

Nautical Fare in Robert Challe's
Journal d'un voyage fait aux Indes orientales (1690-1691)

by
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On February 24, 1690, the Parisian-born Robert Challe, age twenty-eight, set sail on the *Ecueil* bound for Pondicherry, an outpost of the Compagnie des Indes orientales on the west coast of India. Penniless after British irregulars sacked the Acadian enterprise in which he had invested (1688), accustomed to sea voyages and eager for booty, Challe shipped on as *écrivain du roi* or secretary to the captain. He would not return to home port in Brittany until August 29, 1691. The *Ecueil* was part of a six-vessel fleet with both mercantile and military objectives, France then being engaged in the War of the League of Augsburg against Spain, Holland, and England. In his official function, Challe acted as both purser and steward, carrying out various notarial duties and keeping a precise inventory of all passengers, foodstuffs, munitions, hardware, rigging, and so forth aboard his ship. He did not, however, confine himself to such tasks, but also set about writing his first substantive work, a detailed log of his journey in the form of a private diary. The final outcome would be a voluminous *Journal* published posthumously in 1721 which records both daily events and weighty ethnological, scientific, theological, and philosophical musings. The *Journal* is recognized by maritime historians as a compendium of details about material conditions aboard royal vessels at the height of France's naval power. Literary scholars have exploited the text to uncover links with the writer's later, better-known works, in particular *Les Illustres françaises* and *Difficultés sur la religion*, finding the *Journal* to be an excellent expression of Paul Hazard's famous "crise de la conscience européenne." One of the modern editors of the *Journal*, Frédéric Deloffre, eulogizes it as "le chef-d'œuvre du récit de voyage de l'époque classique" (Robert Challe: *Un destin* 111).

Although Challe's *Journal* became an eighteenth-century best-seller, doubt was cast early upon its veracity. Thanks to the publication earlier this year of an (if not the) early draft of the *Journal*

(under the new title *Journal du voyage des Indes orientales*), Challe scholars now know that the 1721 text is both “un beau roman” (Popin, “Le *Journal de voyage*” 62) and an autobiographical narration. One finds in it a curious intermingling of fact and fiction, involving the insertion of fabricated stories into the original version, changes in chronology for dramatic effect, and an overall enhancement of the minor role that Challe actually played during the journey (*Journal du voyage des Indes orientales*, Appendice I 341-64). Particularly notable in the 1721 edition are many embellishments surrounding the motifs of food and drink. If during the revision of his original text Challe exaggerated his role as bon vivant aboard the *Ecueil*, he no doubt did so in order to capture a broader readership, a goal which he in fact attained. Clearly, the process of rewriting for publication opened a significant space for reflection, in which the subject of nourishment underwent multi-dimensional literal and figurative developments. On the one hand, the pleasures and difficulties of serving good food at sea were underscored; on the other, the symbolic dimension of food in a navy’s communal life became a subject for meditation and idealization. In the following analysis, these two aspects of nautical fare onboard the *Ecueil* will be explored.

Challe’s ship departed from Brittany loaded with a two year supply of provisions, both foodstuffs and drink. Included were such staples as oil, vinegar, salt and pepper, salted beef, and beans for the crew. Hardtack, also earmarked for the crew, was preserved in tin-lined storerooms, according to the captain’s specifications. Of special concern to Challe was the amount of wine taken aboard, for it had to suffice not merely for the outward journey (which would last some five and one-half months) but also for the return trip by way of Martinique (lasting some seven months). The writer’s intricate calculations with regard to the consumption of alcohol onboard are both amusing and obsessive. They show that the officers’ wine and the sailors’ brandy rations which flowed more freely on festive occasions were deemed a major source of good morale. We shall later see that alcohol was considered crucial for good health as well.

In accordance with Challe's prudent estimates, the *Ecueil* thus got underway loaded with a twenty-four month supply of wine for the three hundred and fifty persons aboard. This reserve included Grave and Bordeaux for the ship's officers, chaplain, surgeon, missionaries, civilian passengers, and occasional guests from the fleet, plus twenty-four barrels of a cheap but good white vin d'Anjou whose existence was known only to Challe, the captain, and their mutual friend, the infantry officer La Chassée (89, n.101, n. 102).¹ In concert with the latter two men, Challe also has more than eighty bottles of Grave sequestered in his cabin for nightly drinking parties.² An unspecified, but significant amount of brandy is put also into the hold. Once underway, Challe persuades his twelve fellow diners to ration their wine, arguing that: "... en laissant à discrétion le vin comme il est à présent, vous êtes en risque de faire des croix de Malte [i.e., jeûner] au retour: en un mot, ayant à faire la campagne ensemble, il faut agir d'économie et par ordre, & ne pas faire vie de cochon, courte et bonne" (91). First and second lieutenants will get slightly less than one liter for breakfast, lunch and dinner; all others, including the priests, will get a half-liter for breakfast and one liter for the other two meals.

Once the alcohol and foodstuffs are stowed, a bevy of livestock is lodged in whatever spaces remain, and Challe comments: "Notre vaisseau est une véritable basse-cour, cinq cents poules en cages, huit boeufs, deux vaches à lait, quatre truies, un verrat, douze autres cochons, vingt-quatre dindes, quarante-huit canards, vingt-quatre moutons, douze oies, six veaux, trente-six pigeons; où se mettre pour respirer? tout est plein de cages & de parcs" (87-88). Fresh eggs and milk were considered particularly important for the sick, who shared the officers' menu. Suckling pigs later bred on-board are termed "les gentilhommes du vaisseau" by Challe, since one alone can feed fourteen: "& quatorze personnes à la mer ne sont pas faciles à rassasier, surtout lorsqu'elles ont notre appétit" (221).

One may note in passing that the casualties of the ship's livestock during the trip are probably typical of the times. On July 3, 1690, one hundred animals placed for safekeeping in the ship's wardroom are killed during an engagement with an English vessel. Twelve days later in heavy seas, many crippled animals are put down and eaten. Finally, during a storm so fierce that Challe loads

a pair of pistols in case of shipwreck (March 2-4, 1691), two-thirds of the ship's livestock are killed or washed overboard.

Far more attention is paid in Challe's *Journal* to fresh meat and copious wine than to good water. It is curious to discover why this is so, since the trip took the *Ecueil* into some of the world's hottest climates. In his entry of May 5, 1690, Challe describes the "well-known" three sicknesses of fresh water taken to sea. Whatever its provenance, drinking water was inevitably polluted by worms, which no subsequent process of filtering could eliminate. Small wonder that the ship's population preferred to drink wine or brandy! Moreover, even collected rainwater was viewed as a danger to human life in a hot climate. Challe argues that brandy is far more refreshing to a sailor than any water could be: "...c'est l'unique cause de l'empêchement & des défenses qu'on fait aux matelots d'en boire beaucoup: l'expérience montrant qu'un coup d'eau-de-vie les rafraîchit plus que toute l'eau du monde ne pourrait faire..." (198). Challe seeks nonetheless to collect fresh rainwater by new means when the ship's livestock refuse to drink water collected on sails coated with tar and resin.

Enriching the limited range of the *Ecueil's* initial provisions were foodstuffs and drink brought onboard in various ports of call and uninhabited islands. Along with Madeira, Spanish wine, and Shiraz (Persian) wine bought from the Portuguese, the wardroom's menu was enlivened by game, exotic fruits, and fish. Flying fish are eaten in great quantities. Weary land birds off course are captured and eaten. On the island of Moali, Challe purportedly kills sixteen partridges and guineas in a half-hour (242-43). His long list of game found there includes only those ten species of birds he recognizes: "... la cigogne, le faisan, la poule pintade & de bruyère, la perdrix rouge, le pigeon ramier, la tourterelle, le perroquet d'une infinité de sortes, le becfigue qui est une espèce d'ortolan, la grive, & quantité d'autres, qui y sont très communs & qui ne coûtent que le plaisir de les tirer" (237). The worldwide decimation of insular species during the age of sail was one result of hunting parties such as these. On the same island, Challe discovers bananas, a fruit hitherto unknown to him (and called "figues" by the crew), as well

as pineapples, melons, strawberries, raspberries, and coconuts. On the island of Négrades, wild boars, peacocks, parrots, deer, and turtles are harvested (335 ff). Whether in port or at sea, a large variety of fish is caught and eaten fresh or marinated for future use. Challe is particularly proud of his own recipe for marinated tuna which insures him a certain reputation among other ships of the fleet (150). As he stresses, this abundance of fish was especially welcome given the crew's careful observance of fast days. The earlier version of the *Journal* stresses that fasting was especially difficult at sea, given the hard toil of the crew (107-108).

In entries describing special receptions, Challe underscores his desire to provide copious dishes for discerning palates and describes their preparation by the ship's cook. On March 30, 1690, Challe reports that the fleet's Admiral will dine onboard the *Ecueil* and details the menu to be served: "Elle [la réception] sera magnifique, pour un vaisseau en pleine mer. Douze pigeons à la comote, quatre langues de boeuf ou porc & un jambon en feront l'entrée, en attendant la soupe. Cette soupe sera composée de boeuf frais, de mouton, de deux chapons & d'un morceau de lard, avec du riz pour légumes. Tout cela fera le bouilli. Il sera servi de deux pièces de four, d'abatis & de tripes de cochon de lait; après quoi paraîtra le cochon de lait, accompagné de deux dindes, une oie; & six poulets à la broche, & six autres poulets en fricassée. Ensuite, feront figure pour le dessert douze biscuits, un jambon, un pâté de canard, du fromage de Grière [Gruyère] & de Hollande, & deux salades, l'une de cornichons & l'autre de casse-pierre.³ Le vin de Cahors à discrétion, mais pourtant l'oeil dessus, n'étant pas fait pour tout venant." Supposedly either Challe or his putative valet Landais would keep a watchful eye on those drinking this special wine.⁴ And Challe comments proudly: "...il y a bien des festins de noces qui n'approchent point d'un pareil repas..." (153).

When the Admiral reappears on the *Ecueil* on April 26 to install a new captain, following the death of the first, a second banquet is described: "Entre autres choses, nous avons un cochon de lait...; il avait été farci de deux gros chapons désossés & en hachis, avec des anchois... Des petits pâtés & un [sic] dinde à la daube lui ont tenu compagnie" (184). Later that day, Challe happily serves

his new captain an abundant supper: “Il a paru surpris du service: une bonne soupe avec du mouton, une poule dessus, du lard & des choux; un [sic] dinde à la daube & un pâté à la godiveau; une salade de passe-pierre, des olives, des anchois, & du fromage de Hollande & de Gruyère. M. de La Chassée & moi avons vu avec plaisir sa surprise...” (185). Here and elsewhere, Challe presents culinary novelty as a piquant diversion from maritime routine.

Of equal interest are the delicacies Challe hoards in his cabin to accompany the wine he serves nightly. They include pâté, ham, and tongue, as well as fresh bread: “... soit dit une fois pour toutes, nous avons & aurons tous les jours du pain frais: notre boulanger fait cuire les pâtes que le cuisinier fait; eux, le maître d’hôtel & Landais s’entendent tous quatre comme larrons en foire” (91). Meetings in Challe’s cabin to snack are initiated by stroking one’s throat to indicate thirst. Challe’s repeated emphasis upon groaning boards, enticing menus, and intricate calculations with regard to consumption of alcohol onboard suggests at the very least an imaginary dominated by big appetites and an ideal of abundance that expresses itself most freely in visions of copious food and drink.

The symbolic value of food and communal eating is, in fact, a major sub-text of Challe’s *Journal*. No mere inventory, his narration presents an economics of consumption fraught with moral, political, ideological, and even theological overtones. According to Challe’s strongly regional and hierarchical social vision, some “nations” in the territory of France can be typified according to their tastes. Poitevins, he writes, form a “nation toujours altérée” (148); the Breton sailors according to the fleet’s admiral “...se donneraient au Diable pour boire” (82; cf. 189); Provençaux, like Italians, have a misguided taste for roasted goat (150); the despised Jesuits, a group everywhere apart, yet everywhere present, exemplify the deadly sin of greed: “...ils mangeraient volontiers dans un repas ce qui servirait à d’autres pendant une semaine” (140). Worst of all are the Normands and Bretons who make up the crew of the *Ecueil*. Noting that the crew will eat porpoise, shark, bats, aged Indian cows, and spoiled hardtack, Challe exclaims: “... que

ne mangeraient-ils pas?" (164) and "Parler à des matelots de jeûner, c'est comme si on parlait aux cardinaux de Rome à faire carême" (463). Challe associates these sailors' greed with the devil: "...je suis convaincu que si les abbés commandataires & les moines sont, comme on le dit, les cochons du pape, les gens de la maltôte sont ceux du diable" (353). Challe comments darkly as follows on the sailors' dinner of porpoise: "...selon moi, du marsouin pour manger, du café pour boisson, & une pipe de tabac pour dessert serait un véritable régal du diable, & convenable à sa couleur" (151). As for the bats, Challe's disgust is more pronounced: "Je crois que le diable rôti, bouilli, grillé, traîné par les cendres, laisserait ses grègues sous leurs dents" (238. Repeated on 320). Having learned that the crew would have eaten a caiman had the captain not prevented it, he restates his conviction: "Je crois que toute la mateloterie a le diable dans les dents" (338).

Challe's disgust is most strongly limned in the case of a sailor who may well be the devil incarnate: "J'ai dit ci-dessus que je crois que toute la mateloterie a le diable dans les dents. Nous avons ici un homme nommé René Le Gallic, qui mange les rats, & dit qu'ils valent mieux que les lapins: & les vers qui sont dans le pain sont pour lui du beurre et des confitures; il les étend dessus & croque tout ensemble" (506). Yet twentieth-century readers would be wrong to conclude that Challe is wholly lacking in sympathy for the common sailor. Modern critics often quote, on the contrary, a striking passage in their favor: "Ils travaillent & fatiguent beaucoup nuit & jour, au hasard de leur vie: ils sont mal nourris, en comparaison de ce que les ouvriers mangent à terre; peu soignés, & avec cela, quelquefois bien battus! Sont-ils moins hommes que les autres?" (266). Nonetheless, given Challe's presentation of the crew as sub-human in its appetites and considering as well how foreign they must have seemed to someone who could not understand *bas-breton*, it is telling that Challe characterizes the Europeans and Creoles he encountered on the Portuguese island of Saint Yago by "une avidité canine" (139). Overt racism, along with xenophobia, misogyny, and anti-Semitism, effectively plays a large part in the construction of one's nature/nationality as French/Parisian in Challe's *Journal*.

Challe's preoccupation with symbolic aspects of food and drink is also dramatized in his presentation of the links between nutrition and health. The sinister role of fresh water is but one example of a mythology of the salubrious ("warm") vs. the harmful ("cool") which characterizes the entire diet of the ship. Challe thus later warns his readers that drinking lemonade in the West Indies can cause sudden death (526). As noted previously, wine is considered the most health-promoting substance onboard. Not only the sick, but also those men working in the hellish temperatures of the ship's hold are given wine from the officers' table. Challe despises the fleet's surgeons, whose chief remedies consist in bleeding the sick and substituting *tisanes* and bouillon for the wine to which their bodies are accustomed: "...interdire le vin, qui est sain, à un homme qui n'a jamais bu autre chose, & qui en est pétri & confit! Oter la nourriture à un estomac chaud, ce qui est la marque d'une bonne constitution! N'est-ce pas là vouloir le tuer?" Challe insists on the contrary that sailors' bodies need to be kept hot (240). Aware of the ravages of scurvy, which he attributes to bad air and coagulation of the blood, Challe also stresses the need for fresh meat instead of the salted beef and bacon consumed in its absence (357) and praises the rejuvenating power of islands where numerous sick sailors are disembarked for rest cures. When bubonic plague appears onboard in late November, 1690--and we should recall that one of Challe's duties was to record the cause of death, if it could be determined--Challe and La Chassée resort to a concoction of wine and garlic to ward off infection. The latter calls this: "...chasser le diable au nom de Belzébuth" (505). Meanwhile, as a precaution, the crew is given more brandy than usual. Challe is nonetheless persuaded that the crew is partly responsible for its own mortality rate: "Mais les matelots français mangent tout; &, si on peut le dire sans insulter à leurs souffrances, les malheureux avalent leur mort en se remplissant le ventre" (356). In response to his own attacks of fever, often a harbinger of the black buboes of the plague, Challe adopts either a strict regime of rice and rainwater or an all-wine diet that he has discovered in the *Mémoires* (1665) of the maréchal de Bassompierre (1579-1646). On his account, both serve him well, for he attributes all cures to nature according to a lesson learned during his stay in

Acadia: "Je me trouve fort bien de la manière des sauvages de Canada, qui disent que pour les blessures il faut des remèdes extérieurs, mais que nous portons dans nous-mêmes les remèdes qui conviennent à nos maladies naturelles. C'est la sueur & la diète" (170). Challe later returns to this attack on the medicine of his age, and the importance of nutrition: "...il est vrai que je me trouve fort bien de ne prendre pour médecin que moi-même, & que la sueur & la diète, qui ne coûtent rien & valent incomparablement mieux que toutes les drogues d'un apothicaire" (455-56).

Moral and political dimensions of eating aboard the *Ecueil* are further showcased in Challe's accounts of ostracism and male bonding. He underscores the isolation of Mme de Maintenon's protégé, the arrogant lieutenant Bouchetière, condemned to relinquish brandy stowed onboard for his own later profit in India. The lieutenant's subsequent change of heart manifests itself in his gift of candied walnuts to a soldier he has injured, while his reconciliation with fellow officers will be sealed over a bottle of "fenouillet de Ré" (220). Gifts of food and drink are greatly esteemed: the old hands who "baptize" the novices crossing the equator for the first time receive gifts of wine and bread; the new captain of the *Ecueil* arrives with brandy for the crew; wine and tuna are given to the Admiral; the ship's chaplain "pays" for the celebration of his feast day with candied walnuts. Conviviality at meals is also vaunted by Challe: "C'est ordinairement la table, qui nous sert de champ de bataille; & après avoir bien querellé, & bien ri, un verre de vin d'Espagne fait notre paix... Effectivement, nous plaisantons les uns des autres: mais sans choquer, & ne nous servons que des raileries innocentes qui font l'agrément de la table; & qui que ce soit n'en est exempt" (265). Camaraderie is thus established on the most basic level, by sharing bread.

Challe deems such sharing to be a basic virtue at sea, as two very different stories illustrate. The first presents the mock trial of the ship's chaplain, accused of hoarding candied ginger for himself. The second, far more striking incident concerns the reaction of one of the fleet's captains, the chevalier d'Aire of the *Oiseau*, when entreated by his boatswain to pick up English sailors forced to abandon ship: "As-tu de quoi leur donner à manger? lui de-

manda froidement M. d'Aire. Ils vivront avec l'équipage, & pourront être dispersés sur l'escadre, répondit Leurat. Tu n'es qu'une bête, lui dit M. d'Aire: il vaut mieux les laisser boire, puisqu'ils sont à même, & n'en a sauvé aucun" (267). Such a bitter anecdote from the lips of a man who hated the English as much as Challe did is a telling sign of the supreme value given by the writer to largesse, not merely at moments of catastrophe or celebration, but in daily life at sea and on land as well. Deprivation is condoned only to punish individuals who thwart fraternal bonds. Just as for a time the ostracized Bouchetière "vit seul comme une bête fauve" (92), anti-social individuals are axiomatically at risk: "... l'homme est à lui-même son plus cruel ennemi dans une solitude" (111). Eating as a form of socialization is on Challe's account an indispensable aspect of life in Louis XIV's navy. No member of the crew ever seems to eat alone, whether on land or sea. Even in port, where sex could be dangerous, as Challe cautions, food remains the pleasure of choice, just as a finicky palate is the ultimate sign of one's nature/nationality as French/Parisian. Not surprisingly, Challe's first mission upon his ship's return to France will be to procure a tasty dinner for all aboard, including as much wine as anyone cares to drink.

It seems highly likely that Challe and his shipmates were often hungry, even famished in the course of their journey in 1691-92. Modern readers will perhaps have difficulty recognizing how laborious life on a sailing vessel at sea could be, and how difficult it must have been for ordinary sailors to replenish the calories they burned in their daily activities. Eighteenth-century readers of the published *Journal*, on the other hand, might well have grasped this problem more fully, and enjoyed Challe's clever, if embellished, account of feasting and ingenious nautical hospitality. Marivaux's later *Le Paysan parvenu* certainly does not neglect this thematic, and the flavor it adds to his novel is indisputable. We may surmise that such rich evocations of the material conditions of life pleased the early eighteenth-century reading public enormously, and they have not lost their interest for us today.

NOTES

¹ My colleague the historian Harry Paul informs me that it is impossible to determine the amount of alcohol in these various wines, but that amount was probably less than what they contain today.

² Challe actually claims that his friends' fondness for imbibing led him to choose the *Ecueil*: "Il [La Chassée] aime aussi bien que M. Hurtain à boire le petit coup: & je ne le hais pas; tout cela me fit demander dès l'année passée d'être mis sur l'*Ecueil*" (59).

³ *Casse-pierre*, also called *passé-pierre* by Challe, is a variety of saxifrage (found as "stonebreak" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*). It was culled and pickled together with cornichons (185, n. 301). Since the plant grew between rocks, it was thought to have the power to break up gallstones and kidney stones according to the "Doctrine of Signatures, which purported that if a plant or part of a plant resembled an anatomical organ or feature in shape or color, it was a signature from God that this plant would heal any diseases that affected that particular organ" (Williams and Wyandt).

⁴ Challe's first mention of Landais has mythological overtones: "Il y a dix ans qu'il est avec moi, c'est un enfant de Nantes, en Bretagne, tout aussi brutal que fidèle; c'est-à-dire souverainement" (79). Popin argues that Landais is a fantasy ("Le *Journal de voyage*," 52).

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