I

We do not know what imagination is. Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge have given us their sublime accounts, as have other Romantics, down to Gaston Bachelard, who thought it was the flame burning at the summit of mind, “the region of the metaphor of metaphor.” We do not know, but I prefer to think of imagination as motion, migrancy, displacement, a flickering gift, a knack of seeing otherwise, a way of moving away from identity, things as they are – including identity.

But let us admit it: in moving away, we die to some things. We learn loss even as our minds consume one identity to flare out into another. Does imagination, then, confirm our homelessness, our perpetual exile, in the world? Not exactly. People feel exile, imagination is free. Yet, feeling exile, men and women may come to reality wounded in their identity, nursing a secret ache.

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What, then, is “identity,” in Egypt, America, Australia?

Though mysteriously made – no, not simply “constructed” from the outside, no more than imagination is – identity remains as wary of imagination as is imagination of identity. Rightly so. The mackerel, the starling, the warrior ant adhere to their kind with primal ferocity. But can human beings settle for solidarity by blood, tribe, nation, class, gender, color, caste, religion, linguistic habit? The Sophoclean chorus chants: “Many are the wonders, but none more wonderful than man;” the Bible boasts that God created man in His image; and humanists never cease to proclaim each individual unique. Is our race just whistling in the dark?
Regarding blood and belonging, I fear that human beings remain closer to the warrior ant. E.O. Wilson’s “epigenetic rules” still hold their ground. Rules? Reading the dispatches of madness in our time, I wonder, for an instant, if Georges Bataille may not be closer to the mark. Instead of rules, he proposes a “surplus” of cruelty, an “expenditure” of frenzy, a “supplement” of destructiveness in human affairs. Death, violence, and sensuality, it almost seems, rush to fill a crack in creation, a discontinuity in our being. And imagination itself, though it abhors sameness, may mingle and conspire with identity in this lurid metaphysics.

Forget metaphysics; see how fantasy, if not imagination, holds sway over the killing fields. In Blood and Belonging, Michael Ignatieff shows in chilling detail how the desperate will to belong – call it “nationalism” for short – must violently dispossess others while fabricating myths, no, big lies, of its own. Hence the “high volume of untruth,” needed to sustain current vocabularies of moral self-exoneration. But belonging needs, beyond self-exoneration, blood, needs terror producing more terror. Ignatieff concludes with a statement that almost reaches back to Bataille, as it reflects on the “staggering gratuitousness and bestiality of nationalist violence…”

The most fraught episode – it touches the human mystery – that Ignatieff relates concerns Milan, a young woman of Kurdish descent, born and bred in Melbourne. She leaves home, which she regards as no home, to join Kurd guerrillas, the peshmerga of the PKK, in the mountain fastness of the Caucasus. Indoctrinated in classical Marxism, she bears a Kalashnikov, speaks softly, and endures extreme hardships, together with women warriors of her chosen kind.

Why? To belong? For purity, self-immolation, self-transcendence? For a meaning, a value, a certainty that could take all life by the throat? Or was it, beyond all that, at the behest of some irresistible demon lover, Death itself? Call it “idealism,” if you wish – I won’t. Ignatieff calls it, with concealed distaste, “happiness:”

Milan’s cause all but abolishes the division between individual and group. She has embraced a kind of belonging so intense that those who share it may look like mental slaves to an outsider like myself. To themselves, they seem at last to be free. For that is what is most striking about Milan, as she smiles, shakes my hand and dashes back to the mess tent: she is truly happy here.