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# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Beauty on Wry

Robert Wood · Wednesday, July 8th, 2015

In the opening episode of the documentary series *Chef's Table*, Massimo Bottura discusses the earthquake that shook his home region of Modena in 2012. 360,000 wheels of cheese had been damaged and that could have spelled the end of parmiggiano reggiano. What he did was create a recipe of risotto with cacio e pepe using the cheese. It was cooked around the world from London to Tokyo. As Bottura says, 'on that day, 40,000 people were eating risotto. All the wheels were sold and no one lost a job. It was a recipe as social justice.'

It has only been a recent occurrence that chefs occupy such a venerated position in the global media-scape. Along with the rise of starchitects in the 1990s, this strikes me as one fundamental change to the cultural ecology of our times. What then is the lesson poets can take from chefs like Bottura, or for that matter Rene Redzepi and Ferran Adria?

I think the lesson to be drawn from food, thought of as another creative field, is not only at the level of strategy, of how to engage the world anew so that it listens, but also at the level of artistic practice itself. One notes with Bottura the dribbles and dazzle of the plates themselves. People will recognise this in other 'post-modern' restaurants as well. This is food as art, but it is a particular type of art. It has its roots in abstract expressionism at the level of presentation and plating up. Richter looms as a particular influence on Bottura for example. For poetry, we might want to signpost the end of realism. If Heston Blumental's duck a l'orange teaches us anything it is that a sandwich is not a sandwich, a rose is not a rose.

The question for poetry is: what would a corresponding aesthetic engagement look like?

People like Bottura, Adria and Redzepi highlight how local their produce is. They forage near their restaurants, they build relations with farmers who live close to them, they have a decidedly located sense of place. The food though utilises cutting edge techniques – it ties into scientific gastronomy as well as the technical knowledge of French haute cuisine. This is not the demotic, the vernacular, the idiomatic of the local alone. It relies on what passes as 'universal' good taste. That marriage is a lesson for poets. Make it new, but know where that statement comes from.

What is impressive is that these chefs have attained success from peripheral places. They are not in London or Paris, but Modena and Copenhagen. These are not entirely peripheral locations to be sure, but they are not the metropole either. That should give poets working on the outskirts cause for hope. Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and Wole Soyinka can only confirm this.

The local solute poets work with will depend on where and how one lives. This might mean that

comfort food is pierogis rather than jerk chicken; this might mean the way of saying hello is short and brusque or long and meandering; this might mean the material that constitutes one's ebb and flow of daily life is distinct and apart. In thinking through the universal claims of poetry – of good taste that relies on technique, one need only turn to the Historic forms of poetry that circulate and matter. One should read the classics then. That might be Sappho or Chaucer or Basho; or it might mean Ovid or Shakespeare or Stein. One need though to have a foot in the literary economy as it already exists and another grounded by what is possible when one looks at one's daily life.

Food, like language, is an unavoidable part of our daily lives. If Bottura had a vision of rebelling against and changing Italian cuisine, we need to harness the animating energy of our original poetry desires. Who are the presiding figures to topple? For many years Bottura was scorned and mocked, his food deemed too difficult for the people of Modena. Only with the support of his partner and the lucky appearance of an established food critic did Bottura get a break.

For poets this might take a similar shape. One can labour without being published before there is a breakthrough moment. That is by no means where the journey ends. That is, for many, only the start of what is to come. The ways in which one judges what an acceptable level of success is will differ. Some people covet prizes, others more readers, others still more time on the microphone. There is always a dance between recognising one's position and being satisfied and feeling compelled to keep producing simply because one can and must. Some poets let go of the art and run guns instead; some take many years to be recognised; but we all need figures like Bottura to cook beautiful, challenging food for us in the diminishing light of an increasingly unjust world. That he can teach us as poets should come as no surprise either.

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