Oral and Olfactory Art

JOHN HARRIS

No one would surely dispute that art is a sensuous phenomenon; for most of us it is often also a sensual one. But what senses are appealed to by the sensuous and sensual qualities of art? When we try to answer this question a curious fact emerges: there is almost exclusive reliance on two of our senses. It is as if art objects divide almost without remainder between those that offer themselves for the interest and delight of the eyes and those that appeal to the ears. For the sake of propriety I will confine discussion to those sense organs above the neck; but this restraint shows even more clearly the arbitrariness of the distinction between those objects or events which stimulate, delight, or interest the eyes and ears and those which are savored through the senses of taste or smell. What could justify such a distinction?

I shall argue that the distinction is without justification and that food and drink are as capable of being art forms as are painting and sculpture, drama or ballet, literature or music; in short, that our aesthetic delight and interest in visual and auditory rather than in oral and olfactory experience is a crude prejudice.

Inasmuch as aesthetic appreciation has always been intimately involved with beauty, good taste, sensuous and sensual delight, and perhaps even the sublime, it has always been a prejudice to exclude oral and olfactory experience from the canon of art. But aesthetic appreciation covers much more ground than this. It can have to do with the religious dimension of art objects, with their devotional, iconographic, or allegorical function. Where art is figurative or involves representation, it may be the realism or the symbolic interpretation or the infor-

mation content or the power to portray scenes or events or ideas that is important. On the other hand, it may be the expressive or emotional properties of an object that engage our interest or its power to evoke for us remembered or imagined scenes or events.

I

The first thing to note is that it is not clear how many of these functions can in fact be performed by food and drink. Proust more than others realized the tremendous power of tastes and smells; but what sort of power is it? Consider these passages from the first volume of Remembrance of Things Past:

And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid and the crumbs with it touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory — this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather the essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it?

Heady stuff this and powerful. How many artists would not give their place in the Pantheon to have this sort of effect on their audience? But whence comes this sensational effect, and how is it related to tea and cake? Proust tracks it down at last:

And once I had recognised the taste of the crumb of madelaine soaked in her decoction of lime-flowers which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of why this memory made me so happy) immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like the scenery of a theatre to attach itself to the little pavilion, opening on to the garden, which had been built out behind it for my parents... and with the house, the town, from morning to night and in all weathers,... so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and of its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.
Do tastes and smells operate as mere triggers for the memory, as simply the occasion for emotions (and other things) to be recollected in tranquility? It is clear that Proust thinks this is so, but that it is also more. For him it is a tremendous virtue and a formidable power: “But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.”

For Proust, then, smells and tastes hold the vast structure of recollection in the “tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence.” They hold the recollections in their essence, but they are released in our minds. The recollections that they hold are personal to each of us and we, like Proust, must seek them out by reflection.

But is this the case? Often, smells and tastes hold not the vast structure of recollection but a vast power of evocation in “the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence.” Not only can they be the occasion of exquisite pleasure of the sort that invaded Proust’s senses, of transcendent, “all-powerful joy,” but they can also represent swelling scenes and complex ideas. So that if for Proust tea and cake evoke the past, his past, and the recollections occasioned are personal to him, this is not to say that some experiences of the Proustian phenomenological sort may not be perfectly objective ways of characterizing the objects occasioning them.

I mean by “objective” here simply that the events, scenes, or thoughts evoked can be seen to be part of what it is to experience this object, whether this object be food or drink or music or painting. The best test of whether or not the experience in question is objective is of course whether it is, or comes to be, widely shared. Thus if certain tastes or smells generally evoke certain thoughts and feelings or if, under the pressure of suggestion or “criticism,” they come to evoke certain thoughts or feelings, then these will be qualities of the objects occasioning them. If we think of E. M. Forster’s wonderful characterization of one of the movements of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in chapter 5 of *Howard’s End*, we can see more clearly how this works:

Helen said to her aunt: “Now comes the wonderful movement: first of all the goblins, and then a trio of elephants dancing.” . . . “look out for the part where you think you have done with the goblins and they come back,” breathed Helen as the music started with a goblin walking quietly
over the universe from end to end. Others followed him. They were not aggressive creatures; it was that that made them so terrible to Helen. They merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world. After the interlude of elephants dancing, they returned and made the observation for the second time. Helen could not contradict them, for, once at all events she had felt the same, and had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! The Goblins were right.6

One does not have to think that this is what Beethoven’s Fifth, or this part of Beethoven’s Fifth, is really about. Forster’s characterization only has to strike us as apposite, not as definitive.

The power of food and drink to evoke thoughts and scenes might well be used by chefs in the same way as painters, poets, and playwrights rely on us to make certain fairly obvious associations with things they depict or on certain images to evoke particular moods or emotions. For example, a director staging Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida can rely on his audience’s making connections with Hitler’s S.S. if he dresses Achilles’s Myrmidons in black and has them march as if jackbooted.7 Similarly, if trivially, to generations of English people the taste of cucumber sandwiches evoked vicarage lawns and summer afternoons. And of course even if not relied upon by artists or chefs, certain associations may nonetheless become standard and thus part of the art object. Whether or not Gustav Holst intended his “Jupiter” from the Planets Suite to be jolly music or not, those of us who come to it first through the hymn “I Vow to Thee My Country” cannot but bring different associations to the music.

Another feature of the Proust phenomenon concerns not its evocative powers but the exquisite pleasure that is the initial response to the taste of tea and cake. Although Proust “did not yet know and must long postpone discovery of why this memory made [him] so happy,” it did make him happy. It is not important (though it is very interesting) that Proust was able to trace the long and complicated etiology of his all-powerful joy. What matters is that no sooner had the warm liquid touched his palate, than a shudder ran through his whole body. This is a very common reaction to tastes and smells, and it is an integral part of the aesthetic experience they occasion. Integral because inseparable. Smells and tastes are characteristically elusive and allusive, and it matters nothing if we never track down the precise cause of their especial charm nor if the sense that they allude to things past is itself an illusion. Whether the joy that smells and tastes often give us is purely sensuous and sensual or whether it is inextricably mingled with vague
allusions and a disturbing sense of the past, is not a question that we have to settle before we can respond to the sensation fully; and it is therefore not a question we have to settle at all in making a case for food and drink as art forms.

II

Whatever we finally decide about the capacity of food and drink to perform the full gamut of functions performed by all the arts, it is clear that an inability to perform even quite a large slice of that gamut is no disqualification. Many respectable art forms operate, as it were, on only one cylinder. For a purely formal art, many of the functions of art mentioned earlier are irrelevant; and abstract art, minimal art, conceptual art, concrete poetry, the later plays of Samuel Beckett, the music of John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen, and a long list of etceteras concentrate on a very few of the manifold functions of art. Therefore, even if the worst came to the worst and we were to conclude that food and drink function only on the sensuous and sensual level, this in itself would be no bar to their being considered as art forms. But as we have seen, food and drink can certainly evoke scenes, events, memories, and ideas in addition to being occasions of transcendent joy (even if these are not the reasons for which we usually seek them out).

Before turning to some of the objections that might be made to the aspirations of an oral and an olfactory art, we should note two points. The first is that we have ignored, and will continue to ignore, the crucially important visual dimension of food and drink. These forms are fortunate in being able to combine oral and olfactory excitement with tremendous visual interest and delight which are, of course, an integral part of our response to food and drink and a substantial part of their great charm. But for our present purposes we will treat the visual dimension as a mere bonus, as indeed we will that rather less important feature of food and drink, the sounds with which they are associated.

The second point is that the case for food and drink as art forms does not have to wait upon the production of a positive account of what art is which would show how they fit in, any more than any of the other arts have had to wait for such an account. It will be enough if I can show that food and drink share a sufficient number of those features or functions to which we relevantly refer when discussing other “accredited” art forms, and that those features they do not share with particu-
lar art objects (or particularly prestigious ones) are also lacked by many quite respectable works of art.

Before setting out to see what objections might be made to the artistic bona fides of food and drink, it might be as well to consider whether our journey is really necessary. It might well be claimed that food and drink are already considered art forms and that it is only the fact that we live in particularly uncivilized countries that makes us imagine this is not the case. But “the art of food” is still for most people a metaphor; chefs and cellar masters, restaurateurs and proprietors of vineyards are not considered artists in the same way as are virtuoso musicians, composers, or the directors of opera companies. A visit to an excellent restaurant does not have the same cachet as a visit to the concert; a hostess who gives “musical evenings” is artistically serious in a way in which the hostess who gives dinner parties is not. There are no cookery classes in arts faculties, nor is the history of culinary achievements studied in institutions of learning. If I am wrong about all this, so much the better for the argument; but there are sufficient numbers of heretics for the case to be worth making.

So what objections can be made to the idea that food and drink can be art forms, properly so called? It is sometimes said that food and drink cannot be art forms because they are consumed. It is not clear to me why this should be an objection, but insofar as it is, it is also an objection to music—in one ear and out the other. It would be odd indeed if there were an artistic difference between horizontal and vertical consumption. If it is the metamorphosis of food and drink into something less savory that is the ground of the objection, this objection must apply to all art objects which are subject to decay. And if the decay takes centuries rather than hours, we must ask why rapidity of decay marks a difference between art and nonart.

This brings us on to a second objection: that food and drink are ephemeral, that they disappear rapidly, either through decay or digestion, and are irretrievably destroyed by these processes. Again, it is far from clear that an art form which is short-lived is less of an art form for that. This is a feature shared by all performing arts; the experience is transitory and can never be exactly repeated. It is true that we can now record music and film plays, but music and the theater were art forms before the invention of methods of recording them. It is true also that music and plays are very often both preserved, and in a sense created, on paper and can be performed any number of times and in any number of ways from the score or text. But of course this is also
true of food and drink. A combination of recipes and menus can function very like a musical score or the text of a play.

This analogy between food and drink and music or the theater is worth pursuing a little further, for it seems clear that food and drink are (if they are art forms) very complicated performing arts. A recipe tells a competent chef how a particular dish is to be created. How it actually turns out will depend on the degree of expertise or even brilliance of the chef, the quality of the ingredients and of the utensils, and also to a lesser extent on the suitability of the things with which the food is to be eaten— the dishes and cutlery and even the receptivity of the diners. The performance of a piece of music is similarly dependent on the ability of the performer, the quality of his instrument, the acoustics of the room, and again the receptivity of the audience.

To elaborate, a meal requires quite complex orchestration or “staging.” Not only must all the dishes and drinks be individually well rehearsed, prepared, and presented, but their entrances and exits, alone or in combination, are most important. The way certain dishes or flavors can be juxtaposed or the ways in which various tastes, textures, smells, and indeed the visual appearance of all the dishes and drinks can be used to complement one another or to create drama, surprise, or even humor, are all matters of fine judgment and discrimination. Perhaps each of the dishes or wines could stand as a work of art in its own right, but in combination they become parts of a quite different sort of work; just as solo performances by musicians or actors may stand alone, when part of a play or symphony or opera they take on a quite different function and become part of a quite different form of art.

Another objection that is often made to the respectability of food and drink as art forms is that food and drink are necessities, that we cannot live without them, and moreover that we need them every day, that they are the stuff of life. This often takes the form of an argument from decadence, that there is something decadent in elevating the bread and butter of life to the level of art. There are really two arguments here. The first is that art is necessarily nonnecessary. The second, that it is decadent to make art out of everyday life, involves the implicit claim that art is an inessential feature of life.

This is far from obviously true. It may be that we can go without art on a day-to-day basis; we do not need it so often as we need food and drink. But to concede this is far from saying that art is inessential to human beings. It is difficult to think of any society that is or has been totally without art or artistic expression of some sort. And at a very
minimal level one might say that the aesthetic response may be a response to anything at all and also that it is probably always some part of our response to everything. This is not to say that everything is art and art is everywhere. It is to point out that we cannot in advance rule out certain classes of things (the necessary) as incapable of being art. We cannot in advance say what might lead to our awareness of particular things being sensitized or enriched in the way that is characteristic of our response to art.

A similar objection to oral and olfactory art is that food and drink are utilitarian, mundane; that art must somehow transcend the everyday use of things, that it must add some mystery ingredient which carries the object above and beyond ordinary human purposes. Either food and drink, when they are art forms, do achieve this transcendence (and of course the claim is not that food and drink are always art forms, but simply that they are capable of being art), or the objection is misconceived. For there is a long tradition, stretching from Aristotle through William Morris and the English craft movement to the Bauhaus and Trotsky, which argues that things well designed to perform their function are what art is or should be about.

In an otherwise admirable but rather halfhearted defense of odors and tastes, Harold Osbornel seems to deny food and drink the ultimate accolade of fine works of art largely on the grounds that tastes and smells are not susceptible of elaborate structuring.12 It is not clear from what Osborne says, or otherwise, why it is necessary for something to be elaborately structured for it to be a fine work of art. Indeed it is far from clear precisely what it is for something to be elaborately structured. There are so many ways in which a work of art may be said to be structured. All that seems necessary for talk of structure to get off the ground (or to have sound foundations, depending on your structure) is for one to be able to differentiate different parts or aspects of the work and talk about their mutual relations. It is not clear, for example, how structure is related to complexity. Works of art may be very complex but not structurally complex, and some may be very simple, both structurally and otherwise, and yet their power might be located precisely in this simplicity. It may be that in many cases one might be unable to understand a work without reference to its structure, but this is a long way from elevating structure into something like a necessary condition of art. In any event, it is clear that a dish, say a soufflé, may be elaborately structured both physically and in terms of the tastes, textures, and aromas it offers, and we have already noted
the elaborate structure of a whole meal. A fine wine might offer less in the way of complex physical structure (unless we talk trivially of molecular or atomic structure), but its taste and bouquet may provide an astonishing range of sensations. If this is not enough, so much the worse for structure.

A further objection worth considering is the demand that for every art there is an artist. Clearly the chef or the creator of a famous recipe or process (mayonnaise) can count as the artist in the requisite sense, but it is more difficult to point to an only begetter in the case of wine. In addition to the gardeners tending the vines, there are the proprietors who chose which vines to plant and who decide perhaps when to harvest the grapes and the cellarmasters responsible for blending and for decisions about how long to keep the wine in cask before bottling, etc. But we owe the character of the wine also to the weather in a particular year, to the soil conditions on a particular hillside, and to the sensitivity of those who store the wine and those who open the bottle at the right time and at the right temperature. This multiple “authorship” is perhaps no more of a problem than was the vast Renaissance studio in which many hands touched the painting which when finished nonetheless bore the master’s signature.

More difficult are the food and drink of nature — fruit, vegetables, juices, and so on. These take their place with sunsets and birdsong in whatever place they all inhabit. When natural ingredients are used, or even merely presented, by people, they pose no greater problem than natural pigment on the end of an artist’s brush or natural objects used in collage or sculpture, either as part of larger works or as themselves.

It is important that we should be able to educate or cultivate our artistic taste. But if Bertrand Russell was right in saying that whereas we can do as we please, we cannot please as we please, it would follow that we could not educate our preferences for food and drink. Fortunately this is not true, for we can set out to get a taste for something we find at first quite unpalatable. Young people generally do not at first like beer, but their wish to like it soon enables them to acquire the taste. Unhappily the same is often true of cigarettes. It is clear that we can educate our taste in food and drink in much the same way as we can educate our taste in literature or painting or any of the other arts. We can learn gradually to make discriminations that are at first quite beyond our powers. There is such a thing as informed or educated taste in food and drink just as there is in the other arts. In view of this and of the great rewards to be derived from food and drink that really are
art forms, it is a tragedy that we make no effort to educate people in what is perhaps the most fundamental of the arts.

We have been questioning the apparent monopoly of the eyes and ears in the art appreciation business and asking whether the nose and mouth might not be entitled to a corner of the market. In surveying the range of appeal and the functions of some of the more established arts, we found that food and drink were capable of performing a significant subset of those functions and perhaps more of them than are in fact performed by some of the more central and accredited arts. We noted particularly that oral and olfactory art objects are capable of possessing the two sets of qualities most necessary for aesthetic appreciation to take hold. We first looked at the range of expressive, emotional, or evocative qualities, those which give rise to what we called the "Proust phenomenon." The second set are those qualities most commonly called aesthetic qualities, those which make appropriate the use of such terms as harmony, grace, balance, elegance or ugliness, clumsiness, exaggeration, and so on. I would not wish to claim that a superb meal accompanied by great wines could be as important a work of art as, say, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, or Goya's paintings of the events of the second and third of May. But then there are many wines infinitely superior to any painting of Vasarrelly and some foods that surpass the entire corpus of Jackson Pollock.

Notes

1. Similar arguments to those here presented might well be applied to sex as an art form, but perhaps we would want to make sex an art form without a public — or perhaps we would not.
3. Ibid., p. 61.
4. Ibid.
5. As Proust says, "I put down my cup and examine my own mind." Ibid., p. 59.
8. This is part of what Wittgenstein meant when he denied that psychological explanations were of any use in aesthetics. See Cyril Barrett, ed., *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*
As Wittgenstein might have said, "We don't need to know the cause of our joy, merely its target."

9. Food and drink have very wide appeal, making use of all four senses, and it is not really possible to disentangle our response.

10. We can of course now freeze and can food, and we have long been able to dry, pickle, smoke, and otherwise preserve some foods and to bottle wines.


12. See especially ibid., p. 47.

13. It should not be assumed that this means I love Jackson Pollock less, rather that I love food and drink more.