

Long Paddock

TEJA

Identity Threat (or the terror of veganism)

A dear friend of mine often makes the fatal mistake of giving yet another chance to the human species, and this time chooses a white Christmas dinner to do so. While the gathering of believing and non-believing traditional minds was happily gnawing away at their bones, she was kindly offered a vegan salad, and forced herself to depart before her hunting instinct could break through and her blade-sharp tongue leave necks behind, blood red. The neck supporting the head she became engaged in conversation with was long, slightly wrinkled and red-spotted, just like the face, as a result of wine abuse, she thought. They talked weather, house renovation, places they lived in, places they didn't, and she told him she'd moved into the town twenty years before with her late Aboriginal partner – only to get flooded, to her surprise, with the most amazing brainstorm of innovative ideas and lexicographical ingenuity in regard to the Aboriginal people, eventually summarised in her collocutor's claim: "The only thing we did wrong was not to shoot the lot of them." Lacking the capability of lateral thinking, as any butcher does, our whitefella did not consider the possibility that the flesh he was so vigorously skinning and chopping up in front of his imaginary customer might have been not only the dead Aboriginal man, which would be enough to hurt the intellect of anybody who has set themselves free of such (n)ever-changeable social morals, but also the "customer's" children and perhaps grandchildren, who should probably have been shot too, or were they entitled to mercy having been blessed with some healthy white genes?

My first connection with Australia was Bert Pribac, a Slovenian-Australian poet, upon whose work I wrote my Honours thesis. *Midway* in my journey through his life *I found myself in a dark wood*. I had given up on his claims to Christianity and proclaimed him a panentheist, not sure that it applies to him entirely but felt it better than having him connected with the fish-killer¹. Bert still kills fish but I remain hopeful, as a well-bread (ex) Catholic should. Bert had lots of interesting stories to tell me about persecution by the communist regime (Bert himself was a socialist!) and his escape while I was trying to source out the possible origins of the lyrical subject (the mention of "author" in this context would be blasphemy and my husband could risk losing his job!²). So the author, Bert, ended up in Australia from a refugee camp in Germany while waiting for his French visa. And while Bert was deciding whether Australia was a good place to go or not, knowing so little about this country at that stage, the *knowledge* that Australia had never had a war was enough to make him pack his bags and family and set off for the unknown.

I stumbled on that (so must have he, later on). And I still do, every time the big picture is shaped around – and thus corrupted by – small technicalities, in this case the technically absent war. I often get the Balkans thrown into my face, even though

Slovenia is not part of the Balkans (I don't expect anybody to know that!): the Balkans as a constantly boiling pot of ideological impacts and attempted genocides, as opposed to Australia, which has swept everything under the rug (just make sure you don't tread on it too vigorously or we'll all suffocate in the dust rising from underneath). But if we make it look civil, you see, and show some attempt at reconciliation and so-called justice (a word ... but what else is being offered?), it's easy to de-balkanise ourselves or, if you want, de-nazify ourselves, on the surface, especially when the other side is too weak or maybe too sane to demand back what was taken from it, and I don't like the idea of ownership, especially in regard to land and nature, or the idea of tribes or any form of collectivism, which I will explain later on, but speaking in human terms, I imagine Aboriginal peoples suddenly – right now – marching forward, camping in so-called national parks and on farm “properties” out there, demanding back not the “properties” themselves but the right to walk through them, pick a flower, set up a tent for a day or two without being fined for it, and at the same time resisting the inevitable threats of the authorities. A real revolution, a *culture* wanting to be, again. And I can see the Balkans happening, right here, on the stolen land. Stolen from them, stolen from the animals, stolen from everybody, me included. (And what right do I have?)

I have spent some time travelling around the Australian outback lately and was appalled, yet again, at the fact that most of the land is fenced. Miles and miles of fences and only a few sheep or cattle per square kilometre. A devastated land, dead kangaroos on the road and many more corpses hidden away, I hear, shot dead, and their joeys bashed to death against trees and trucks or just left out there to pass away from starvation and cold, because the country is overpopulated, with wildlife not people, and they break into people's *properties*, eat their grass, destroy their cars if they are not equipped with bull-bars of the right size, causing a lot of frustration and anger to the farmers and other land owners, which then makes them age too quickly, drink too much, beat their wives... am I going too fast?

But that's where veganism comes handy, though not many can handle it. Veganism is not about food, it's about freedom in a Sartrean sense, which, contra Sartre, is not limited to the human kind but certainly includes it. And when you let yourself roll down this broad and never-ending veganic path the whole perception of the world and your place in it takes a different turn, which is frightening, I get told occasionally by the bravest of the carnivores, the ones that can actually see I'm not asking them only to replace their meat steaks with tofu. The crucial part in veganising yourself – and veganism is an on-going process, not a state – is the attempt to *decentre* oneself. This does not imply the removal of the *I* from your poem if you are writing one, or some other similarly ridiculous postmodern notion (which I have to call ridiculous, hoping not to offend anybody, as I have never seen any of these authors publishing a collection without their name on the cover page [or am I mixing the lyrical subject with the author here, again?]). The *I*, as it happens, does remain in the centre as an active force, but instead of turning everything towards itself and shaping it around itself, it becomes the object of constant change as a result of the growing awareness of the world around it and its own role within this world, as one of its constituent elements, not the axle of its spinning top. The decentring of the *I*, i.e. the adaptation of it to the world in a kind of reverse Darwinian sense because the *I* doesn't need to exterminate anything to survive, is also and in fact the only way to keep the *I* alive. While on the other hand merging the *I* into pre-established patterns which offer false security and false identity, such as nations, religions, even singular cultures, is a sure way to the *I*'s grave. This is not to imply that the social contract is not needed at this stage – humanity will have to veganise itself before it becomes healthy enough for an anarchic society, which unfortunately will probably never happen – but the problem with the social contract is that it is exclusive in its nature. While I am quite happy to pay my medical insurance (do I have a choice?) to keep the system going and use it whenever I need it (which is not

very often because I don't *trust* the medical profession), I am worried when the social contract expands to other, less material fields.

To put it very simply and hopefully briefly, the human animal, as we all know, is on one hand an individual and on the other a herd animal, a so-called social animal. And every time an individual joins a group the individual has to give up part of its self, just as every time a group joins another, usually larger, group, the first one has to give up part of its self again. Such integration of groups can actually be quite innocent, if not even helpful for the developing of the individual self, especially when it is brought to such an extreme as globalisation is, which gives the individual an optimal opportunity to detach oneself from the false security old social and cultural patterns offer and throw oneself into the global wilderness, where just about everything we were conditioned to believe in is crashed and where through aloneness the personal self has a chance to finally discover and build itself. To get over this half-Platonic cave our society lives in or has lived in, a rethinking of the whole idea of identity is necessary, and – even though I thought I'd never quote that sixteenth century bastard animal torturer – a categorical doubt is crucial in thinking the self.

In my earlier thought I saw the main problem in the fact that we develop a collective identity before a personal identity, and unavoidably adopt this collective identity as if it was our own, perhaps with a few slight adjustments, but nothing major in most cases. The problem is of course that we don't really have a choice. Before we are even able to pronounce a comprehensible sentence we learn about what is right and what is wrong. It's like dog training: they give you a spoon and if you manage to get the stuff on the plate into your mouth everybody smiles and you get a cuddle, and if you splash it around the table nobody smiles and you don't get a cuddle. We go through years of being completely incapable of any serious thinking and the only thing we do is absorb, like a dry sponge, whatever our parents and/or other educators feed us, and, since there's nothing else around, we have to rely on them. Then we go through adolescence, when we're actually able to think but we are not allowed to, and by the time we reach adulthood we forget what the word thinking means in the first place, or almost (even though the systems around us – universities included – work at convincing us that we *are* thinking at last). This is partly because our concerned educators from the past tried to teach us how to survive in this world, and opposition is not part of it. Who can blame them? But what we don't get to learn in this process is how to survive with ourselves. How to survive with the self that we don't have.

To distance ourselves from society we have to doubt. Doubt. Doubt. Doubt. Doubt everything. (Including me, yes; and how Cretan is this? What a wonderful opportunity I'm giving you to dismiss the whole issue!) But doubt especially everything that is considered "normal" because what falls under the category of normal doesn't often get thought about, though it is being implemented through our actions, most of the time with a heavy impact on the environment, both social and natural. I have to peel off layer after layer after layer and get as close to rawness as possible. To achieve this it is essential to dismiss one principal fear: the fear of my own thinking, i.e. I should not be afraid of my own thoughts, even when they start leading me beyond the border of the supposed "normal". Without a thorough analysis and an understanding of every single thing I do, think and believe, and its impact on both the self and the non-self, i.e. others, I will always feel uprooted, in a constant search for guidance, safety, stability, which – whether I want to see it or not – collectivism cannot really provide.

Collective identity only means something to the individual when it impacts another, different collective identity. If we take nations, for example, nationality is only important to individuals when it sits side by side with another nation(-ality). Without relation it is null. The same is valid for regional cultures, etc. Another member of my nation will only become my brother or sister when our collective self is impacted by the collective self of

members of other nations (the most banal example is an international football match and the most serious example is when somebody has to decide whether to take a life, the life in front of him/her, to *honour*, for example, the abstraction of the memory of his/her deceased ancestors, and I know most people would find this a simple decision to make because collective identity is more important than an individual life, something we can only believe if we have fallen victims to the idea that any form of collectivism can bring added value to our own life). When this is not the case my brother (or sister) is just another social entity I have to protect myself from, or my “culture” if the individual comes from a different cultural background despite the joint nationality. It is an everlasting circle of anxiety to protect some sort of spiritual space that we supposedly own and that everybody is trying to take away from us, a space that we don’t even know, let alone understand, and this is the main reason for fearing the impact from an outside source. It’s a pattern, an abstraction. A social game, which produces a lot of frustration, and which we are all too prepared to accept and play.

Along with collective identity comes the dangerous concept of pride. People are proud of their ancestors. People are proud of the “national” war veterans. People are proud of poets, innovators, sportsmen whom their “nation has bred”. As if they had anything to do with them in the first place! People are even proud to be human beings, and if they don’t ever think of it this way, though some do, they certainly act as if they had actually done something right to deserve this and treat everything else as if it was there to serve their purposes. Because somebody had enough innovative thinking to compose a functioning gun we feel we have the right to use it. Because we are more “intelligent” than the non-human animals and can easily learn how to manage a herd (not realizing more intelligent and more manipulative members of our own species are doing the same to us) we think we have the right to exploit them as we wish. But send a human out there into the wild to tame a tiger without guns and electric prods and other weapons which have been made available to us, even though the individual – you, I – can’t take any credit for it, and see who’ll be dancing in the central arena while the audience claps and wants its bit. *Vanity of vanities*, said the Preacher, *all is vanity*. We must remember that it was only a while ago that human slavery was abolished. And that it took another long while still to give “black” people human rights, even though those who denied them knew all along they were humans (come on, they must have known...). All this in this beautifully civil world of ours while *important* literature was/is being written and a lot of paper wasted for philosophical thought. Two of the prides of humanity, along with gunpowder and growth hormones, *essential* these days in your protein intake. Racism and speciesism are an extension of nations, cultures, groups – everything that helps an individual to crash aloneness, everything that takes their fragility away, even if only superficially (for we all know deep inside we will always be alone), including religions and their aggressive attempts to distract the masses, and the individual, from the world they are shaping. Religions with their sacrifices, expected and delivered.

That is why veganism is frightening. It pulls the individual out of the masses: it doesn’t make promises, and you won’t receive an honorary medal from the animal kingdom. But what unsettles people most, as far as I can tell from conversations I have had with them, is the fear of being degraded to the level of an animal. They just don’t seem to understand that it is all about upgrading the animals, human or not, giving them nothing more than the freedom we all – you, I – want for ourselves.

NOTES

- 1 From *Jesus, fish killer, walks on water*, charcoal drawing by Stephen Kinsella.
- 2 The way he recently lost face by publishing a book of heterosexual love poems. The bastard! Daring to degrade a woman to a muse! Hey, grow up girls, the lyrical subject is allowed to fuck whoever it wants, ok?!