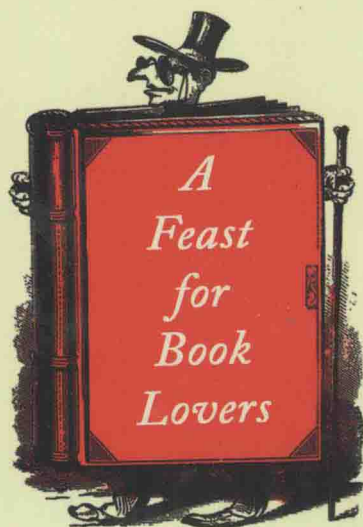


# *Curiosities of Literature*



*John Sutherland*



*Illustrations by Mark Rowson*

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JOHN SUTHERLAND

With illustrations by  
Martin Rowson



A Herman Graf Book  
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*Curiosities of  
Literature*

## Introduction

HAMLET: To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why  
may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander  
till a find it stopping a bung-hole?

HORATIO: 'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.

HAMLET: No, faith, not a jot.

This collection of *Literary Curiosities* is loosely inspired by Isaac D'Israeli's *The Curiosities of Literature*. Loose is the word. D'Israeli's was the first such venture methodically to indulge the unmethodical pleasures of the literary miscellany. Flim-flams, he elsewhere called them. A perennial bestseller, his scholarly flimflamery-flammery went through seven editions between 1791 and 1823. *The Curiosities* is a grab-bag of bibliophile and antiquarian anecdote and literary lore – witty, charming, erudite, and above all 'curious'. D'Israeli serves up a pudding which is all plums.

Modern academic life seems to me more and more like a Japanese car factory – with scholarship that could as well be produced by robots. I suspect even the plum duff we eat at Christmas nowadays is factory produced, and its plums inserted by steely robotic fingers clicking un-merrily on their assembly line. The silver threepenny bits have long since gone, on health and safety grounds.

D'Israeli's 'old curiosity shop' is a welcome antidote. In this contemporary *Curiosities* I have followed D'Israeli's potpourri unmethodicality. Entries have clumped together into sections, by a kind of weak magnetism; but not so as to create any

### *Curiosities of Literature*

systematic order – which would, I think, work against the spirit of the thing. I like to think of the sections as little stewpots – with many ingredients, but a dominant flavour.

Like D’Israeli, I occasionally wander outside the strict confines of literature – although I try to start or finish there. Some of the pieces may be considered too unserious for even unserious readers; some boring; some already stale; some codswallop. Most, I hope, will divert. Driving the enterprise is the less the intention to instruct, or inform, than to communicate the random pleasures which may be found in reading literature, and reading about literature. Why else read?

I am grateful to Nigel Wilcockson for sanctioning this project (at Random House expense), Victoria Hobbs for arranging things, and Messrs Google and Xerox for their help throughout. A few of the entries have been published, in different form, in the *Guardian*, the *New Statesman* and the *Sunday Telegraph*. ‘Thrift’ – as Hamlet says to Horatio, à propos of the funeral baked-meats. On, then, to literary baked-meats.

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I

# *Literary Baked Meats*

*'Erst fressen' – 'Grub First'*

*Bertolt Brecht*





## OMELETTE LITTERAIRE

Many writers have their idiosyncratic gastronomic preferences. Jack London, for example, was devoted to duck, plucked but very lightly seared. 'Raw', others thought. His nickname among those close to him was 'Wolf'. One would probably not have wanted to be too close to Jack at lunch time, while wolfing his *canard Londres*.

Only one novelist, as far as I know, has given his name to a dish which has taken its place in classic cuisine. Arnold Bennett, the bestselling middlebrow novelist, about whom highbrow Virginia Woolf was frequently rude, dined – when not on his yacht or in the south of France – at the Savoy, off the Strand, in London. He could afford to; Bennett sold a lot more books than Mrs. Woolf. Almost as much as fellow south-of-Franciers E. Phillips Oppenheim and Somerset Maugham.

Bennett was a big man at the Savoy. The waiters were circulated with his photograph, so that they would recognize him, and treat him as the honoured guest he was. And, as the highest mark of that honour, the Savoy master chef, Jean Baptist Virlogeux, created a dish in the master novelist's name: *omelette Arnold Bennett*. It's a rather gooey thing in which a *baveuse* ('runny') mess of eggs is artfully mixed with haddock, cheese and herbs.

The dish is still proudly on the Savoy Menu, along with such concoctions as M. Stroganoff's beef and M. Benedict's eggs. It is also on the menu of other top hotels and restaurants in London's West End, such as the Wolseley in Piccadilly, where the waiters routinely call it Omelette Gordon Bennett, or Omelette Alan Bennett.

*Curious Literary Grub*

Those seeking colourful taste thrills in literature might start with J.K. Huysmans' *À rebours* (roughly translates into rough Anglo-Saxon as 'arse about face') in which the dandy hero, Des Esseintes, serves a farewell party comprising all black food, served by negresses, on black china. A change of tone could be introduced with the 'white soup' which is served up by Charles Bingley's servant in *Pride and Prejudice*. The whole thing to be finished with the chocolate-coated lemon-flavoured latrine disinfectant tablet, Patrick Bateman playfully serves up, as a postprandial sweetmeat, to his girlfriend, in *American Psycho* ('it tastes "minty"', she merely observes, innocently). The heroic literary eater must, however, go thylestean. Thyestes is the luckless prince in ancient Greek mythology, unwittingly served up a pudding made of his own sons for supper. It has become a favorite theme in literature. Seneca wrote a revenge

Alas, although his dish remains in print among metropolitan bills of fare, Bennett's novels have fallen out of print – even his return compliment to the Savoy, *Imperial Palace* (in which Virlogeux figures as 'Rocco'). For those curious to taste *omelette Arnold Bennett*, and short of the fifty quid or so they'll charge you in its home base, the recipe for the dish can be found on the food recipes section of the BBC cookery website. As for *le roman Arnold Bennett*? Try eBay, or the nearest Oxfam bookstore.

play on the subject, much translated and imitated in the English Renaissance. Shakespeare introduces a thyestean feast into *Titus Andronicus*. So gothic are the horrors in that play, that it ranks as among the least blood-curdling the audience is made to endure. Swift, mockingly, argues in his 'Modest Proposal' that Ireland's perennial famine can be solved by Hibernian parents consuming their too-many offspring, 'stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassée or a ragout.' In modern literature, the hero of Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief* discovers, the night after a drunken revel with savages, that he has unknowingly feasted on his girlfriend, in what he took to be a peculiarly savory stew. He handles the news without so much as a regretful belch. The *ne plus ultra* is in Thomas Harris's *Hannibal*, where the monster of the title induces a drugged victim to consume slices of his own brain, lightly sauteed in a wok: 'Hey, that tastes pretty good' says the auto-thyestean.

## DR. JOHNSON'S GULOSITY

'Gulosity' is not a word in current use; even at the high tables of Oxford, where the best words are usually to be found. It has a fine Johnsonian ring to it – appropriately so, since Dr. Johnson invented it. Gulosity is defined in the Great Dictionary as a noun indicating 'greediness, voracity, gluttony.'

These words, alas, attach adhesively to the word-maker himself. He had a lust for food which, if contemporary accounts are to be credited, offended those of delicate disposition who happened



to be in the Great Cham's fallout area. This is Macaulay's description (writing, it should be said, from historical accounts, fifty years after Johnson's death):

The old philosopher is still among us in the brown coat with the metal buttons and the shirt which ought to be at the wash, blinking, puffing, Rolling his head, drumming with his fingers, tearing his meat like a tiger, and swallowing his tea in oceans.

Boswell, on his first meeting with Johnson, was immediately impressed with the great man's appetite. 'Some people' Johnson informed the (then) slim young Scot, 'have a foolish way of not minding, or pretending not to mind, what they eat. For my part, I mind my belly very studiously, and very carefully; for I look upon it, that he who does not mind his belly will hardly mind anything else.'

He was, Boswell reverently thought, in the presence of '*Jean Bull philosophe*'. At least, when talking. When actually guzzling, our philosophical John Bull was something else:

When at table . . . his looks seemed riveted to his plate; nor would he, unless when in very high company, say one word, or even pay the least attention to what was said by others, till he had satisfied his appetite, which was so fierce, and indulged with such intensity, that while in the act of eating, the veins of his forehead swelled, and generally a strong perspiration was visible.

Plates, one must assume, were lucky to survive Samuel Johnson's table-time assault unbroken.

Otherwise an uncritical admirer, Boswell confessed to an un-Boswellian disgust at his idol's table manners. And total amazement. Was not Johnson a 'philosopher' and a 'moralist'? Weren't