

Popcorn

Cooking fascinates me. Once in a while I even dare to try it. But the fact is, I am more competent with words than with pots and pans. For that reason I've written more about cooking than actually cooking. I dedicate myself to something that could be called "literary culinary." I've written about a great variety of entities in the world of the kitchen: onions, ora-pro-nobis, chopped beef with tomato, rice and beans, cod, soufflés, soups, barbecue. I even reached the point of dedicating half of a philosophical book to a meditation on the film *Babette's Feast*, which is a celebration of food as a ritual of sorcery. Aware of my limitations and competences, I have never written as a chef. I wrote as a philosopher, poet, psychoanalyst, and theologian—because the culinary stimulates all those functions of thought.

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Foods, for me, are dream entities. They stimulate my capacity to dream. At the same time, I never imagined that the day would come when popcorn would make me dream. But that's precisely what happened. Popcorn—dried corn, tough, rounded grains—always seemed to me a simple little joke, a delicious game, without metaphysical or psychoanalytical dimension. But a few days ago I was talking with a patient who mentioned popcorn. And something unexpected happened in my mind. My ideas began to pop like popcorn. Then I saw a metaphoric relationship between popcorn and the act of thinking. A good thought is born like an unexpected, unforeseen burst of popcorn. So popcorn revealed itself to me like an extraordinary poetic object. Poetic because as I thought about popcorn my thoughts started popping and jumping around like the kernels in the pot.

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I remembered the religious meaning of popcorn. Popcorn has a religious meaning? For Christians, the sacraments are bread and wine, which symbolize the body and blood of Christ, a mixture of life and joy (because life, life alone, without joy, is not life...). Bread and wine should be taken together. Life and joy should exist together. So I am reminded of the lesson I learned with Mother Stella, the powerful Bahian candomblé wise-woman: that popcorn is a sacred candomblé² food.

² Candomblé is a syncretic religion brought to Brazil from Africa by slaves and modified to adopt certain elements of Catholicism.

Popcorn is a withered, underdeveloped corn. If I were an ignorant farmer, and if some of these runty spigots appeared among my full-blown corn, I'd get mad and get rid of them. From the perspective of size, popcorn can't compete with normal corn. I don't know how this happened, but the fact is that someone had the idea of shucking the spigots and putting the kernels in a pan over a fire, expecting the kernels to get soft so they could be eaten. After the experiment with water failed, they tried with oil. What happened next, no one would ever have imagined. All of a sudden the kernels began to burst, jumping in the pan with an enormous noise. But the extraordinary thing was what happened to them: tough, tooth-breaking kernels turned into soft, white flowers that even children could eat. Thus the bursting of the kernels went from a simple culinary operation to a party, a game, foolishness that everyone, especially children, laughed at. It's very funny to see corn popping!

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And what does this have to do with *candomblé*? It's that the transformation of hard corn into soft popcorn is a symbol of the great transformation that all people should go through so they can be what they ought to be. The popcorn kernel isn't all it ought to be. It ought to be that which happens after the pop. The kernel is us: hard tooth-breakers inappropriate for consumption. By the power of fire we can, all of a sudden, transform ourselves into something else.

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We can return to being children!

But the transformation takes place only under the force of fire. Kernels that don't pass through fire go on being kernels forever. That's what happens to people. The great transformations happen when we pass through fire. Whoever doesn't pass through fire remains the same their whole lives. They are people of a sameness and an astonishing hardness. It's just that they don't realize it. They think their way of being is the best way to be. But all of a sudden there's fire. Fire is when life thrusts us into a situation we never imagined. Pain. It could be fire from outside: to lose love, lose a child, get sick, lose a job, become poor. It could be fire from inside. Panic, fear, anxiety, depression—sufferings whose causes we do not know. There is always recourse in medicine. To put out the fire. Without fire, the suffering diminishes, and with it the possibility of transformation.

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I imagine that the poor popcorn, closed up in a pot, thinking, as it gets hotter inside, that its time has come, that it's going to die. From inside its hard shell, closed up inside itself, it can't imagine any other end. It can't imagine the transformation that is being prepared. It doesn't imagine what it is capable of. Then, without warning, under the force of fire, the great transformation happens: Pop! And it looks like something else, something completely different, something it had never dreamed. It's the ugly, crawling

caterpillar coming out of its cocoon as a flying butterfly.

In Christian symbology, the miracle of popcorn is represented by the death and resurrection of Christ. The resurrection is the popping of a kernel. You have to stop being one way to be another. “Die and transform yourself!” Goethe wrote.

In the state of Minas Gerais, everybody knows what *piruá* is. Talking about *piruás* with some people from the state of São Paulo, I discovered that they don’t know what *piruás* are. Some even think I was kidding, that *piruá* is a nonexistent word. I found myself forced to check the *Aurélio* dictionary to confirm my knowledge of the language. A *piruá* is a popcorn kernel that has refused to pop. My friend William, an extraordinary research professor at Unicamp—the federal university at Campinas, São Paulo—who is a specialist in the area of corn, unveiled the wonder of popcorn popping. He certainly has a scientific explanation for *piruás*. But in the world of poetry, scientific explanations don’t count. For example, in Minas Gerais, “*piruás*” is the name that they give to women who never marry. *Old maids*. My cousin, over forty, laments, “I’ve become a *piruá*!” but I think the metaphorical power of *piruás* is much greater. Old maids are those who refuse to change no matter how much they are scorched by fire. They think that there can be nothing more wonderful than the way they are. They ignore what Jesus said: “Whoever preserves their life loses

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it.”

Their presumption and their fear are the hard shell of the kernel that doesn't pop. Their fate is sad. They will remain hard their entire lives. They won't give happiness to anyone. When the joyous popping is done, in the bottom of the pot remain the old kernels who were never good for anything. Their destiny is the trash.

As for the kernels that pop, they are adults who go back to being children and who know that life is a big game...

Mental Health

I was invited to give a lecture about mental health. The people who invited me supposed that I, as a psychoanalyst, ought to be a specialist in the subject. And I thought so, too. So much so that I accepted. But as soon as I stopped and thought about it, I regretted my decision. I saw that I didn't know anything. Let me explain.

I began my thoughts by making a list of people who, in my point of view, have had a rich and exciting mental life, people whose books and projects are food for my soul. Nietzsche, Fernando Pessoa, Van Gogh, Wittgenstein, Cecília Meireles, Vladimir Mayakovski. And then I was shocked. Nietzsche went crazy. Fernando Pessoa was given to drink. Van Gogh killed himself. Wittgenstein was happy to know he would die soon; he no longer tolerated living with such angst. Cecília Meirles suffered chronic light

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depression. Mayakovski committed suicide. All of them were profound, lucid people who will continue to be bread for the living long after we have been completely forgotten.

But did they have mental health? Mental health—that condition in which ideas behave themselves, always balanced, foreseeable, without surprises, obedient to the commands of duty, everything in its place like soldiers in rank order, never allowing the body to miss work or do something unexpected. It isn't necessary to take a trip around the world in a sailboat. It's enough to do what Shirley Valentine did. (If you haven't seen the film yet, do.) Or have a prohibited love affair, or, more dangerous than all of this, the courage to think what's never been thought. Thinking is a dangerous thing...

38 No, mental health they did not have. They were too lucid for that. They knew that the world is controlled by crazy old people in neckties. Being owners of power, the crazy go on to become the prototypes of mental health. Of course none of the names I cited would survive the tests that psychologists would have subjected them to if they were to look for employment in a company. On the other hand, I've never heard of a politician who had stress or depression. They always go parading around the streets of town, passing out smiles and certainties.

I feel like my thoughts are the thoughts of a crazy person, so let me hurry on to some obligatory clarifications.

We are very much like computers. The function of the computer, as everybody knows, requires the interaction of two parts. One of them is called hardware, literally the hard equipment, and the other is called software. The hardware consists of all the solid things that the appliance is made of. The software is made up of “spiritual” entities—symbols that form the programs and are recorded on discs. We, too, have hardware and software. The hardware are the nerves of the brain, the neurons—everything that makes up the nervous system. The software is made up of a series of applications that are recorded in our memory. Just as in computers, what remains in the memory are symbols, gossamer-light entities that could be said to be “spiritual,” the most important application being language. A computer can go crazy through a flaw in its hardware or its software. So can we. When our hardware goes crazy, we call in the psychiatrists and neurologists, who come in with their chemical potions and scalpels to fix what went bad. When the problem is in our software, however, potions and scalpels don’t work. You can’t fix an application with a screwdriver. Since software is made of symbols, only symbols can get into it. To deal with software, you have to make use of symbols. For that reason, whoever deals with disturbances in human software never sees anything good in physical resources. Their tools are words, and they may be poets, humorists, clowns, writers, gurus, friends, or even

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psychoanalysts. It happens, though, that this computer that is the human body has a peculiarity that differentiates it from others. Its hardware, the body, is sensitive to things that the software produces. And isn't that what happens to us? We hear a song and we cry. We read Drummond's erotic poems and the body gets excited. Imagine a sound system. Imagine that the record player and accessories, the hardware, had the capacity to hear the music that it played and to be emotionally moved. And imagine that the beauty is so great that the hardware doesn't behave and breaks down with emotion! Well that's what happened with those people I cited at the beginning. The music that came out of their software was so beautiful that their hardware couldn't stand it. Given these theoretical presuppositions, we are now in a position to offer a recipe that will guarantee, for those who accept the risk, mental health until the end of their days. Opt for modest software. Avoid beautiful and emotionally moving things. Beauty is dangerous to hardware. Be careful with music. Brahms and Mahler are especially contraindicated. Rock can be taken at will. As for readings, avoid those that make you think. There is a vast literature specializing in impeding thought. If there are books by Dr. Lair Ribeiro,³ why risk reading Saramago? Newspapers have the same effect. They should be read daily. Since they publish the same things every day with

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³ Brazilian cardiologist and internationally renowned author of self-help books for executives.

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different names and faces, it is guaranteed that our software will always think the same things. And on Sundays, don't forget Silvio Santos and Gugu Liberato.⁴ Following this recipe, you will have a banal but tranquil life. But since you have cultivated insensibility, you will not sense how banal it is. And instead of reaching the end that the people I mention reached, you will retire to realize your dreams. Unfortunately, however, when you arrive at that moment, you will have forgotten what they were.

⁴ Silvio Santos is the Brazilian host of an interminable Sunday television program of pop culture. Liberato was his producer and also a television personality.

On Politics and Gardening

42 **O**f all the vocations, politics is the most noble. Vocation: from the latin *vocare*, “calling.” Vocation is an inner call of love. Not love for a man or woman but for a *thing-to-be-done*. This *thing-to-be-done* marks the place where the called want to make love with the world. There, in the place of their *thing-to-be-done*, they want to penetrate, ejaculate, fecundate. Psychology of the lover: to do without wishing to gain. To do even if their *thing-to-be-done* puts them in danger. Many lovers have died because of ephemeral moments of pleasure with a prohibited love.

Political vocation is a passion for a garden. Let me explain. “Politics” comes from *polis*, city. A city was, for the Greeks, a safe place, orderly and tame, where men could dedicate themselves to the pursuit of happiness. Political vocation, then, is at the service of citizens’ happiness, the

happiness of people in the city.

To the contrary of the Greeks, for the Hebrews this living space was not represented by the city. God did not create a city, he created a garden. Their God was not an urbanist; he was a gardener, an inventor of paradises. Perhaps it was by the fact that they'd been nomads in the desert. Those who live in a desert dream of oases. So the garden, for the Hebrews, was that which the *polis* was for the Greeks. If we asked a Hebrew prophet "What is politics?" he would respond, "The art of gardening applied to public things."

Vocational politicians are in love with a big garden that's for everyone. Their love is so great that they give up the little garden that they could till for themselves. What good is a little garden if all around you is a desert? The whole desert needs to be turned into a garden.

I love my vocation, which is to write. But I know that the beauty of literature is weak. A little poem by Emily Dickenson:

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*To make a prairie, it takes a clover and a bee,
One clover, and a bee.
And reverie.
The reverie alone will do,
If bees are few.*

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It would be good if it were true. But the fact is, fantasies aren't enough to plant gardens. To turn into gardens, fantasies need bees: hands, tools, power. But power is what the poet does not have. But the politicians do. Politicians by vocation are poets with power. They have the power to dig, plant, care for, pull up, prune, make walls. Politicians make laws and take measures for them to be obeyed. The nobility of the political vocation is in that it has the power to transform the dream of a garden into a real garden where life takes place.

It is such a pleasing vocation that Plato suggested that politicians do not need to possess anything as private property. It doesn't make sense to have a private garden when you're the gardener of the big garden. For that reason it would be undignified for the gardener to have a privileged space better or different than the space occupied by everyone else. Laws for the politician are laws for everyone. I know, and have known, many vocational politicians. Their lives were and continue to be a reason for hope.

Vocation is different from profession. In a vocation, the person finds happiness in the act itself. In a profession, pleasure is found not in the act but in the gain derived. The professional who is only professional does his *thing-to-be-done* not for the love of it but for the love of something outside of it: the salary, the gain, the profit, the advantage. People motivated by vocation are lovers. Professionals, to

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the contrary, don't love their lovers; they use them for their own advantage. They are gigolos.

All vocations can be turned into professions. Prophets are followed by mercenaries. Gardeners by vocation give their lives to everyone else's garden. Gardeners by profession use everyone else's garden to build their own garden even though, for this to happen, the desert and the suffering around them must increase.

Thus it is with politics. There are many professional politicians. So therefore I utter my second thesis: Of all the professions, professional politics is the most vile. This explains people's total disenchantment with politics. No one believes what politicians say.

Guimarães Rosa, asked by Günter Lorenz whether he considered himself political, responded:

I could never be a politician with all the charlatanism of reality... Politicians are always talking about reason, logic, reality, and things like that and at the same time practicing the most irrational acts imaginable. Unlike "legitimate" politicians, I believe in mankind and I wish us a future. The politician thinks only in minutes. I am a writer, and I think in eternities. I think about the resurrection of man.

Anyone who think in minutes doesn't have the patience to plant trees. A tree takes many years to grow. It

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is much more profitable to cut them down.

Our future depends on a struggle between politicians by vocation and politicians by profession. The sad thing is that many who feel the calling of politics do not have the courage to attend to it in fear of the shame of having to get along with gigolos. I'm one—but now it's too late.

I speak to you, the young, to seduce you into becoming gardeners. Maybe there's a dormant politician inside you (like in the story of *Sleeping Beauty*). Hearing the vocation is hard because it is disturbed by the noise of the expected choices: teaching, medicine, engineering, computing, law, science. All of them are legitimate if they are vocations. But they are all funneling: They all put you into a little corner of the garden that's far from the place where the fate of the garden is decided. Wouldn't it be a lot more fascinating to take part in the fate of the garden?

46 We recently celebrated 500 years since the discovery of Brazil. The discoverers, when they arrived, didn't find a garden. They found a jungle. A jungle isn't a garden. Jungles are cruel and insensitive, indifferent to suffering and death. A jungle is a part of nature still not touched by the hand of man. That jungle could have been transformed into a garden. It hasn't been. The politicians that attended to it were not lovers. They were woodchoppers. Gigolos. And that's how the jungle, which could have been turned into a garden for the happiness of all, was transformed into

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deserts flecked with luxurious private gardens where a few found life and pleasure.

There are discoveries of origins. More beautiful are discoveries of destinies.

So maybe, if the politicians of vocation take possession of the garden, we can begin to write a new history that does not repeat the past but a history that celebrates the future. But this can only happen if the woodchoppers are thrown out and replaced by gardeners. So instead of deserts and private gardens we would have a big garden for everyone,. It would be the work people who loved to plant trees in whose shade they would never sit and who would feed themselves with food that birds brought from the future (Nietzsche). We would have the happiness of seeing men, women and children living and playing in a garden...