

## THE TABOO IN LITERATURE

~~James Branch Cabell~~

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Pre-eminently the most engaging feature of the assigned topic, assigned to me in particular for reasons best known to the Editor of *The Literary Review*, is the patent ease with which this topic may be disposed of. Since time's beginning every age has had its literary taboos, selecting certain things—more or less arbitrarily, but usually some natural function—as the things which must not be written about. To violate any such taboo so long as it stays prevalent is to be “indecent”: and that seems absolutely all there is to say concerning this topic, apart from furnishing a trifle of historical illustration.

The most striking instance which offhand occurs to me sprang from the fact, perhaps not very generally known, that the natural function of eating, which nowadays may be discussed intrepidly anywhere, was once regarded by the Philistines, or at all events the Shephelah and the deme of Novogath, as being unmentionable. This ancient tenet of theirs, indeed, is with such emphasis emphasized in a luckily preserved fragment from the Dirghic of Savius Nicanor that the readiest way to illustrate the chameleon-like traits of literary indecency appears to be here to record what of this legend survives.

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Now, at about the time that the Tyrant Pedagogos fell into disfavor with his people, avers old Nicanor (as the curious may verify by comparing b. X, Chap. 28), passed through Philistia a clerk whom some called Horvendile, travelling by compulsion from he did not know where toward a goal which he could not divine. So this Horvendile said, “I will make a book of my journeying, for it seems to me a rather queer journeying.”

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They answered him: “Very well, but if you have had dinner or supper by the way, do you make no mention of it in your book. For it is a law among us, for the protection of our youth, that eating must never be spoken of in any of our writings.”

Horvendile considered this a curious enactment, but it seemed only one among the innumerable mad customs of Philistia. So he shrugged, and he made the book of his journeying, and of the things which he had seen and heard and loved and hated and had put by in the course of his passage among ageless and unfathomed mysteries.

And in the book there was nowhere any word of eating. But to the book comes presently a garbage-man, newly returned from foreign travel for his health's sake, whose name was John. And this scavenger cried, “Oh, horrible! for here is very shameless mention of a sword and a spear and a staff.”

“That now is true enough,” says Horvendile, “but wherein lies the harm?”

“Why, one has but to write ‘a fork’ here, in the place of each of these offensive weapons, and the reference to eating is plain.”

"That also is true, but it would be your writing and not my writing which would refer to eating."

John said, "Abandoned one, it is the law of Philistia and the holy doctrine of St. Anthony Koprologos that if anybody chooses to understand any written word anywhere as meaning 'to eat', the word henceforward has that meaning."

"Then you of Philistia have very foolish laws."

To which John the Scavenger sagely replied: "Ah, but if laws exist they ought to fairly and impartially and without favoritism be enforced until amended or repealed. Much of the unsettled condition prevailing in the country at the present time can be traced directly to a lack of law enforcement in many directions during past years."

"Now, I misdoubt if I understand you, Messire John, for your infinitives are split beyond comprehension. And when you talk about the non-enforcement of anything in many directions, even though these directions were during past years, I find it so confusing that the one thing of which I can be quite certain is that it was never you whom the law selected to pass upon and to amend all books."

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proudly* This Horvendile says foolishly, not knowing it is an axiom among Philistines that literary expression is best controlled by somebody with misleading tenderness toward it; and that it is this custom, as they proudly aver, which makes the literature of Philistia what it is.

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spoken* But John the Garbage-man said nothing at all, the while that he changed nouns at random to "fork" and "table" and "dish", and carefully annotated each verb in the book as meaning "to eat." Thereafter he carried off the book along with his garbage, and with—which was the bewildering part of it—self-evident and glowing self-esteem. And all that watched him spoke the Dirghic word of derision, which is "Tee-Hee."

But Horvendile forthwith consulted with a man of law. And the lawman answered a little peevishly, by reason of the fact that age had impaired his digestion, and he said: "But of course you are a lewd fellow if you have been suspected of writing about eating!"

"Sir," replies Horvendile, "I would have you consider that if your parents and your grandparents had not eaten, your race would have perished, and you would never had been born. I would have you consider that if you and your wife had not eaten, again your race would have perished, and neither of you would ever have lived to have the children for whose protection, as men tell me, you of Philistia avoid all mention of eating. And I would have you consider how little is to be gained by concealing even from the young the inevitability of this natural function—"



To which the man of law replied, with a bewildering effect of talking very wisely and patiently: "Ah, but it does not matter at all whether or not the function of eating is practiced and is inevitable to the nature and laws of our being. The law merely considers that any mention of eating is apt to

inflame an improper and lewd appetite, particularly in the young, who are always ready to eat: and therefore any such mention is an obscene libel."

So Horvendile lamented, and fled from the man of law. Thereafter, in order to learn what manner of writing was most honored by the Philistines, this Horvendile goes into an academy where the old books of Philistia were stored, along with other relics of the past: and as he perturbedly inspected these old books, one of the fifty mummies which were kept in this place, with lackeys to attend them, spoke vexedly to Horvendile, saying, as it was the custom of these mummies to say, before this could be said to them, "I never heard of you before."

"Ah, sir, it is not that which is troubling me," then answered Horvendile; "but rather I am troubled because the book of my journeying has been suspected of encroachment upon gastronomy. Now I notice your most sacred volume here begins with a very remarkable myth about the fruit of a tree in the middle of a garden, and goes on to speak of the supper which Lot shared with two angels and his daughters also, and of the cakes which Tamar served to Amnon, and to speak over and over again of eating. I notice that your most honored poet, here where the dust is thickest, from the moment he began by writing about certain painted berries which mocked the appetite of Dame Venus, and about a repast from which luxurious Tarquin retired like a full-fed hound or a gorged hawk, speaks continually of eating. And I notice that everybody, but particularly the young person, is encouraged to read these books and many other old books which speak very explicitly indeed of eating—"

"Of course," the mummy replies: "for all these books are classics, and we used to discuss them in Paff's beer-cellar."

"Well, but does the indecency of this word 'eating' evaporate out of it as the years pass, so that the word is hurtful only when very freshly written?"

The mummy blinked so wisely that you would never have guessed that the brains of all these mummies had been removed when the embalmer, called Time, prepared these fifty for the academy. "Young fellow, before estimating your literary pretensions, I must ask if you ever frequented Paff's beer-cellar?"

Horvendile said, "No."

"Then that would seem to settle your pretensions. To have talked twaddle in Paff's beer-cellar is the one real proof of literary merit, no matter what sort of twaddle you may write in your books, as I am here in this academy to attest. Moreover, I am old enough to remember when cookery-books were sold openly upon the news-stands, and in consequence I am very grateful to the garbage-man, who, in common with all other intelligent persons, has never dreamed of meddling with anything I wrote."

And all the other mummies spoke the word of derision, which is "Tee-Hee," and they said also, "He never meddled with us either, and we never heard of you." And one of the lackeys who attended the mummies said sternly, "I am not at all in sympathy," and another said, "Pseudo-litterateur," and yet another said, "I can perceive that you do not produce the necessary profound murmurs and inflowings when you meditate upon the name of Bradford," and there was much other incoherent foolishness.

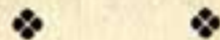
But Horvendile had fled, bewildered to note that a mummy, so generally esteemed a kindly and well-meaning fossil, appeared quite honestly to believe that all literature came out of the beer-cellar of Paff, or Pfaff, or had some similarly Teutonic sponsor, and that the cookery-books of fifty years ago had something to do with Horvendile's account of his journeying, from he did not know where toward a goal which he could not divine, now being in the garbage pile.

Still, Horvendile was not quite routed. "For, after all," says Horvendile, in his folly, "it is for the average person that books are made, and not for mummies and men of law and scavengers."

So Horvendile went a-seeking until he found a representative citizen, who was coming out of a representative restaurant with his representative wife.

"Sir," says Horvendile, "I perceive that you have just been eating and that emboldens me to ask you—"

But at this point Horvendile found he had been knocked down, because the parents of the representative citizen had taught him from his earliest youth that any mention of eating was highly indecent in the presence of gentlewomen. And for Horvendile, recumbent upon the pavement, it was bewildering to note the glow of honest indignation in the face of the representative citizen, who waited there in front of the restaurant—



Here, rather vexatiously, the old manuscript breaks off. But what survives and has been cited of this fragment amply shows you, I think, that even in remote Philistia, whenever this question of "indecent" arose everybody acted very foolishly. It has attested too, I hope, the readiness with which a fanatical training may lead you to imagine some underlying impropriety in all writing about any natural function, even though it be a function so time-hallowed and general as that to which this curious Dirghic legend refers.