Raffles Institution
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General Certificate of Education Advanced Level
Higher 1

GENERAL PAPER

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Paper 2

31 August 2020

INSERT

1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

Louise Fabiani comments on our omnivorous appetites and the drawbacks of our gluttony.

1 Ten thousand desert rats, 10,000 fish, 14,000 sheep, 1,000 lambs, 1,000 fat oxen and many more creatures slaughtered, cooked and served: that is how Ashurnishabal of Mesopotamia (883-859 BCE) pampered almost 70,000 guests for 10 days. The Archbishop of York's enthronement feast in 1466 CE required 104 oxen, 2,000 geese, 1,000 capons, 1,000 sheep, 400 swans, 12 porpoises and seals, and a great number of other birds and mammals. Nothing pulls at the imagination like extremes – overwrought banquets and orgies, epic battles, devastating natural disasters, glorious human triumphs. Our omnivorous appetites find extravagant feasts awe-inspiring and enviable, and occasionally disconcerting.

2 During our hunter-gatherer past, which constitutes 99 per cent of our history as a species, those lavish and omnivorous tastes served us well. We routinely dined to capacity on a wide variety of nutritious fare to save us from malnutrition and starvation. Food quality and quantity were unpredictable, and contingent upon human forces such as trade routes, as well as the vagaries of weather and natural cycles. Very early on, we adapted to periodic scarcity, leaping at any chance to pile on calories and storable nutrients – for instance, when we found a bush laden with ripe berries, or a rockpool full of tide-stranded shellfish. Those who were quick-witted enough to see an opportunity when it presented itself and had the physiological means to convert extra calories into fat, were more likely to survive long stretches between meals, and to raise healthy offspring.

3 These adaptations had long been in place when humankind began its first huge revolution, the agricultural, which allowed food storage. As civilisations sprang up, the main beneficiaries of stuffed grain bins and successful herding – pharaohs, kings and other rulers – could stage banquets to repay political favours or use them as a sign of power over the have-not majority. The fantastic feast became part of folklore, for the elite. Alas, socioeconomic inequality was a fact of life in Europe, Asia and many other parts of the civilising world. Food became a signifier of class and a measure of rank when some people started to command more food resources than others.

4 Consequently, some of the first food-utopia stories emerged in medieval Europe, in a time of famine and epidemics. Dreaming of a paradise of easy eating became a popular escape for beleaguered peasants. A version of this ideal place was featured in the Land of Cockaigne. It first appeared in 1250 as a poem in France, replete with bountiful quantities of food, plenty of leisure time, and an implicit or explicit challenge to the class system. Cockaigne was a return to the Garden of Eden, a terrestrial version of Heaven, perfecting upon Nature, eliminating pain, discomfort and want of any kind. In that magical land, the human struggle within the food chain was finally over, and we were free – not only of being prey, but also of being fully predatory too. It also removed the backbreaking and miserable labour involved in farming for the benefit of overlords.

5 One constant seems clear: gluttony – shameful or proud – persists as exuberant overeating at social gatherings, eating contests and shopping sprees at price-club MegaMarts. But by any other name it is still a reminder of the polarised privilege inherent in our more precarious past. Herman Pleij, Emeritus Professor of medieval Dutch literature at the University of Amsterdam, contends that, if the people of medieval times could see us now, 'Modern-day Europe would represent in many respects the realisation of Cockaigne: fast food is available at all hours, as are climatic control, unemployment benefits, and plastic surgery that seemingly prolongs youth.' Without having to be all that historically savvy, today's marketers can exploit consumer lust based on human nature alone. In fact, it might be one of the easiest ways to get consumers to part with their money: boggle their minds with food worthy of a feast, making it easy to acquire and consume.

6 The capacity for excess might explain the frequency with which humans have brought desirable wild animal populations to, and sometimes over, the brink of extinction. Two North American species stand out: the passenger pigeon, whose population nosedived from billions to zero by 1914 and the North Atlantic cod, whose size and numbers supported one of the richest international fisheries in history. In both cases, hunters faced with unimaginable bounty never had – or quickly lost – any notion of sustainable practice. It is easy to blame the people of other times and other circumstances for ecological short-sightedness, but imagine standing in a field in 19th century Pennsylvania and watching millions of passenger pigeons pass overhead, darkening the sky for days: would you stop and wonder if shooting wagonloads of them every week was a bad long-term plan?

7 However, as the relatively recent mismanagement of the northern cod stocks illustrates, there is no excuse for disregarding the needs of future generations because of short-term abundance right now. While an easy kill is desired, it still feels wrong. Like so many other human traits, the opposites here reside as a powerful pair in the collective consciousness. A certain squeamishness about death coexists with the understanding that any non-vegetarian meal costs a life, perhaps not entirely unlike our own in anatomy and emotional qualities. We grasp the cost, but gluttony – part of our biology – is still the rule. That biology is hardly unique, but even more problematic is the fact that culture acts upon it, creating a vast number of permutations that might be our fault alone.

8 Biology might give us the appetite and physiology for this dietary drive, but culture encodes and excuses it, and too often exaggerates it. Perversely, we place more value on a scarce commodity, partially because it is scarce. For instance, Bluefin tuna are in very high demand in the international sushi market, so they get hunted commercially. As they become rarer, they become more valuable. Breaking the circle would require top-down management of almost draconian levels, since mere regulation and slap-on-the-wrist fines would simply drive the market underground. Once again, products of the imagination – whether it is the hyperbole of a spectacular feast or the fantasy of a place where food is easily available and worry-free or the idea of a $3-million tuna – erase animals' realities.

9 The all-you-can-eat buffet table and the ubiquitous fast food outlet are today's real life Cockaigne: easy, cheap, uncomplicated. The sheer quantity, not to mention the ease of access, does something to our relationship with the living or once-living food itself. Boggled by abundance, the mind can avoid dealing with unpleasant thoughts, primarily the pain and distress an animal experiences during pursuit, confinement and slaughter. It is almost too easy to erase the fact that our desire for satiety involves a living, feeling being, let alone one with a critical role in its ecosystem.

10 This is how we are: gluttonous, ravenous, lazy and short-sighted. To act any differently, the intellect must use complex arguments from philosophy and science to suppress millennia of adaptation. It's tough. Famine sticks in our cellular memory; the fat and protein in meat provide some of the best actual insurances against it, so biology cries Eat it! Culture adds that meat must not only be easy to find, but easy to acquire. Thus, the land of plenty is also the land of the lazy. And the lazy have the additional luxury of denying the uneasy truth behind their easy meals.

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