

Bellow, Cannibalism, and the Laughing Death

A few months back I read Patrick French's excellent biography of V.S. Naipaul, and the study led me to a title I had never heard of before. *The Loss of El Dorado*, published in 1970, is Naipaul's history of the colonization of the West Indies. The book had a poor sale, in the U.S. at least, and has never drawn the attention of *A House for Mr. Biswas* or *In a Free State*, the celebrated novels, or *An Area of Darkness* and *A Million Mutinies Now*, his nonfiction studies of India.

The Loss of El Dorado is specifically a history of the northeastern coast of Venezuela. It includes the Orinoco River and Delta, Trinidad (Naipaul's birthplace), and a few neighboring Caribbean islands. The book remains well worth reading, though it disregards the usual chronology of conquest and liberation from Spain and other European powers. Instead, Naipaul's grim and tawdry story chronicles European exploration, uprooted native populations, the depredations of buccaneers, imperialists and desperadoes, the Spaniards, the Dutch, the English, and the French. All were seeking property and gold. And it inevitably includes slaves shipped from Africa to work on coffee, cocoa, and sugar plantations. Naipaul's goal is not conventional history, but the resurrection of long-forgotten stories from a part of the western hemisphere that deserve to be recorded.

“Port of ‘Spain,” writes Naipaul at the end of the book, referring to the capitol of Trinidad, “was a place where things had happened and nothing showed. Only people remained, and their past had dropped out of all of the history books. Picton”—an English viceroy who ruled the island around 1800—“was the name of a street; no one knew more. History was a fairytale about Columbus and a fairytale about the strange customs of the aboriginal Caribs and Arawaks. It was impossible to set them in the landscape.”

Naipaul’s description of the Caribs is what caught my attention. They were cannibals who lived near the Orinoco Delta and on a few of the nearby islands. They ventured forth on man-eating expeditions from time to time, preying on colonizers of varying nationalities and unsuspecting natives. “The Spaniards never had enough to eat,” writes Naipaul, describing the invaders from about 1600. “They were also in danger of being eaten. Man-eating Caribs were increasingly on the prowl.” Naipaul quotes a report sent to Madrid by a Spanish “official” in the region appealing to authorities in Spain for armed support: “They eat the Indians they seize and kill the Spaniards in the most cruel way possible . . . and when they are not available they nourish themselves with Negroes.” The report suggests that Africa slaves were castrated and “held in perpetual solitude until they were eaten.”

As unlikely as the association may seem, this material illuminated for me themes and passages in Bellow’s work. I cannot say that he read *The Loss of El*

Dorado, but it would hardly be surprising if he had, since he was familiar with Naipaul's work, and earned a B.A. degree in anthropology from Northwestern University. Cannibalism is a somewhat hidden but persistent theme in *Humboldt's Gift*, and it is strangely and inexplicably present in his last novel, *Ravelstein*, which is also partly set in the Caribbean. This material seems connected not only to V.S. Naipaul's book, but to the strange and disturbed life of Daniel Carlton Gadjusek, a brilliant medical researcher whom Bellow knew and who (like Bellow) was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1976. He also spent a year in prison on a conviction of sexual abuse.

In *Humboldt's Gift*, the narrator's lover, Demmie Vonghel, dies in a plane crash thought to be near the Orinoco River in the Venezuelan jungle. Demmie comes from a family of fundamentalist Christians in Delaware, who have set up a mission in the jungle to bring religion to the natives; the plane that crashed was on its way to the mission. In search of the missing woman, the narrator, Charlie Citrine, comes upon the mission and discovers several members of her extended family, along with cannibals. "There were lots of Demies there, about twenty Vonghels," says Charlie, describing the scene to another character later in the novel. As he attends services and sings hymns in the mission, Charlie is aware of being surrounded by cannibals, perhaps descendants of the Carib tribe that Naipaul

writes about in *A Loss of El Dorado*. In that same scene, Charlie declares, “I stayed among these cannibals, hoping that Demmie would show up.”

“Were they cannibals?” asks his interlocutor, a childhood flame named Naomi Lutz.

“They had eaten the first group of missionaries that came there. As you sang in the chapel and saw some of the filed teeth of somebody who had probably eaten your brother--Dr. Timothy’s brother had been eaten, and he knew the fellows who had done it” (Cannibals filed their teeth, I assume, to make them more effective carnivores.)

Cannibalism makes another appearance in *Humboldt’s Gift* in an entirely different context. This time the source is a movie script that Charlie wrote in the 1950s with his friend Von Humboldt Fleischer, when both were teaching at Princeton. *Caldofreddo*, the name of the movie, is the story of a polar explorer from the 1920s whose expedition goes awry, leaving him and a few other men stranded amidst the polar ice floes. One of them—Caldofreddo--resorts to cannibalism to survive, and the broken taboo is discovered after a Russian freighter rescues the man. Charlie is shocked to discover near the end of the novel that the scenario is now an immensely successful movie, a world-wide success, one that rescues him from poverty after he establishes that he co-wrote the original script.

There seem to be cannibals throughout the novel, and Charlie might be one of them himself. In a comical scene in the story, Charlie poses as a killer with a minor gangster in order to threaten a man who has mishandled Mafia funds. When the scene is broken up by the police, he tries to assure them that he was forced into playing a role. “Strictly speaking,” he tells the reader, “I was of course no killer. But I did incorporate other people into myself and consume them. When they died, I passionately mourned. . . .But wasn’t it a fact that I added their strength to mine?” In the novel, Charlie is a biographer, hence his reference to “consuming” other lives. Bellow did the same thing as a novelist, taking the lives and stories of people he knew (or knew of) and converting them into literature. Perhaps Bellow felt himself to be a victim of cannibals, the ones who consumed his life in memoirs, biographies, and critical studies, reporting unflattering stories he would have preferred to keep to himself. (In a letter to Owen Barfield from 1977, Bellow remarks on a scholarly article that had recently been published. “I am tired of critics,” he writes, “who tell the world with full confidence exactly what you were up to in writing what you wrote, as though they kept a booth at the fair in the middle of your soul.)

Not without significance, the lawyer representing Charlie’s former wife in a divorce suit is referred to repeatedly the “Cannibal Pinsker.”

Readers who followed Bellow's career had more cannibals coming their way. The narrator of his last novel, *Ravelstein*, takes a near-fatal trip to the Caribbean—as Bellow himself did, when he vacationed on the island of St. Martin in 1994. Chick, the narrator in *Ravelstein*, is served a dish of toxic fish at a seaside restaurant, and, like Bellow, barely survives after a prolonged stay in a Boston Hospital. But before he is evacuated from the island, Chick and his wife investigate passages from a magazine story. The article that interest them draws on the journals prepared by an “American physician” who has conducted research in New Guinea, in the East Indies. The physician is never given a name, and the reader is never told what the object of his research is. But the journals includes stories of headhunters who roast the decapitated victims of their ambush over an open fire. The heads would later be used as “currency in wife purchase.”

“I was hung up,” Chick says, “on the roasting human flesh, on the cannibals and the severed heads looking upward from the blood-sprinkled grass. . .The human flesh being eaten crowded into my—I admit it—contaminated consciousness. It was my sickness that made me peculiarly susceptible.” We should remember that the toxin infecting the narrator came from a reef-dwelling fish—red snapper—that are often piscivores, or fish that eat other fish (Piscean cannibals?)

Chick, I suspect, is reading the journals of Daniel Carlton Gadjusek. According to Zachary Leader, Bellow's biographer, Bellow hoped to use the materials in a manuscript that never came to fruition. Leader offers no details other than to note that both Gadjusek and Bellow received the Nobel Prize in the same year, apparently met in Stockholm during the awards ceremony, and thereafter "kept in touch." Those diaries Bellow was reading would have been a small fraction of the total Gadjusek prepared; in his biographical statement for the Nobel Committee, Gadjusek writes that the journals he maintained over decades amounted to several thousand pages. Whether the gruesome stories Bellow produces in *Ravelstein* come directly from the journals or are inventions of his own isn't clear, but my guess is that he was borrowing heavily from the documents he was reading.

Bellow writes that the researcher "had a firm scientific aim," and indeed Gadjusek did. He was investigating the incidence of kuru among the Fore Indians of New Guinea in the 1950s, and discovered the "funerary cannibalism" that produced the disease. In what was undoubtedly an ancient practice going back centuries, the Fore would often open the skulls of the deceased and consume their brains, probably as a means of obtaining strength and perhaps wisdom. But they sickened themselves in the process. Kuru is a degenerative neurological disorder, ultimately fatal. Before dying, its victims suffer *risus sardonicus*, or a twisting of

the mouth into something resembling a smile, and may even utter bark-like sounds that seem to be laughter—hence the term “the laughing death.” Gadjusek’s discoveries led to an understanding of Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease and later “mad cow,” all of which fall under the heading of spongiform encephalopathy.

But there was more to Bellow’s reading of this material than neurology and cannibalism. “In addition to the disease itself and of Gadjusek’s experiments, the journals contain disturbing accounts of sexual practices in New Guinea, particularly concerning children,” writes Leader. A rite of manhood for the boys included, for example, sexual relations with older men. Gadjusek himself writes of being offered children as sexual playmates and of boys offering themselves. This is probably the source of his legal troubles. He later brought dozens of these children to the U.S. to live with or near him, and in the 1990s one of them accused him of sexual molestation. Gadjusek spent a year in prison, in 1996, and after his release left the U.S. to continue his medical research in Europe. He died in 2008.

I cannot help wondering if Bellow’s interest in the subject isn’t a broader comment on the America he experienced in the last decade or so of his life. A few years ago, preparing for a class on Bellow I was planning to teach, I was struck by the amount of criminality that enters into the work of the 1980s and 1990s. This includes murders, battery, rape, and various categories of fraud. One long short story, “Cousins,” centers on the life of a Mob enforcer who’s a member of the

narrator's family. Bellow's own brother, Maurice, seems to have cheated him out of substantial sums in a real estate investment. Perhaps the late fiction can be seen as a warning of what we might become—cannibals—in the hypercompetitive world of “late capitalism,” where morals have frayed and the country has adopted a *sauve qui peut* mentality.

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