A DISSERTATION ON ROAST PIG

Charles Lamb

Mankind, says a Chinese manuscript, which my friend M. was obliging enough to read and explain to me, for the first seventy thousand ages ate their meat raw, clawing or biting it from the living animal, just as they do in Abyssinia1 to this day. This period is not obscurely hinted at by their great Confucius in the second chapter of his Mundane Mutations,2 where he designates a kind of golden age by the term Cho-fang, literally the Cooks’ Holiday. The manuscript goes on to say that the art of roasting, or rather broiling (which I take to be the elder brother), was accidentally discovered in the manner following:

The swineherd Ho-ti, having gone out in the woods one morning, as his manner was, to collect masts3 for his hogs, left his cottage in the care of his eldest son Bo-bo, a great lubberly4 boy, who being fond of playing with fire, as younkers5 of his age commonly are, let some sparks escape into a bundle of straw, which kindling quickly, spread the conflagration over every part of their poor mansion, till it was reduced to ashes. Together with the cottage (a sorry antediluvian6 makeshift of a building, you may think it), what was of much more importance, a fine litter of new-farrowed pigs, no less than nine in number, perished. China pigs had been esteemed a luxury all over the East, from the remotest periods that we read of. Bo-bo was in the utmost consternation, as you may think, not so much for the sake of the tenement, which his father and he could easily build up again with a few dry branches and the labour of an hour or two at any time, as for the loss of the pigs. While he was thinking what he should say to his father and wringing his hands over the smoking remnants of one of those untimely sufferers, an odour assailed his nostrils, unlike any scent which he had before experienced. What could it proceed from?—not from the burnt cottage—he had smelt that smell before—indeed this was by no means the first accident of the kind which had occurred through the negligence of this unlucky young firebrand.7 Much less did it resemble that of any known herb, weed, or flower. A premonitory moistening at the same time overflowed his nether lip. He knew not what to think. He next stooped

---

1 Modern Ethiopia; Lamb here is using Abyssinia as a synecdoche for Africa.
2 No such work exists; Lamb has made this up to solidify his logos.
3 Acorns and similar nuts used as fodder for pigs.
4 Clumsy; oafish; loutish; stupid.
5 Youngster.
6 Extremely old (literally, “before the flood,” i.e., before the story of Noah’s ark in the biblical Book of Genesis).
7 Properly, someone who inflames a crowd, a rabble-rouser; here, Lamb is humorously using it in a literal sense, i.e., someone who burns something down.
down to feel the pig, if there were any signs of life in it. He burnt his fingers, and to cool them he applied them in his booby fashion to his mouth. Some of the crumbs of the scorched skin had come away with his fingers, and for the first time in his life (in the world’s life indeed, for before him no man had known it) he tasted—crackling! Again he felt and fumbled at the pig. It did not burn him so much now, still he licked his finger from a sort of habit. The truth at length broke into his slow understanding, that it was the pig that smelt so, and the pig that tasted so delicious; and surrendering himself up to the newborn pleasure, he fell to tearing up whole handfuls of the scorched skin with the flesh next it, and was cramming it down his throat in his beastly fashion, when his sire entered amid the smoking rafters, armed with retributory cudgel, and, finding how affairs stood, began to rain blows upon the young rogue’s shoulders, as thick as hailstones, which Bo-bo heeded not any more than if they had been flies. The tickling pleasure which he experienced in his lower regions had rendered him quite callous to any inconveniences he might feel in those remote quarters. His father might lay on, but he could not beat him from his pig, till he had fairly made an end of it, when, becoming a little more sensible of his situation, something like the following dialogue ensued:

“You graceless whelp, what have you got there devouring? Is it not enough that you have burnt me down three houses with your dog’s tricks, and be hanged to you, but you must be eating fire, and I know not what—what have you got there, I say?”

“O father, the pig, the pig! Do come and taste how nice the burnt pig eats.”

The ears of Ho-ti tingled with horror. He cursed his son, and he cursed himself that ever he should beget a son that should eat burnt pig.

Bo-bo, whose scent was wonderfully sharpened since morning, soon raked out another pig, and fairly rending it asunder, thrust the lesser half by main force into the fists of Ho-ti, still shouting out, “Eat, eat, eat the burnt pig, father, only taste—O Lord,”—with such-like barbarous ejaculations, cramming all the while as if he would choke.

Ho-ti trembled every joint while he grasped the abominable things, wavering whether he should not put his son to death for an unnatural young monster, when the crackling scorching his fingers, as it had done his son’s, and applying the same remedy to them, he in his turn tasted some of its flavour, which, make what sour mouths he would for a pretense, proved not altogether displeasing to him. In conclusion (for the manuscript here is a little tedious), both father and son fairly sat down to the mess, and never left off till they had dispatched all that remained of the litter.

Bo-bo was strictly enjoined not to let the secret escape, for the neighbors would certainly have stoned them for a couple of abominable wretches, who could think of improving upon the good meat which God had sent them. Nevertheless, strange stories got about. It was
observed that Ho-ti’s cottage was burnt down now more frequently than ever. Nothing but fires from this time forward. Some would break out in broad day, others in the night-time. As often as the sow farrowed, so sure was the house of Ho-ti to be in a blaze; and Ho-ti himself, which was the more remarkable, instead of chastising his son seemed to grow more indulgent to him than ever. At length they were watched, the terrible mystery discovered, and father and son summoned to take their trial at Pekin, rather than in an inconsiderable assize town. Evidence was given, the obnoxious food itself produced in court, and verdict about to be pronounced, when the foreman of the jury begged that some of the burnt pig, of which the culprits stood accused, might be handed into the box. He handled it, and they all handled it, and burning their fingers, as Bo-bo and his father had done before them, and nature prompting to each of them the same remedy, against the face of all the facts and the clearest charge which judge had ever given,—to the surprise of the whole court, townsfolk, strangers, reporters, and all present—without leaving the box or any manner of consultation whatever, they brought in a simultaneous verdict of Not Guilty.

The judge, who was a shrewd fellow, winked at the manifest iniquity of the decision, and, when the court was dismissed, went privily and bought up all the pigs that could be had for love or money. In a few days his Lordship’s townhouse was observed to be on fire. The thing took wing, and now there was nothing to be seen but fires in every direction. Fuel and pigs grew enormously dear all over the district. The insurance offices one and all shut up shop. People built slighter and slighter every day, until it was feared that the very science of architecture would in no long time be lost to the world. Thus this custom of firing houses continued, till in process of time, says my manuscript, a sage arose, like our Locke, who made a discovery, that the flesh of swine, or indeed of any other animal, might be cooked (burnt, as they call it) without the necessity of consuming a whole house to dress it. Then first began the rude form of a gridiron. Roasting by the string or spit came in a century or two later, I forget in whose dynasty. By such slow degrees, concludes the manuscript, do the most useful and seemingly the most obvious arts make their way among mankind.

Without placing too implicit faith in the account above given, it must be agreed that, if a worthy pretext for so dangerous an experiment as setting houses on fire (especially in these days) could be assigned in favour of any culinary object, that pretext and excuse might be found in roast pig.

---

8 Pre-twentieth century English spelling of Beijing.
9 Place where trials (assizes) take place.
10 Secretly.

11 John Locke (1632–1704), English philosopher, father of classical liberalism. His works, especially *Two Treatises of Government* and *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, were major influences on the Enlightenment and the American revolutionaries.
Of all the delicacies in the whole mundus edibilis, I will maintain it to be the most delicate—princeps obsoniorum.

I speak not of your grown porkers—things between pig and pork—those hobbydehoys—but a young and tender suckling—under a moon old—guiltless as yet of the sty—with no original speck of the amor immunditiae, the hereditary failing of the first parent, yet manifest—his voice as yet not broken, but something between a childish treble and a grumble—the mild forerunner, or præludium, of a grunt.

He must be roasted. I am not ignorant that our ancestors ate them seethed, or boiled—but what a sacrifice of the exterior tegument!

There is no flavour comparable, I will contend, to that of the crisp, tawny, well-watched, not over-roasted, crackling, as it is well called—the very teeth are invited to their share of the pleasure at this banquet in overcoming the coy, brittle resistance—with the adhesive oleaginous—O call it not fat—but an indefinable sweetness growing up to it—the tender blossoming of fat—fat cropped in the bud—taken in the shoot—in the first innocence—the cream and quintessence of the child-pig’s yet pure food—the lean, no lean, but a kind of animal manna—or, rather, fat and lean (if it must be so) so blended and running into each other, that both together make but one ambrosian result or common substance.

Behold him, while he is doing—it seemeth rather a refreshing warmth, then a scorching heat, that he is so passive to. How equably he twirleth round the string!—Now he is just done. To see the extreme sensibility of that tender age, he hath wept out his pretty eyes—radiant jellies—shooting stars—See him in the dish, his second cradle, how meek he lieth!—wouldst thou have had this innocent grow up to the grossness and indocility which too often accompany maturer swinehood? Ten to one he would have proved a glutton, a sloven, an obstinate, disagreeable animal—wallowing in all manner of filthy conversation—from these sins he is happily snatched away—

Ere sin could blight, or sorrow fade,
Death came with timely care—his memory is odoriferous—no clown curseth, while his stomach half rejecteth, the rank bacon—no coalheaver bolteth him in reeking sausages—he hath a fair sepulchre

---

12 Latin: world of food.
13 Latin: the greatest of dainty dishes.
14 Someone of an age between boyhood and manhood; an early adolescent.
15 Latin: love of filth.
16 Latin: a preliminary action. In music, a prelude (præludium) is a movement that serves as an introduction to a longer piece.
17 A covering; in this case, the skin.
18 In Exodus 16, a food supplied miraculously to the Israelites during their forty years in the desert after their flight from the Egyptians.
19 Describing the food of the Greek gods.
20 “Epitaph on an Infant” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1794); in the second line, Lamb has changed the phrase “friendly care” to “timely care.”
in the grateful stomach of the judicious epicure—and for such a tomb might be content to die.

He is the best of sapors. Pineapple is great. She is indeed almost too transcendent—a delight, if not sinful, yet so like to sinning, that really a tender-conscienced person would do well to pause—too ravishing for mortal taste, she woundeth and excoriateth the lips that approach her—like lover's kisses, she biteth—she is a pleasure bordering on pain from the fierceness and insanity of her relish—but she stoppeth at the palate—she meddleth not with the appetite—and the coarsest hunger might barter her consistently for a mutton chop.

Pig—let me speak his praise—is no less provocative of the appetite than he is satisfactory to the criticalness of the censorious palate. The strong man may batten on him, and the weakling refuse not his mild juices.

Unlike to mankind's mixed characters, a bundle of virtues and vices, inexplicably intertwined, and not to be unravelled without hazard, he is—good throughout. No part of him is better or worse than another. He helpeth, as far as his little means extend, all around. He is the least envious of banquets. He is all neighbors' fare.

I am one of those, who freely and ungrudgingly impart a share of the good things of this life which fall to their lot (few as mine are in this kind) to a friend. I protest I take as great an interest in my friend's pleasures, his relishes, and proper satisfactions, as in mine own.

“Presents,” I often say, “endear Absents.” Hares, pheasants, partridges, snipes, barn-door chickens (those “tame villatic fowl”22), capons, plovers, brawn, barrels of oysters, I dispense as freely as I receive them. I love to taste them, as it were, upon the tongue of my friend. But a stop must be put somewhere. One would not, like Lear, “give everything.” I make my stand upon pig. Methinks it is an ingratitude to the Giver of all good flavours, to extra-domiciliate, or send out of the house, slightly (under pretext of friendship, or I know not what) a blessing so particularly adapted, predestined, I may say, to my individual palate—it argues an insensibility.

I remember a touch of conscience in this kind at school. My good old aunt, who never parted from me at the end of a holiday without stuffing a sweetmeat23 or some nice thing into my pocket, had dismissed me one evening with a smoking plum-cake, fresh from the oven. In my way to school (it was over London Bridge), a gray-headed old beggar saluted me (I have no doubt at this time of day24 that he was a counterfeit). I had no pence25 to console him with, and in the vanity of self-denial, and the very coxcombry of charity, schoolboy-like, I made him a present of—the whole cake! I walked on a little, buoyed up, as one is on such occasions, with a sweet

21 The quality of taste.

22 Villatic means rural. John Milton uses this phrase in Samson Agonistes (1671) to mean “chicken.”

23 A sweet food (e.g., pastry, candy).

24 Looking back at it now (when Lamb has grown up).

25 Pennies (i.e., money).
soothing of self-satisfaction; but before I had got to
the end of the bridge, my better feelings returned and I burst
into tears, thinking how ungrateful I had been to my good
aunt, to go and give her good gift away to a stranger that I
had never seen before, and who might be a bad man for
aught I knew; and then I thought of the pleasure my aunt
would be taking in thinking that I—I myself, and not
another—would eat her nice cake—and what should I say
to her the next time I saw her—how naughty I was to part
with her pretty present—and the odour of that spicy cake
came back upon my recollection, and the pleasure and
the curiosity I had taken in seeing her make it, and her
joy when she sent it to the oven, and how disappointed
she would feel that I had never had a bit of it in my mouth
at last—and I blamed my impertinent spirit of almsgiving,
and out-of-place hypocrisy of goodness, and above all I
wished never to see the face again of that insiduous,
good-for-nothing, old gray impostor.

Our ancestors were nice in their method of sacrificing
these tender victims. We read of pigs whipt to death with
something of a shock, as we hear of any other obsolete
custom. The age of discipline is gone by, or it would be
curious to inquire (in a philosophical light merely) what
effect this process might have towards intenerating and
dulcifying a substance, naturally so mild and dulcet
as the flesh of young pigs. It looks like refining a violet.
Yet we should be cautious, while we condemn the

inhumanity, how we censure the wisdom of the practice.
It might impart a gusto—

I remember an hypothesis, argued upon by the young
students when I was at St. Omer’s, and maintained with
much learning and pleasantry on both sides: “Whether,
supposing that the flavor of a pig who obtained his death
by whipping (per flagellationem extremam) superadded
a pleasure upon the palate of a man more intense than
any possible suffering we can conceive in the animal, is
man justified in using that method of putting the animal
to death?” I forget the decision.

His sauce should be considered. Decidedly, a few
bread crumbs, done up with his liver and brains, and a
dash of mild sage. But, banish, dear Mrs. Cook, I beseech
you, the whole onion tribe. Barbecue your whole hogs to
your palate, steep them in shallots, stuff them out with
plantations of the rank and guilty garlic; you cannot
poison them, or make them stronger than they are—but
consider, he is a weakling—a flower.

26 Making tender (intenerating) and sweet (dulcifying).

27 A school run by expatriate English Jesuits in France; after the
French revolution, it became Stonyhurst College in England.