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Opening Extract from...

The Plagiarist in the Kitchen

A Lifetime's Culinary Thefts

Written by Jonathan Meades

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Jonathan Meades

THE PLAGIARIST IN THE KITCHEN

unbound

For Angelica and Laurie

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The successful plagiarist, as both Michel de Montaigne and T. S. Eliot noted, occludes his sources.

Eliot: *We turn first to the parallel quotations from Massinger and Shakespeare collocated by Mr Cruickshank to make manifest Massinger's indebtedness. One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest. Chapman borrowed from Seneca; Shakespeare and Webster from Montaigne.*

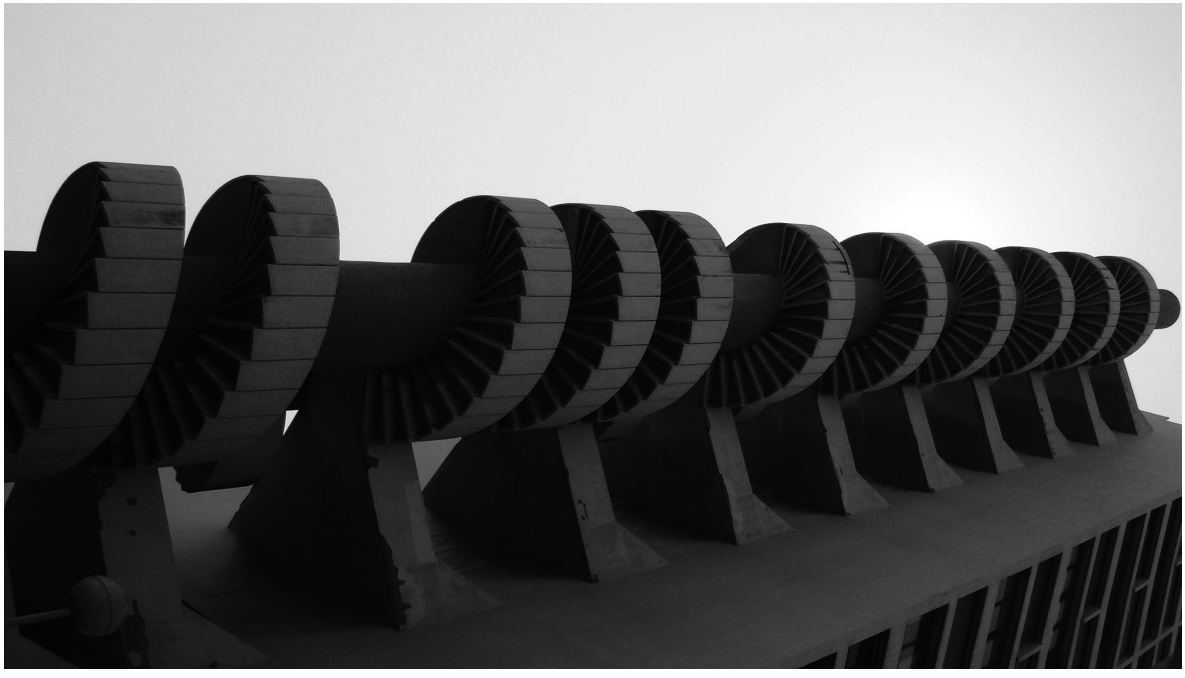
This is the most celebrated disquisition on plagiarism of the modern age, a truistic observation which has become dictat, quoted as irrefutable fact despite the vocational chasm that divides Shakespeare and Montaigne. Eliot advises that: *The attitude of the craftsman like Shakespeare – whose business was to write plays, not to think – is very different from that of the philosopher or literary critic.* (It should be noted that such *craftsmen* as Joyce and Aragon set little store by thinking before writing.)

Yet Eliot's passage is itself borderline plagiaristic. He reiterated Montaigne who wrote: *I hide my thefts, and disguise them. Others flaunt them. Like a horse thief I paint the mane and tail and sometimes blind them in one eye. If the owner had used it as an ambler I turn it into a trotting horse. And if it was a horse to be saddled and ridden I make a packhorse of it.* I do not hide my thefts. I exhibit an absolute

candour about the provenance of this book's content. (That sentence sounds like a lie, and is.) If I know where a recipe comes from I own up to it. However, I don't copy. I steal. Then I make it my own, colour the mane (*la crinière*), which is not to say that I improve it . . . This might be reckoned as criminally coarse as hacking down an exquisite work of, say, Alfred Gilbert and melting it for scrap. So be it. On the other hand, when a recipe has in my opinion been improved by tweaking or the exclusion of certain ingredients, I shall point this out with the falsest modesty known to man.

The book is, further, a deflected meditation on infections of varying gravity: 'influence', 'inspiration', 'homage', 'imitation', Mann's 'higher cribbing', 'channelling' and so on. It proposes that cooking is at best a craft and that craft must always be the same while art must always be different – an unoriginal dictum by the way; it is, of course, Gore Vidal's. (The sort of craft he had in mind was cake-making or scented candle-moulding. He revered Shakespeare as an artist. Beside the haughty desiccated Anglican Eliot, Vidal is a model of humility – that's something that can seldom be said.)

BASICS ARE ON PP. 11–23 . . . DON'T WALK AWAY . . . CONCENTRATE . . . FUCK THE GUESTS . . . AND ALL THAT CONVIVIALITY MALARKY . . . DO NOT WASTE BREAD: OIL IT AND REBAKE IT . . . STOCK! . . . GET TREATMENT FOR SQUEAMISHNESS . . . VEGETARIANISM IS CURABLE . . .'



SOUP

STRACCIATELLA

LIGHT STOCK – PREDOMINANTLY CHICKEN

EGGS

PARMESAN OR PECORINO ROMANO

Beat up 1 egg per person. Mix with grated cheese – I prefer Pecorino Romano – to make a light paste. Put a generous dollop of paste in each bowl. Pour on boiling stock.

PASTA E CECI / PASTA AND CHICKPEAS

This one fell off the back of an Alastair Little. It also derives from the version served at Mimi alla Ferrovia in Naples. There is a further correspondence with the Cypriot houmous soup prepared long long ago by the Koritsas family at their delightful café opposite Camden Town underground station.

500g chickpeas

500g pasta (rombi or pappardelle)

olive oil

4 sticks celery

6 cloves garlic

1 ham bone

Soak the chickpeas overnight. Cook them for 3 or more hours with the ham bone at a low temperature, just simmering. Sweat the celery and garlic. When they're soft add nearly all the cooked chickpeas. Put the lot through the processor. Use chickpea water and oil to get a soupy consistency. Cook the pasta, add to the soup. Decorate with the remaining chickpeas – or don't bother.

SMOKED HADDOCK SOUP

The restaurant trade likes place names. The supposition is that they legitimise a dish's provenance. A dish then is not a creation, it's *natural*, *traditional*; like folksongs and oak apple day it just happened to have happened without authorial intervention, parthenogenetically.

This soup is frequently billed as Cullen Skink. Cullen is a Moray sea town. Like its neighbours Keith and Elgin (the Athens of the even further north) it is formally planned and rather grand.

Much of the town is dominated by an immense railway viaduct. From the main street the sea is visible only through one of its arches which is transformed into a proscenium arch. The theatrical magic of this framed aspect recalls de Chirico.

Skinks (haddocks) have, for over a century and a half, been intensively reared in closed weel-puidges to the east of the town. This practice precurses battery farming and is routinely condemned by fish welfare groups such as CBHC. From a culinary point of view there is nothing to distinguish a farmed skink from a free-range one. Nor does vivid yellow dye detract from the flavour even though it is widely regarded as a gastronomic solecism.

1KG SMOKED HADDOCK, SKINNED AND BONED

500G FLOURY POTATOES

2L MILK

50CL CREAM

WHITE PEPPER

PINCH OF POWDERED CLOVE, NUTMEG, CINNAMON – GO EASY

Chop haddock and potatoes. Put them in a heavy double boiler with cold milk, cream and pepper.

Heat. Take care. Even with a double boiler there is a chance that it will boil over. What's needed is constant attention and a very douce simmer – not a white apocalypse. Stir frequently. Cook for 25 minutes. The ingredients will have begun to disintegrate. They can be further mashed.

Cooking the haddock for 10 minutes too long might seem excessive. The goal is to infuse everything with the flavour of the smoke.

HARICOT BLANC SOUP

HARICOTS BLANCS

END OF RAW HAM

LIGHT CLEAR STOCK

ONIONS

GARLIC

WHITE LEEK

FENNEL

OLIVE OIL

Soak the haricots overnight. Cook them with the ham bone in chicken stock till soft. Make a white mirepoix (p. 14).

Blend together the beans, the oil and the mirepoix in a mouli or a processor.

Add more strained stock.

Do not decorate.

Craft, then, if it is always to be the same, is necessarily plagiaristic. Originality has no place in the kitchen. Fusion cooking is a sad joke. That is, the deliberate elision (more likely prang) of culinary idioms, of, so to speak, Cyrillic and pictograms. The fusion that comes from colonisation and exploration is different – thus Charentais chaudrée became New England's chowder.

Little ender or big ender, a boiled egg plagiarises the line of boiled eggs going back millennia. Its debt is of a different kind to Swift's putting into Gulliver's mouth words that have been plundered verbatim from *Mariner's Magazine*. Or Sterne's nifty effrontery in denouncing plagiarism in words stolen from Robert Burton – surely a gag precursive of Duchamp. He was waiting to get found out. Which he wasn't, till after his death.

HAMBURGER SAURE SUPPE > AALSUPPE

The combination of sweet and savoury flavours may seem odd to the English palate but is commonplace in northern Germany where, for instance, plums are served with meat, rhubarb with fish, and broths are flavoured with dried berries. This recipe is broadly based on that given by Alan Davidson in *North Atlantic Seafood*. However it omits the dumplings which Davidson prescribes and includes gingerbread and black bread which is the practice of a strenuously gemütlich restaurant in Altona whose name I forget.

END OF RAW HAM

CELERIAC

CARROTS

LEEKS

PRUNES

SULTANAS

DRIED PEARS

DRIED APRICOTS

CARAWAY SEEDS

JUNIPER BERRIES

CLOVES

BLACK BREAD

GINGERBREAD

VINEGAR

BROWN SUGAR

(POACHED EEL (P. 64) – OPTIONAL)

Cook the end of ham in 2 litres of water with the juniper berries and caraway seeds. Skim. After an hour discard the berries and seeds and remove the meat from the bone. Return it to its now reduced cooking liquid with the chopped vegetables and the dried fruit. Cook for a further 40 minutes. Add crumbled gingerbread and diced black bread; adjust the flavour with vinegar and sugar.

(Put in the pieces of eel previously cooked in court-bouillon and heat them through. This addition transforms saure suppe into aalsuppe.)

JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE SOUP

These tubers are neither artichokes nor connected to Jerusalem. They are a bore to peel. But their flavour is unlike anything else. An intern is once again useful.

JERUSALEM ARTICHOKES

LIGHT STOCK

Steam the peeled and thinly sliced artichokes. Put them through a mouli then into a pan. Add stock. Cook at a simmer for half an hour.

In Adelaide in 1986, Alain Robbe-Grillet, wearing a rumpled safari suit, announced to Craig Raine and Cabrera Infante that *Je suis voleur*. He was saying just the opposite. And he knew that they knew: the most original prose writer of the second half of the 20th century could get away with any number of false confessions because that prose seemed to start at year zero.

No genuine literary thief would ever dare make so shameful an admission. The genuine thief fears exposure. The genuine thief secretly craves exposure. For him theft is a creative act that obliterates his imaginative poverty, a creative act he wishes to be acknowledged.

CAULIFLOWER SOUP

1 CAULIFLOWER

3 LARGE FLOURY POTATOES

1 ONION

150CL MILK

2 EGG YOLKS

CREAM

NUTMEG

Excise the tougher bit of cauliflower stem. Chop the rest of it and blanch it.

Put it to boil in fresh water, gently, with the quartered onion. Boil the potatoes in another pan. When the cauliflower and onion are soft put them

through a processor. When the potato is ready put it through a mouli. Put them together in a pan to cook with the milk. Don't let it boil over. Cook for an age. Add cream to thicken, nutmeg to revert to childhood, beaten eggs yolks to enrichen.

FENNEL SOUP

This delicious slightly sweet soup was serendipitous. Half-inched from Chance, then. I became absorbed in a football match I had expected to be a disappointment so forgot to check the bulbs I was braising. But I inadvertently timed my run to perfection and got to the pot before it had caught. The thinly sliced fennel had melted.

6 FENNEL BULBS
75CL LIGHT STOCK
(25CL CREAM)
BUTTER
OLIVE OIL

In a pan with a lid sweat the thinly sliced fennel in butter, oil and 10cl stock for 90 minutes at least. Process it. Add the remaining stock and the cream, maybe.

> Cooking can never actually fulfil its obligation to plagiarise because the just cooked plagiarised dish is sloping through someone's digestive tract and the next time it is cooked it will be with fresh ingredients (unless we are discussing a coprophagic cycle).

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ALMOND SOUP

The genuine article bulks out the almonds with almost as much bread. This dilutes the flavour of the almonds. So forget about the genuine article. Forget too about including grapes and vinegar.

350G BLANCHED ALMONDS

4 CLOVES GARLIC

75CL ICED WATER

15CL SUNFLOWER OIL

Process the almonds and garlic to a dry mass that sticks to the sides of the bowl. Scrape into the centre of the bowl. Add water gradually till you have a soup-like consistency. Add sunflower oil (olive oil overpowers the almonds). Serve very cold.

CUCUMBER SOUP

2 CUCUMBERS

75CL CAILLÉ OR SHEEP YOGHURT OR GOAT YOGHURT

MINT

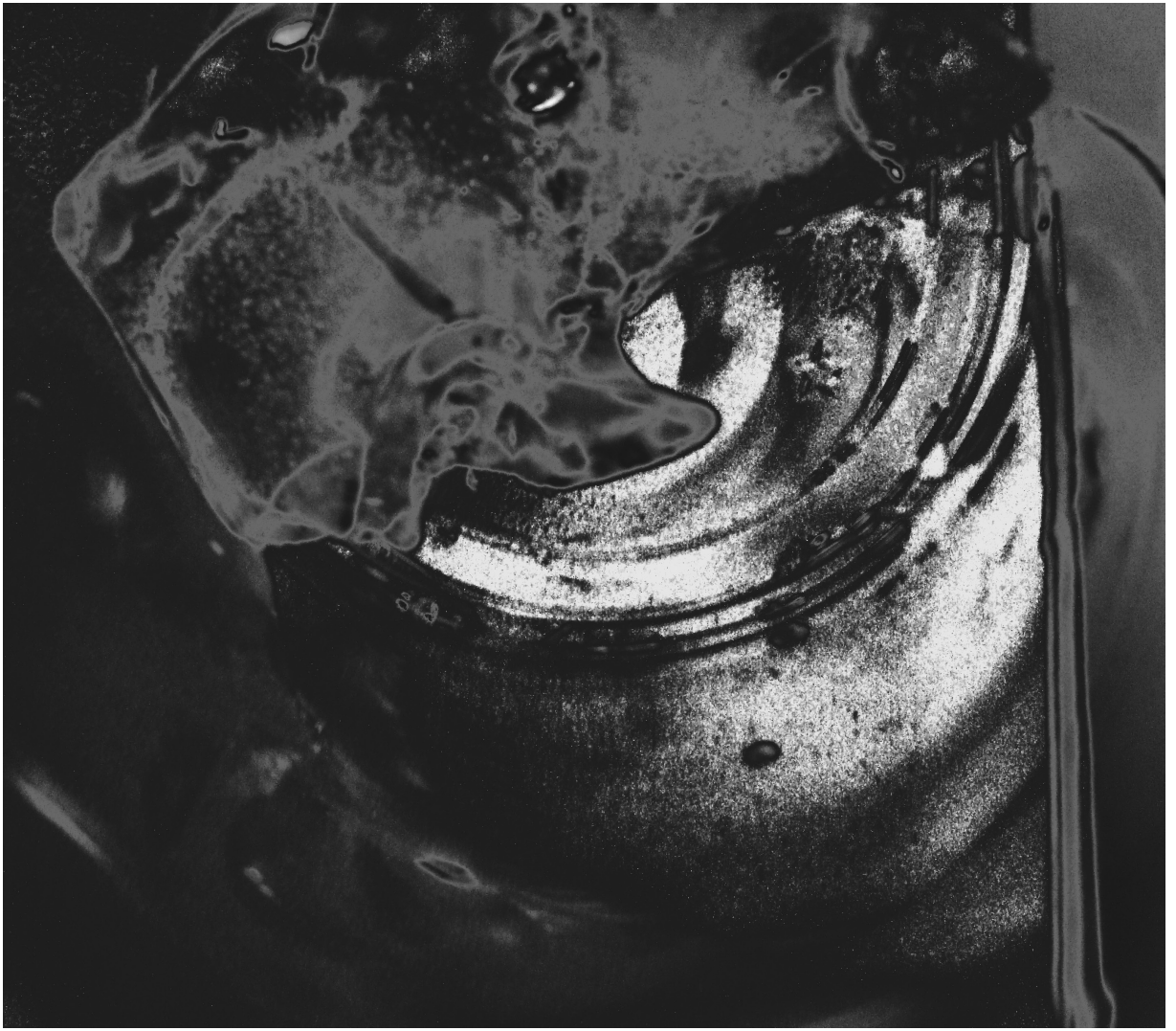
ICED WATER

COLZA OIL

Peel and deseed the cucumber. Put it in the processor with whichever lactic product you choose and blast it. Caillé is fermented and very light, of Basque origin, at the far end of the spectrum from Greek yoghurt. Adjust the texture with water and a drop or two of colza oil. Add chopped mint if you fancy it, but not much. Serve chilled.

The Tichborne Claimant, Perkin Warbeck, Lambert Simnel . . . Usurpers and pretenders are plagiarists whose creation is themselves.

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EGG

DEEP-FRIED EGGS

A childhood treat.

Do not try it if you are not confident about domestic deep-frying. My mother was overconfident: she had a certain expertise in setting light to kitchens.

A wok, an implement I seldom use, is handy. You will also need a slotted spoon and 2 large shallow wooden spoons.

EGGS

PEANUT OIL

The oil must be hot. Put the wooden spoons in the oil to heat them so that the eggs don't stick to them. Do eggs one at a time. Break an egg into a bowl. Slide the egg into the oil. Immediately begin to bathe the exposed side with bubbling oil and cover the yolk with albumen – come at it from both directions with the shallow spoons. Give it 20 seconds then turn the egg over. The side which has been lower will be brown and frilly. Another 20 seconds – then lift it out with a slotted spoon. Degrease on kitchen roll.

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EGGS, SOFT-BOILED AND FRIED

4 EGGS

1 BEATEN EGG

VINEGAR

FLOUR

FINE BREADCRUMBS

Boil eggs for a bare 4 minutes in vinegary water (this makes removing the shell easier). Take them out and put them into cold water with ice cubes to stop them cooking. Peel off the shell. Roll the eggs in flour. Then in beaten egg. Then in breadcrumbs. Fry fairly gently in butter till the breadcrumbs are well coloured. Take great care when turning them.

The cook's duty is to plagiarise. If the cook doesn't plagiarise he is forced to invent. And invention has no place in cooking. However, cryptomnesia – the conviction that we have invented what we have unwittingly lifted from elsewhere – has a paramount part to play.

TORTILLA

1KG POTATOES

500G ONIONS

8 CLOVES GARLIC

8 EGGS

25CL CREAM

PIMENTON PICCANTE

Sweat the sliced onions, garlic and potatoes with pimenton in olive oil in a pan with a lid. The potatoes must fry without taking on colour and developing a crust – so control the cooking with the lid which, when affixed, will cause them to steam. Beat the eggs and cream. Add the potato and onion mix. Oil a pan deep enough to allow the tortilla to rise. Cook in the oven at about 150°C so that it doesn't stick. After 20 minutes turn over the tortilla into a second oiled pan. This can be tricky. Be patient.

CHEESE SOUFFLÉ

Soufflés gain nothing from being made with flour.

6 EGGS

100G COMTÉ

50G PECORINO ROMANO OR PARMESAN

BUTTER

Butter a high-sided vessel – the raw soufflé mix should not come more than two-thirds of the way up the sides. Preheat oven to 200°C. Separate the eggs. If you fuck up do not chance it by including broken yolk in the albumen, it'll prevent it stiffening. Grate the cheese finely. Mix all of the Comté and 40g of the Pecorino with the beaten yolks. Whisk the egg whites till they are sufficiently stiff to form peaks. Fold the whites into the yolk and cheese mix. Do not get too thorough, the whites must retain their airiness – the thing you are constructing is, after all, called a breath. Powder the top with the remaining Pecorino. Cook for 30–35 minutes. Serve immediately.

I would not exchange my favourite fare (bacon and eggs, beer) for the most misspelt menu in the world. Vladimir Nabokov.

Not sure about that word 'fare'.

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TRIPLE SEC SOUFFLÉ

6 EGGS

120G ICING SUGAR

10CL COINTREAU

BUTTER

Butter and sugar a high-sided vessel – the raw soufflé mix should not come more than two-thirds of the way up the sides. Preheat oven to 200°C. Separate the eggs. If you fuck up do not chance it by including broken yolk in the albumen, it'll prevent it stiffening. Mix 110g of the sugar with the Cointreau and beaten yolks. Whisk the whites till they are stiff. Fold the whites into the yolk mix. Powder the top with the remaining sugar. Cook for 30–35 minutes. Serve immediately.

ROTHSCHILD SOUFFLÉ

Follow the Triple Sec recipe adding chopped glacé fruits to the yolks and Cointreau. Cut the amount of sugar accordingly.

SABAYON / ZABAGLIONE

It was a photograph in *Nova*, a thrilling magazine to a teenage boy, which prompted me to first attempt this, to show off to a teenage girl. In the mid-Sixties it had become suddenly fashionable for men to cook: the ability to do something other than a fry-up was as essential as a twin-tab collar shirt, a tonic suit and a pack of Gitanes. I blame Len Deighton.

4 EGG YOLKS

60G SUGAR

Whisk the yolks and sugar in a bowl over hot, but not quite boiling, water. Whisk in opposite directions. The mixture will gradually thicken and pale. Grate in some orange zest. Add a small glass of sweet wine. Serve warm, immediately.

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