

BOOK REVIEW

Solving a Crisis with a Crisis: *Tender is the Flesh* by Agustina Bazterrica

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As recent world events demonstrate, a virus outbreak can cause the normal to become impossible and the unthinkable to become normal. Although the virus which sets into motion Agustina Bazterrica's novel *Tender is the Flesh* is of a different order than COVID-19, it likewise puts the normal in question. Bazterrica's novel, translated from the Spanish by Sarah Moses, explores the ways in which global infrastructures and flows of capital preserve themselves in the face of crisis, no matter the consequences for mankind and planet. Although the world Bazterrica imagines is strange and monstrous, the strength of her novel comes from the fact that this world is uncomfortably similar to our own.

The events of *Tender is the Flesh* take place following an outbreak of a virus which causes animal flesh to become toxic to humans. In this situation, people turn to cannibalism to satisfy their appetite for meat. At first, social disorder ensues: people begin hunting and eating the marginalized, primarily immigrants and the poor. But overhunting causes these populations to deplete rapidly. World governments restore order by passing laws allowing for the industrial farming of humans for meat. This both opens a way to satisfy the global craving for meat and serves the interests of large corporations keen to profit from selling human meat. The legalization of industrial human-farming and normalization of cannibalism is referred to by the media euphemistically as the "Transition."

To most people living in the world of this novel, cannibalism is not the morally objectionable practice which most would today

consider it. Rather, the events of the novel take place in a setting in which consumption of human meat has become normal. Cannibalism is the way out of a virus-induced crisis. But is it also a crisis of its own? Could it also be our own crisis? *Tender is the Flesh* is most lively and engaging when we read it as a text concerned not so much with cannibalism in particular but contemporary situations of crisis and crisis response more generally. While this novel presents the legalization of cannibalism as the solution to a specific meat-related crisis, might this crisis also be read as an allegory of several crises that we currently confront in the real world? Might our own efforts to preserve a global order tested increasingly by crises of climate and capital also lead us to embrace a normal that is also grotesque?

In *Tender is the Flesh*, this “normal grotesque” is so grotesque in no small part because it is presented as so normal. When the narrative begins, the world appears quite different from the one we live in. The novel is set some years after the Transition — a process in which, after animal meat became toxic to humans, government first legalized and facilitated the development of a human meat production industry. The fact that the novel does not begin in the midst of these social changes but after them creates an effect of shock in the reader: a world order that is extremely strange to us is presented as if uncontroversial. Whatever ethical qualms humanity at large may have had about eating its own are already successfully reckoned with. Cannibalism is routine.

This narrative structure provokes the question of where to locate “crisis” or crises in relation to the plot of *Tender is the Flesh*. Was there previously a crisis? Or is the state of crisis ongoing? In addressing these questions, it is helpful to consider what the term “crisis” means, as well as how it is used. According to Reinhart Koselleck, the term “crisis” is, among other things, a “structural signature of modernity” marking a “historically immanent transitional phase.”¹ When exactly such a transition begins or ends depends on situation-specific factors, but in all cases, Koselleck implies, it involves temporal separations. A crisis makes a series of marks in the forward progress of linear time. Before a crisis, there

¹ Koselleck and Richter, “Crisis,” 372.

is a pre-crisis state: the order to things is considered normal. Then a crisis occurs which disrupts the pre-crisis situation. The crisis prevents people from continuing with life as usual. The order to things is in flux. Only once people have adapted to the “crisis situation” does the crisis cease to exist. In place of the crisis emerges a state of post-crisis: a settled order to things that is radically different from the pre-crisis order.

This crisis typology offers a guide to reading *Tender is the Flesh*, where crisis occurs not as a singular destabilizing event but as a period of adaptation to changing circumstances. In the world of *Tender is the Flesh*, this period is known as the Transition. The Transition, I would propose, does not *follow* the crisis but is itself a time of crisis.² While one might object that “crisis” is a term more appropriate to name the event which provoked the Transition – specifically, outbreak of a virus which made animal meat products toxic to humans – in this novel, as in Koselleck’s typology, a phase of crisis and a phase of transition are interrelated to the extent that one cannot be named without simultaneously naming the other. In *Tender is the Flesh*, crisis is both the outbreak of a virus and the process of coming to terms with the outbreak response. The Transition is an ongoing human crisis.

Bazterrica is a careful stylist of language, and in *Tender is the Flesh* she is always attentive to the fact that particular words always mean in particular ways. The word Transition is no different: “Change, transformation, shift: the synonyms that appear to mean the same thing, though the choice of one over the other speaks to a distinct view of the world.”³ The word Transition speaks to a view of the world that is visible as crisis perhaps only from the outside. In the world of the novel, the Transition represents not a crisis but a resolution to what is perceived to be a crisis: the unavailability of meat products. Normalizing the consumption of human meat marks the possibility of ending the crisis and returning daily life to a kind of normality: a new era in which eating habits can be similar – although not completely similar – to how they had been before. The carnivorous diet returns by different means. But from the outside –

² Bazterrica, *Tender is the Flesh*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*

our perspective as readers of *Tender of the Flesh* – the Transition can be read as a crisis in itself: the crisis that is the process of coming to terms with industrial cannibalism. Authorities frame the Transition to cannibalism as an end to the meat crisis – a “good thing” – but it actually represents a new crisis.

Early in the novel, we learn that some have doubts about reasons it was necessary for society to undergo the Transition. There are skeptics of the official narrative:

The most eminent zoologist, whose articles claimed the virus was a lie, had an opportune accident. He thinks it was all staged to reduce overpopulation. For as long as he can recall, there’s been talk of scarcity of resources.⁴

Throughout the novel there is a continuous play between two potential justifications for the Transition. On one hand, there is the fact that a virus has made animal meat toxic and inedible. Industrial production of human meat serves to prevent people who crave meat from causing social unrest. On the other hand, there is a theory, as in the passage above, that the virus is merely a pretext for an anti-overpopulation social intervention. This theory derives from a realization that humanity exerts a destructive and unsustainable impact on the earth’s ecosystems. Slavoj Žižek notes that some people mistakenly assume nature to be capable in itself of neutralizing the destructive effects of human activities.⁵ Nothing could be further from the truth. Our activities do have a lasting consequences for world. One such consequence is that natural resources are being depleted to manufacture consumer food products. Is industrial human meat production good for the planet? Or is it an intensification of global processes and systems that were already destructive of the planet?

The damaged ecology of our planet is an issue which features prominently in discussions of the contemporary climate crisis. In the 21st century, we realize that environmental problems are often consequences of human activity. Human impact on the

⁴ Bazterrica, *Tender is the Flesh*, 14.

⁵ “University of Dundee | Philosophy Lecture Series | Slavoj Žižek.”

planet has been so great that some have argued that we are living in what should be called the “Anthropocene.”⁶ This term, which means roughly “age of humans,” refers to a proposed geological epoch which commences as human activity begins to have a driving and irreversible impact on the Earth’s geology and ecosystems. Rather than celebrating the achievements of mankind, the term “Anthropocene” implies that human activity is a destructive force.⁷ As a destructive force, human activity negatively affects not only the earth’s ecosystems, but also the fate of humanity itself. A 2019 Al Jazeera headline keenly recognizes this two-fold nature of the climate crisis: “We are destroying our own home.”⁸ Indeed, to lay waste to the planet is to deprive ourselves of a home. Ecological problems do not merely concern what is “out there.” Rather, they directly affect humanity itself. When we destroy the earth on which we live, we destroy ourselves. In light of this, cannibalism in *Tender is the Flesh* could be read as a metaphor for anthropogenic climate change: man destroys man. To consume another is also to consume oneself. The novel’s portrayal of a world in which cannibalism is normal parallels real-world obliviousness to the “cannibalism” that is climate change. In both cases, man is victim of his own self-destructive activities.

Tender is the Flesh’s cannibalism also discourses with another contemporary crisis related to ecology, a crisis which many argue is the root of man’s tendency toward ecological destruction: the crisis of consumerism. As I have mentioned, the legalization of cannibalism in Bazterrica’s novel was due in part to pressure on government by wealthy corporate interests. When people stopped eating animal meat, the global animal meat production industry lost its business model. After this industry successfully lobbied government to legalize cannibalism, it went into the highly profitable business of producing human meat.⁹ In the world of *Tender is the Flesh*, big business is more powerful than government and profit motive supersedes the worth of human life. Cannibalism keeps the economy going. To corporate industry, the use of humans as

⁶ Ellis, *Anthropocene*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Al Jazeera, “‘We are destroying our own home’: UN report reveals nature crisis.”

⁹ Bazterrica, *Tender is the Flesh*, 14.

livestock solves a problem of basic supply and demand: the toxicity of animal meat generates massive consumer demand for which there is no supply. This gap in the market offers lucrative business opportunities.

Thus, the Transition. The virus which makes animal meat toxic to humans leads to a crisis for global industry and tests the resilience of the capitalist order. Just as, according to Koselleck, crises “not only contain immanent forces through which they can be overcome, but are also manifestations of tendencies pointing to the structural limits of capitalism,” the virus in *Tender is the Flesh* makes visible both the limits of capitalism and capitalism’s ability overcome limits.¹⁰ The capitalist global order preserves itself by adapting in the face of adversity: without livestock there can be no capital accumulation, so industry turns humans into livestock in order to continue accumulating capital. Corporate interests conspire to make eating human meat socially acceptable. The human becomes a mass-produced consumer product, reduced to the materiality of its edible body. Capitalism’s ever-lurking existential crisis — the inability to profit — is overcome.¹¹ Production, consumption, and accumulation of capital continue. But industrial cannibalism, capitalism’s way out of crisis, is itself a new crisis: a human crisis.

The strength of *Tender is the Flesh* is that it allows us to see so clearly the relation of the first crisis to the second. Introducing cannibalism as a solution to a crisis of profitability is allegorical of the indissolubility of global capital systems. But in this novel, cannibalism is more than a generic trope of inhuman monstrosity. Specifically, it might be read as an allegory of man’s destruction of his own existence through environmental degradation. Bazterrica reminds us that Earth suffers for capitalism to survive, and as inhabitants of Earth, we humans also suffer for capitalism’s survival. Capitalism may well soon bring about the ruin of everything, but before that happens, surely, it will sell us ourselves to place on our own dinner plates. The nauseating power of Bazterrica’s novel is

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Bartolovich, “Consumerism,” 211.

that imagining the dystopia she so vividly describes is easier than imagining the end of capitalism.

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