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Catalin Avramescu: An Intellectual History of Cannibalism

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INTRODUCTION



A AND B, THE TWO PHILOSOPHERS whose dialogue opens Denis Diderot's work *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville. . . on the Inconvenience of Attaching Moral Ideas to certain Physical Actions which they do not Presuppose* (1772), review the recent discoveries in the South Seas, on which occasion they find themselves confronted with a situation requiring special consideration. Will an island situated in the midst of natural abundance, with a limited surface area (a league in diameter, as the text specifies) and whose inhabitants have arrived there almost by miracle, be able to sustain population growth? What will happen, asks B, when the people begin to multiply?¹ For A, the answer is clear: they will begin to exterminate and eat one another. It is possible, continues A, that, due to this type of situation, anthropophagy may have appeared at a very ancient date and would thus be "insular in origin."² Hence there results the necessity and the source of cruel customs, such as infanticide, human sacrifice, castration, and infibulation, which arose in order to halt unsustainable population growth. Diderot qualifies these as "so many customs of a necessary and bizarre cruelty, whose cause has been lost in the night of time and which drive philosophers to distraction."³

Amateurs of metaphysics might wonder why we have found it fitting to torture the public with an analysis of oddities occurring on real or imaginary islands of the past. In the context of eighteenth-century theories, however, the discussion between A and B seems unremarkable at first sight. The primitive anthropophagi of exotic lands, the origins of religious worship and fanaticism in the necessities of natural existence, the obsession with population growth within a given territory: these are all tried and tested subjects of the Enlightenment. The significance of the theory that cannibalism is insular in origin will come to light only if we distance ourselves from the text and view it in relation to the type of science it sets out to employ, namely "natural history," in the sense in which this term was understood during Diderot's epoch. The anthropophagi of the Lancer Islands are placed in a situation that is at the intersection of two major theories. On the one hand, they are necessary products of natural history. The combination of limited natural abundance and the tendency to multiply cannot logically be prolonged except as far as a point at which the accumulation of bodies must generate reciprocal consumption. On the other hand, however, it is precisely the

fact that anthropophagi are cultivated by the philosophic imagination in the isolation of the island-laboratory which proves that the nature of cannibalism is not an element of natural history understood as a universal genus.

The discussion between A and B captures the cannibal at a crossroads, at a precarious point in history when access to him becomes opaque and the way he is understood radically altered. Beyond this point, the anthropophagus will become the creature we know today: a product of particular circumstances. Extreme hunger, extinct customs in regions now invaded by tourists, and the manifestations of a profoundly deranged mind: all these are glimmers of a causality once described by distinct sciences. The anthropophagous nation has been reduced to a sad rabble of eccentrics, who each separately lead a tortured existence within a small ecological niche, incapable of constituting any starting point for the articulation of a moral philosophy.

Having ended up as functionaries who know very well where their next meal is coming from, the philosophers of our times teach us one or another version of utilitarianism, moral relativism, or juridical positivism. Sensible to the pleasures of the no longer topical, I have elected to present the reader with a study about a period of the past during which the eater of human flesh made his atrocious hegemony felt within the bounds of the science of natural law. The debate between A and B allows us to contemplate, at least as a possibility, a situation in which the cannibal was an original subject of universal history. If true, then the cannibal is one of the great forgotten figures of philosophy, and the story of man and his obligations, as these were seen by the philosophers of the past, would be incomplete without him.

This history of cannibalism can be reconstructed as three successive stages, part historical and part conceptual. In the first, the cannibal is viewed as a creature from the perspective of natural law. In the second, the cannibal becomes the diabolical retort in which the flux of particles confounds the calculations of theologians and metaphysicians. The third stage is that at which we seem to have arrived today, when the cannibal is a creature of circumstances and education. Natural law, materialism, and anthropological relativism are the three major contexts that impose a division in the history of the cannibal's passage through thought and which are, in their turn, clarified by his presence.

Nevertheless, the present work is not one that is primarily historical. First of all because it is in no way a history of cannibalistic practices. Of course, the instances of verifiable anthropology have sometimes left their traces in the ideal productions of the philosophers. However, whether cannibals existed or not is a fact of marginal importance. My

cannibal is in the first place a scholarly creature, a personage who animates theoretical texts, and only to a lesser extent, if at all, is he a subject for the anthropology of the aberrant.

Before anything else, this book is about us and our world. What I have attempted to explain is not just the way in which anthropophagy was treated by the sciences of natural law but above all the general mystery of the disappearance of those theories. This disappearance has a significance of a philosophical order, since it is within its space that we now think about good and evil.

Together with the sanguine figure of the cannibal disappears a style of philosophical argument, leaving behind an imagination that is the poorer. But what is fundamental is the fact that a world of arguments, values, and sensibilities become inaccessible or unclear to us once their point of articulation is exiled from the field of reflection.

The anthropophagus was an unyielding creature who brought to light the law of a harsh and profound nature. As such, perhaps he has something to tell us about ourselves, the people of a time in which nature has become merely an occasion for the picturesque. In relation to us, the subjects of technologically mediated organization, the cannibal of the state of nature allows us to explore this impossible dimension, to traverse the crystalline sphere of the political.

In his strangeness, the cannibal is sovereign over a species of freedom. His story is one that casts light on the origins of the modern state and the boundaries of modern civilization, and weighs up their right to existence. Let us listen to this cannibal, for his voice comes from beyond, whence we too come and whither we shall perhaps never arrive again.