is the capital of a country whose people have a long tradition of savoring and of talking about what they are eating and drinking, and this tradition, along with the suitability of the country for all kinds of agriculture and seafood harvesting, has resulted in a cuisine renowned for the richness of its flavors. France and the French have been leading promoters of dining as a sensory pleasure, or as a series of sensory pleasures. And it is possible that French culture, being older and having deeper roots than American culture, has been able to better embrace new forms of entertainment—movies, television, the Internet—without entirely trashing existing forms such as dining. The meal in France remains an event in a way that in the United States it is rarely (or only on Thanksgiving?). Compared to New York (where I live), in Paris, *or in an ideal Paris*, one lingers longer over one's meals, one notes and savors more of the flavors of the meal.

Certainly things taste differently (and artworks, landscapes, and urban scenes look different) in a culture that is attached to savoring, or during those moments when we, whoever and wherever we may be, are caught up in savoring, as opposed, say, to being caught up in acquiring, or in worrying about our mortality (health) or our thinness, or in writing essays about savoring, mortality, or dieting. The present essay will also argue that

even in the “best” Paris restaurants the savoring is limited; many of the flavors or aspects of meals are commonly ignored in France as elsewhere. “Social flavors,” such as the taste of commercial rents or of the minimum wage paid to immigrants working in kitchens, will get particular attention.

In short, Paris has offered this piece a starting place, and readers may be coming to understand that I am not taking their time in order to remind them that they might eat better (in the sense of more delicious or healthy foods and dishes) if they lived in Paris (or, say, in Bologna or Beijing). Quite to the contrary. One of the features of savoring that this essay focuses on is how it can heighten our sensitivity not only to good (“tasty,” orally pleasing) things, but also to what can be called bad or off, unwelcome tastes. One of the chief arguments against savoring, and indeed one of the reasons many people rarely bother with it, could be this feature: the less one seeks to savor the foods one is eating or the life one is living, the less one will have to confront the complexity of the flavors, the complexity of our interactions with the world around us, and the not always sweet or even healthy aspects of life that we are ingesting.

Life and my writing have given me many occasions to quote from Ian Craib’s *The Importance of Disappointment*. The apt passage here is:

There are . . . a number of aspects to [psychological] integration that can make it a not-so-attractive prospect It means becoming aware of and suffering conflicts; becoming aware of and putting up with what I have described as authentically bad aspects of relationships, and of the self; . . .

Similarly, I am proposing, savoring can increase our integration with the lives we are living, but this can include, though not be limited to, increasing our awareness of conflicts, of personal limitations, and so forth. Even were this essay to limit itself to gustatory flavors, the discontents of savoring could be appreciated.

Americans have developed, or have been trained to have, a taste for bland and sweetened food. Thus Manhattan restaurateurs are not encouraged to offer less than bland (or tastier) food, and they may have some difficulty obtaining and may have to pay extra for physically flavorful meats, vegetables, bread, and so forth. If one is physically hungry in New York and seeks a hamburger or slice of pizza to fill one's stomach and send fats and proteins into one's bloodstream, the chance of finding a "good" hamburger or pizza slice—one that fulfills these purposes—will be high, assuming one has enough money to buy food. But if one seeks a burger or slice that will be pleasing to one's palate, entertaining it with some music of pleasing flavors and textures—experience has taught me that the chances are not good that one will be successful (and the price will be relatively high).^{*} And so what if one were to savor even in one's quickly obtained, blood-sugar-restoring burger a sense of limitation—a sense that you did not have access to all types of burgers? One could find oneself "savoring" (with limited enjoyment) mortality, or the not-everything-possible flavor of mortality.

Nonetheless, let's say. Plato's Socrates famously proposed that a life unexamined was not worth living. In a less heroic age this essay proposes that a life dedicated in some part, though hardly entirely, to savoring the life one is living could be a life well lived. (Why "hardly entirely"? Well, there would be a paralysis or an endless feedback loop in a life devoted entirely to savoring. Were I to try fully savor the writing of this essay on savoring,

^{*} This exploring of an ethics of savoring deftly ignores the possibility that we humans, or we humans under capitalism, are not able to make significant choices. Our lives may be so channeled—by economic factors, genes, customs, our characters, psychology, gender, etc.—as to be a series of "only choices," of actions that only *seem* to involve choosing. It may be that this channeling is so much the case and so demoralizing—it forces us into using ethical ruminations, our wonderings about what we should do, what choices we should make, as a way of disguising our reality or of trying to make up for it.

how would I be able to keep writing it—and with what kinds of flavors and textures would I then be left?)

Given my belief that the ethical question—what should I do, at this moment or in general?—is not only central in human lives, but cannot be answered with any certainty, and given my belief that our thoughts and customs are channeled by our circumstances, prevailing economic systems included, it would be absurd for this piece to propose that people *should* live a life of savoring. What seems less absurd, and equally diverting, is to consider what a life focused on savoring might involve.

I note, too, that as savoring involves tastes, readers should expect to continue to encounter in this piece a plethora of tastes—my tastes, which may seem to range from the conventional to the snooty and bizarre. There may prove to be less pleasure in savoring my prose or ideas than in taking issue with them. I think of the pleasure of wearing a sweater on a summer day.

To savor

For the verb “savor,” the Internet gave me the following “quick definitions from Macmillan”:

To enjoy an experience, activity, or feeling as much as you can and for as long as you can. (*Bill savored the view as he cruised along the coastline.*)

To enjoy the flavor of something as much as you can by eating or drinking it slowly. (*I sipped my coffee, savoring every mouthful.*)

Mine, you can say, is a savoring that embraces more than just joy, or that, in seeking to take note of all the flavors of existence gives enjoying short shrift. Bad coffee, I am proposing, can be savored for its badness (wateriness? excessive bitterness or acidity?), and sad moments for their sadness, just as much as tasty mouthfuls or joyous moments are savored

for their more agreeable qualities. We might think, too, of the Japanese ideal of *wabi-sabi*, by which beauty lies in the imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. Scenes, objects, and experiences that are beautiful in this way can provoke melancholy and spiritual longing—which feelings, and the qualities that inspire them, worthy souls know to savor.

Mes actes font lever des valeurs comme des perdrix, Sartre proposed. My acts cause values to spring up like partridges. Except that, in our present pass, the partridges are questions, springing up each time, we, exploring a field in a pre-dawn hour, extend a toe. Does the idea of savoring imply a focus on sensations or is there an intellectual form of savoring? Does savoring have to involve consciousness—of flavors, of beauty, or of the fact that one is savoring? Are some phenomena—coffee, coastlines, our sadness—easier to savor than others—the taste of water, motor-vehicle or inbox traffic, the suffering of others, ecstasy? Can questioning contribute to savoring? (I believe so.)

Taking a brutal detour, I must ask, too, what is the “taste” of knowledge about starvation or of an Internet newsflash—260,000 people died during a famine in Somalia? The World Food Programme has reported that more than 10 percent of the world’s population—more than 800 million people—do not have enough to eat, and poor nutrition causes nearly half of the deaths in children under 5 years old (more than 3 million deaths per year). These factoids may make any ethics of savoring seem grotesque. (To say nothing of “Be happy!” or seeing the glass as half full or even Marilyn Monroe’s sad “I know I will never be happy, but I know I can be gay!”) If, in the face of World Food Programme reports and the many similar we could collect, we continue to explore an ethics of savoring, could this be with an idea that in a world in which seeking to pay greater attention to our experiences, *à table* and elsewhere, played a larger—and making more and more money a

somewhat smaller part—fewer people might starve? Or would this be disingenuous, a rationalization for a bourgeois text?



At an extreme it could be proposed that a meal should taste better if one eats it with the knowledge that other people are not starving to death. This would be, however, to ignore one of the less welcome, yet fundamental aspects of savoring meals. The deliciousness of a meal (or of a rare wine or a particularly fresh fruit, or of a Caribbean

A meal should taste better if one eats it with the knowledge that other people are not starving to death.

beach) often owes a good deal to rareness or specialness, with this linking to a sense that the flavors and pleasures are not available to all (or at all seasons). It is not far from here to the pleasure some derive from driving a fancy car or from living in a large house—the pleasure of knowing that many others cannot afford such luxuries. The relative rarity and high cost of “my” vacation home’s view gives me a means of savoring how successful or lucky “I” am. From this perspective we need to ask: Would the pleasure of, say, getting to eat good food (however goodness might be defined), and of

having the time and relaxation to savor it, be diminished if one held in one's consciousness the fact that many or most people could or did enjoy the same good fortune?

Excursus related to vegetarianism

I recall in the 1980s buying chickens in North Carolina supermarkets for 29 cents a pound (about the same price at that time as a pound, or pint, of gasoline). The chicken had no flavor and was loaded with extra hormones and antibiotics, and nor was I—an editor of a progressive weekly paper—unaware of the low pay of the chicken processors and the unhealthy conditions under which they worked. But there was an additional and not pleasant flavor in the meat—of a life (in this case, the chicken's life) being worth so little: 29¢/pound. Rarely when I was eating this chicken did I consciously acknowledge that the flesh I was eating was almost worthless, and yet I think that this chicken did make me feel diminished, as if my life, too, might be of such little value. And yet again, we cannot ignore, that chicken at 29 cents a pound can be purchased by many more people than the richly flavored, free-range *poulet jaune* one may order in certain Paris restaurants, or than the \$3.99 heads of organic broccoli that have been for sale at my local, New York, Whole Foods supermarket.

Eating involves eating: the consumption of an other. This other is destroyed so that "I" can live on.

And in almost every case, if we are to eat, other beings, animal or vegetable, must be eaten. An exception would be a milk-only diet, which would involve the exploitation, but not consumption, of other beings. And do we feel differently about eating seeming parents (e.g. fish caught in the wild or wheat) than we do about eating "offspring" who might, if not eaten, become parents (eggs, beans, apples)?

The various forms of vegetarianism now practiced often involve, among other things, a degree of ethical sophistication and a belief in traditional hierarchies. That is, for example, some people consider it morally better to eat eggs rather than chicken, or to eat vegetables rather than any fish, fowl, or mammal. This would seem linked to a sense that a chicken is autonomous in a way that an egg is not, and because more complex organisms seem somehow superior to less complex ones, as do those animals that seem most like we humans. So a savoring question would be: In practicing vegetarianism can an individual taste or even enjoy such values, hierarchies, and affiliations?

While I eat most everything, I am not without sympathy for vegetarian ethics, to include for the idea that more human beings could be fed were we all vegetarians. (Though, and while I would not have even one child die or even suffer much, I do not want all these billions of people. I would rather there were more room and resources for other entities and for emptiness.) At the same time, it seems to me that vegetarianism often involves various forms of denial, self-denial included. The essayist and child psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has written and spoken well about how frightening our appetites, our voraciousness, can be. There is only so much “aliveness” we can bear, and we are highly ambivalent about aggression. And thus, among other things, we fight—with our parents, with restaurants, with ourselves—to limit what we eat, insisting that, for ethical or physical-health reasons—or to “look good”—we must limit, control ourselves.)

The denial that I wish to sketch in this portion of this essay is the denial of the notion that eating involves eating: the consumption of an other. This other is destroyed so that “I” can live on. If we are interested in savoring our food or our meals in all their dimensions, then we should not deny this aspect of eating and of existence. There, but for the grace of those who, through dying, nourish me, go I.

For some reason in Paris restaurants oysters are much more substantial than they are in New York, and this plays no small part in the pleasure to be had eating raw oysters in Paris, and hardly least in the late spring when the oysters are particularly succulent. Many others have extolled the gustatory and tactile wonders, the softness of the flesh mixed with the saltiness of the taste, and the accompanying flavors of butter, lemon, shallots, white wine, and a sense of the sea. (We are not far from the tastes and pleasures of oral sex; or, rather, oyster eating and drinking good wine can be thought of as forms of oral eroticism, of savoring life and desire in one's mouth. And our enthusiasm for oral sex suggests how attached we are to eating!) In the midst of all this, let us not ignore how in taking our time as we eat oysters, in savoring the flavors, the odors, the experience, we are also in some way reveling in the pleasure of swallowing another being, raw and whole, in one delicious swallow.

In his twelfth year my son went through a bacon phase. He wanted bacon for breakfast every morning, and we had a particular, chemicals-free brand that we favored (for his six slices and my one). It was a nice feature of this brand that from packet to packet the thickness of the slices varied, and our preference was for the thicker slices. One morning during the time I was first drafting this essay I remarked to Jonah about this variation, which is quite unusual for a packaged product. "Perhaps it depends on the pig," Jonah said. This seemed to me a nice fantasy. We might say that the pig is lost in the bacon and to an extent that a raw oyster on the half shell certainly is not. (We will get to our version Marx's fetishism of commodities right below.)

Social flavors (and some snooty tastes)

In New York one of the great staples of restaurant “food”—or, if you prefer, of restaurant conversation—is real estate, real-estate prices in particular. As I was editing these pages over lunch in the gentleman’s-club-like Gramercy Tavern dining room, a man several tables away said loudly to a fellow diner: “How much are you paying for your apartment?” In Paris, diners often talk about the tastes and ingredients of the foods they are eating, and this often leads to memories of other foods they have eaten at other times. It is important to recognize that either conversation—about real estate or, say, old breads—can seem formulaic and tiresome, and particularly when you are hearing or caught up in it for the umpteenth time. Yet, as regards the taste of the food on your plate and of the wine in your glass, it makes a difference which conversation you are having or which you are likely to have. This is in part because restaurateurs will seek to offer different

flavors to people who are going to be talking about real estate and to people who are going to be talking about the food. (“Voilà ce qu’on ne peut obtenir au

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cabaret . . . : une daube de bœuf où la gelée ne sente pas la colle, et où le bœuf ait pris parfum des carottes”. Proust : Here’s something you can’t get in a cabaret : cold beef casserole in which the jelly does not taste of glue and the meat has caught the flavor of the carrots.)

An urbanist once explained to me that Parisian café life—the fact that in Paris one can linger for hours over a single espresso—was related to French tax policy, which led to ground-floor commercial rents being lower in Paris than, say, in New York. Even if this happens not to be true, a chief ingredient, if not *the* chief ingredient, in every big-city café or restaurant order—be it an espresso, steak, or gluten-free pasta—is rent. And thus I am proposing that a true gourmet, a person with a great capacity for tasting the flavors in her

food, would be able to discern the tastes of rent, and of taxes, of the cost of service, of human labor. In a New York restaurant she would be able to taste the exploitation of immigrants who do much of the kitchen work, or he could taste the fact that many workers feel compelled to come to work even when they are sick. In contemporary winespeak, a wine may have, for example, fruit aromas of strawberry and Bing cherry with hints of cedar, vanilla, and lavender. In the Marxist foodspeak of this essay, a steak could have aromas of the domestication of cattle; of agribusiness, agrochemicals, and genetically modified feed; and of refrigeration and the complex modern commodity distribution systems, with hints of property law and the role of capital in driving up real-estate prices. Clearly it would take a very developed palate to be able to taste all this, and such tasting might be easier in New York than in Paris, since the food served in the latter city might have both stronger and more subtle “physical” flavors, which would interfere with the savoring of the “social” ones. (Americans have developed, or have been trained to have, a taste for bland and sweetened food. Thus Manhattan restaurateurs are not encouraged to offer less than bland (or tastier) food, and they may have some difficulty obtaining and may have to pay extra for physically flavorful meats, vegetables, bread, and so forth.)

I might go on at some length, airing my complaints, stating my own tastes, circling back to Marx. My mother used to put carrots in her tomato sauce to counteract the acidity of the tomatoes, but now carrots are often just orange-ish fiber, and tomato-sauce-makers use fructose or cane sugar instead. And the Francophile in me cannot help asking: If a self-respecting restaurant serves bread without a pronounced crust, wouldn't that only be so that we could appreciate, as with a brioche, *la mie*. So shouldn't this—the inside part—have some flavor besides that of sugar or corn syrup? Inoffensiveness is a form of offensiveness. One good French or Moroccan melon, or a good French or Russian strawberry, can make it hard

to ever want to eat an American melon or strawberry again. The melon lacks what the French call *un parfum*, a scent; the strawberry, while huge, has a taste of tastelessness (or of sawdust?). I have eaten in relatively fancy New York restaurants that offer special, local, free-range chicken, which may well be tender, but has no flavor. I presume that this is at least in part because the farmers know that flavor—that is, a gamier or bird-ier flavor—is not wanted.

Chain restaurants and their names—chosen by consultants with the help of focus groups—demoralize me, or deaden my pallet. I was once talking with a restaurateur friend about the declining quality of a chain of New York “Belgian” restaurants, and he explained to me how periodically the stockholders or bankers of such restaurants review the bottom line and look for ways of raising revenues and cutting costs. Inevitably the managers are directed to find cheaper suppliers for the meat, coffee, wine, bread, and this, in my experience, is all too easy to taste.

There is also the pleasure and taste of security, and of feeling—in a restaurant serving delicate little portions?—that our voraciousness, our insatiability is being successfully denied. If you eat a well-done hamburger made from meat that had no flavor to begin with, the lack of flavor may assure you (rightly or wrongly) that you are not being poisoned. Is there a related pleasure, too, in not feeling forced to have a potentially new experience or, in some sense, any gustatory experience at all? (And can this, too, be savored?) In a general sense, the insecurities of our current era may not be all that different from those of so many previous eras, but it may be that now, as we are barraged by advertisements and “information,” non-experiences are coming to be a great luxury. I think of my son, during his “latency” period, reading and re-reading the works of various fantasy and espionage

novelists. The plots all followed the same few formulas, good was always triumphing over evil, etc. The blandness and repetition seemed to be at the heart of the pleasure—soothing.

When George W. Bush was President there was a story, perhaps apocryphal, that he liked peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches with the crust cut off the bread. Were the forces of evil so deeply ingrained in his mind—or the complexities of life so daunting and disagreeable—he needed his meals to be as simple as possible? Once in Paris I had dinner with an up-and-coming New York fashion designer who remarked that he did not like any of the types of meat that I particularly favor: lamb, duck, goat—meats that have, or that even in the United States have yet to completely lose, a gamey flavor. Is my ability to savor so limited that I need robust flavors?

Certainly it is easier to savor a gamey piece of meat than a bland one, but it is not clear that this makes the former superior to the latter, and even if we accept the values of the present exploration.



Is savoring supposed to be easy? Is food that can be easily savored (e.g. raw oysters) superior to food (Budweiser beer) whose “flavors” (including the social relations involved in the production, sale, and purchase) are so much more difficult to taste?

American tastes are at least in some part a result of American businesses’ efforts to take advantage of the economies of scale and of the efficient distribution networks of the United States. Rather than selling different regional specialties and thus selling the pleasures of particularities (as is done in France and some other countries), U.S. food businesses seek to sell one national product—one approach to bacon, one flavor of beer, one idea of

pizza—to everyone. Even our ethnic foods are simplified, so that “Mexican” food can be counted on to taste the same from one chain to the next, and “Chinese” or “Szechuan” tastes the same in every Chinese or Szechuan family restaurant. The goal for each product or cuisine is less to please, tantalize, or surprise than to reassure and not offend. The “pleasures” are to come from other sources than the physical flavors themselves, which have been codified and minimized. Instead the consumer is offered such psychological and social flavors as consistency, low prices, and convenience, along with qualities that may have been injected into the products or chains by advertising. In drinking X beer, I may feel like the sort of character shown repeatedly on TV drinking X beer in the company of a lot of X friends and X young women in bikinis. (Let us credit manufacturers and distributors with the extraordinary insight that, if lots of customers and money are what you are after, the physical flavors of food products are best dispensed with; it can be easiest, cheapest, and most lucrative to advertise and sell products that have no physical flavor at all.)

Is savoring possible?

In recent years I have been spending a good deal of time in Paris—neither fish nor fowl; neither tourist nor resident. I have “my” room in a generous friend’s apartment, my local habits, and my, albeit limited, society of local residents. At the same time, when I am in Paris I try—in a touristic way, in a way that I do not in New York—to savor the experience of being in Paris. I find this more or less impossible, or to be a kind of puzzle that I have yet to solve.

Of course there are moments, *éclaircies*, when the sky clears and details of the theater, set, and actors of Paris, tourists included, appear richly detailed, command my eyes, and delight. I have my favorite bicycle routes and places to stop and take in the view. Having

lunch while reading, talking, or answering e-mails, I may be suddenly stopped by the complex flavors in a glass of good wine.

Perhaps the problem, the struggle to savor, has to do with our inability to stop time, and how easy it is to regret this. The pleasure of savoring—good or bad tastes—may lie precisely in this. It leads us to imagine that we can stop time—we are stopping it. It would already be difficult enough to “stay in the moment” were moments not, by definition, momentary. Approaching *le bassin d'eau*, the pool of water, in the middle of a French park, I am struck by the “civilization” of the scene, and I tell myself that I should find a chair and spend some time—doing what?— inhaling through my eyes this civilized quality and thinking, too, of the waves of mass murder that seem another feature of the European landscape? Well, the initial moment has passed.

I am reminded of stages in love-making, from together mounting the stairs (or taking the elevator) to tentative kisses, to more liquid moments and a

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kind of losing one’s head, recovering one’s animality, letting go and drifting dumbly into sleep. I would stop at any of these moments and stay within it for a long, long time, but that we humans cannot do. And of course the pleasure would be very different, and might not be pleasure at all, were the stairs more numerous or the carnality less brief. Often in a restaurant I will eat something delicious, or at home I’ll have a little piece of Belgian chocolate with pistachios mixed in, and I’ll find it so delicious, it seems I should have another piece, and certainly I want to. But if I follow my desire, the second piece is not as good, and a double dose of sugar will make me feel a little unwell and overwhelm a previous, so pleasurable experience.

It is also the case that, after the most wonderful or transgressive love-making, and often after the most extravagant or delicate meals as well, one may regret what one has done



and not done. It seems one has gone too far or not far enough. Or one may note with sadness how the experience has been reduced to a memory and how far memory is from our initial experiences themselves. There may indeed have been brief

instants when one was fully savoring, doing nothing but savoring, but most of what one retains—like red-letter dates in a chronology—is that there were such instants and when they occurred. “I remember that for a long time we exchanged delicious, simple kisses on her couch, and the warm wetness then waiting between her thighs.” But this is literary and governed by the grammar and vocabulary our parents and others introduced us to around the same time as we were being toilet trained. One struggles, in vain, to work one’s way back from language to what we would like to call the truer, more wonderful, wordless initial experience.

“J’aurais voulu . . . arrêter, immobiliser longtemps devant moi chaque intonation,” Proust writes about the first time he saw a great actress perform. He would have liked to have been able—so as to be able to explore more deeply, to try to discover the source of their beauty—to stop, to immobilize each intonation of the actress, each facial expression. . . . But they lasted so briefly! Hardly had a sound reached his ear than it was replaced by another.

Ethics of the meal; noise and silence

Once in New York I went to a discussion and tasting of French wines. Participants sat at desk-like tables, and nothing but wine and water was on offer (though I was eventually able to get hold of some bread). Some of the attendees were taking notes, either for professional purposes or just out of habit—to give themselves something to do in between sips. (This was in an age before people blocked free moments by compulsively thumbing through cellphone messages.) All of us were paying inordinate attention to the qualities of the liquids we were sampling. And it struck me that in this way we were completely lost to wine, to its traditional role in society and as part of a meal. Wines have long been crafted to heighten our experience of certain foods at certain times and also to promote certain convivial kinds of social interactions (and also as a way of storing agricultural produce out of season and for protection against bad years, bad harvests). Now, in contemporary New York and many other cities, wines are also used, and perhaps some are crafted to be used, in this seemingly odd form of social interaction in which strangers come together to taste and learn. Of course many people who go to wine-tastings are also, as I was, interested in the social interaction and may be hoping to “meet someone”—someone who shares their tastes.

The idea of a meal suggests an ethics of experiences of others and with others rather than of things in themselves.

I recall a time—before we were all swamped by globalization—when French people recently come to New York would remark critically or amusedly on our American habit of asking for a “doggy bag,” so that we could take home the leftovers. From the French perspective there could be no leftovers because in dining they were not ordering or consuming a quantity of food so much as they were engaging in an event—a meal, complete

with conversation. When the meal was over, the experience was over, the only leftover there could be would be a prolonging of the experience, say, by taking a postprandial stroll or by recalling the flavors and conversation sometime in the future, in the course of another meal.

Let us ask what ethics this idea of a meal suggests. It may invalidate much of what has been written heretofore. It is an ethics of experiences of others, and with others, rather than of things in themselves. The strawberry, melon, wine, chicken, or oyster is not more sought after than, say, when kissing we might seek a particular color, shape, fleshiness, moisture, or saltiness of lips. Kissing is a shared experience in which lips certainly play a role, and in which the savoring of the sensations plays a role as well, but what matters above all is your relations with another human being, and her or his relation to you.

I might take this opportunity to complain about the noise of New York restaurants, a noise that is now, like an alien species, invading Paris as well, and that is produced both by loud music and by the use of building materials that reflect sounds harshly rather than absorbing them gently. I once heard that shopping malls deliberately try to disturb their customers with music in order to make the buyers anxious, to make them try to soothe themselves with purchases. I assume restaurateurs have this in mind as well. As regards savoring, I would protest that, as it is difficult to feel two different pains at once, so it is difficult to simultaneously process information from two different senses, so that if one is besieged by sound, it may be difficult to taste anything but noise. (Restaurateurs may have this in mind too; noise takes the pressure off the cooks and lowers the cost of supplies, no point in seeking out the flavorful; the noise will render it unnoticeable.)

I would not, and will not, pass up this opportunity to protest more generally against the noise of contemporary life. In a youthful (1928) speech, the future composer John Cage proposed: "One of the greatest blessings that the United States could receive in the near

future would be to have her industries halted, her business discontinued, her people speechless, a great pause in the world of affairs created. . . . We should be hushed and silent, and we should have the opportunity to learn what other people think.”

But there is also a sense here in which I am simply being a curmudgeon. Both noise and silence can be and are savored. In the wonderful, inspiring chapter on music and silence that closes his *La musique et l'ineffable* (1961, *Music and the Ineffable*), the Russian-French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch writes about how, until recently, human beings tried to make sounds (music, conversation) to escape from their anxieties and the seeming silence of the universe and of eternity. (Now do we go online and use our cellphones, earbuds, movies, and television programs for the same purpose? Or would it be more accurate to say that such media are used to silence or drown out others and ourselves?) Jankélévitch draws an analogy with a traveler lost at night who speaks out and laughs loudly in order to persuade himself that he is not afraid. Thanks to the protective screen of the sounds he is making, the traveler imagines that he is scaring away the specter of death. But now, Jankélévitch proposes, this situation is being inverted (for the truly well-to-do or for some *avant-garde*, I am here proposing). Exhausted by the racket, we cover our ears, try to preserve our little gardens or islands of silence. Silence, rather than sound, has come to seem the safe haven. This, then, would be to say as well that—whether we enjoy the noise or seek silence—we are trying to avoid savoring, trying not to have real meals, not to have our thoughts provoked.

Savoring not savoring and patience

My son Jonah and I have our best conversations when walking somewhere together, and thus one of my top priorities as a parent (and having greatly enjoyed conversations with Jonah!) is to make sure we take walks together. And thus I noticed, too, and savored in a

certain way, a morning when I walked with Jonah to school, and we seemed in no way angry with one another, and yet said nothing, just walked together.

Similarly, when I take the train between New York and Boston I like to look out at the Long Island Sound shoreline, particularly at the salt marshes between Guilford and New London, and at this sense of sea, river, and port around New London itself. But one day, caught up in editing a manuscript, I did not look out the window, and there was a moment that I became aware that I was not looking, and I savored this, this not looking.

“Nature is reported not by him who goes forth consciously as an observer, but in the fullness of life.”

I would note here, too, a line from Thoreau’s Journal: “Nature is reported not by him who goes forth consciously as an observer, but in the fullness of life. To such a one she rushes to make her report.” Here I will quote from another, briefer description, from Emerson’s journal entry of May 11, 1858, a day he walked to Walden Pond with Thoreau:

The charm which Henry T. uses for bird & frog & mink, is patience. They will not come to him, or show him aught, until he becomes a log among the logs, sitting still for hours in the same place; then they come around him & to him, & show themselves to him.

This is to suggest that something—essence or close to it—is missed by those who try to savor (to observe consciously). Is there a way to begin in silence or to get back to it, and to be patient and listen? This would not involve the egoism of savoring—an experience on *my* tongue, of *me* in Paris (or Tuscaloosa), of *me* feeling relaxed after my yoga class or of getting *my* peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches just the way I like them, with or without the crust.

What remains?

It may be asked, here at the end, after all this discussion and questioning, all these sketches: What's left for savoring? How could it possibly seem a good way to live?

The argument or proposition may be summarized as follows. There would seem something—a resonance—in fully tasting, sensing, appreciating the life one is indeed living. A life lived in such a way could be a fuller life than one devoted to escape and denial, to ignoring and being ignorant.

I remember once hearing of a football coach who ate so rapidly and so distractedly that when his wife asked him, the moment he was done, what he had eaten, he could not remember. This happens to all of us from time to time. Much more often we cannot remember not the contents but the flavor of a meal—or, say, of a day spent at the office. We might say that the meal or day tasted good or bad and not know what we meant by this or have much of an idea what had gone into the dish. Busy, busying ourselves, preoccupied, do we, often deliberately, fail to experience the lives we are living? And is this not-appreciating something to savor?

Images

The image of the pool of water is if *le Grand bassin octagonal* of the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris, the photo has appeared on an fr.wikipedia.org site.

The photograph of the Somali is by John Moore, via Getty Images. It appeared in *The Guardian's* "**Poverty matters blog.**"

The image of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich is from a promotion for **Sarabeth's** restaurant in New York. It is made with seven-grain bread, strawberry-raspberry jam and salty, crunchy peanut butter.

The kissing-biting close-up was found on Tumblr, photographer unknown.

References with Links (and one quote)

John Cage as quoted by Alex Ross in *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (Picador, 2007).

Stuart Gilbert's translation of Albert Camus's, *La peste* (Gallimard, 1947) is available from Vintage: *The Plague*.

Ian Craib, *The Importance of Disappointment*. (Routledge, 1994).

Carolyn Abbate's English translation of Vladimir Jankélévitch's *La musique et l'ineffable* (A. Colin, 1961) was published by Princeton University Press in 2003: *Music and the Ineffable*.

Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850* (a series of articles written between January and October 1850 for the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* journal).

—, *Capital, Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. The fetishism of commodities is discussed in Chapter One, Section 4. From a translation offered at www.marxists.org:



There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things qua commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, which assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.

Adam Phillips's comments on our voraciousness may be found in his *Paris Review* interview, "*The Art of Nonfiction No. 7*," interview by Paul Holdenraber, *Paris Review* 208, Spring 2014.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant : Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, édition corrigée avec index par Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre (Gallimard, 1943).

World Food Programme, "*Hunger Statistics*."

I have also discussed the commercial drive toward blandness in a short essay: "*For all you know you could be a chocolate cake*," March 2000.