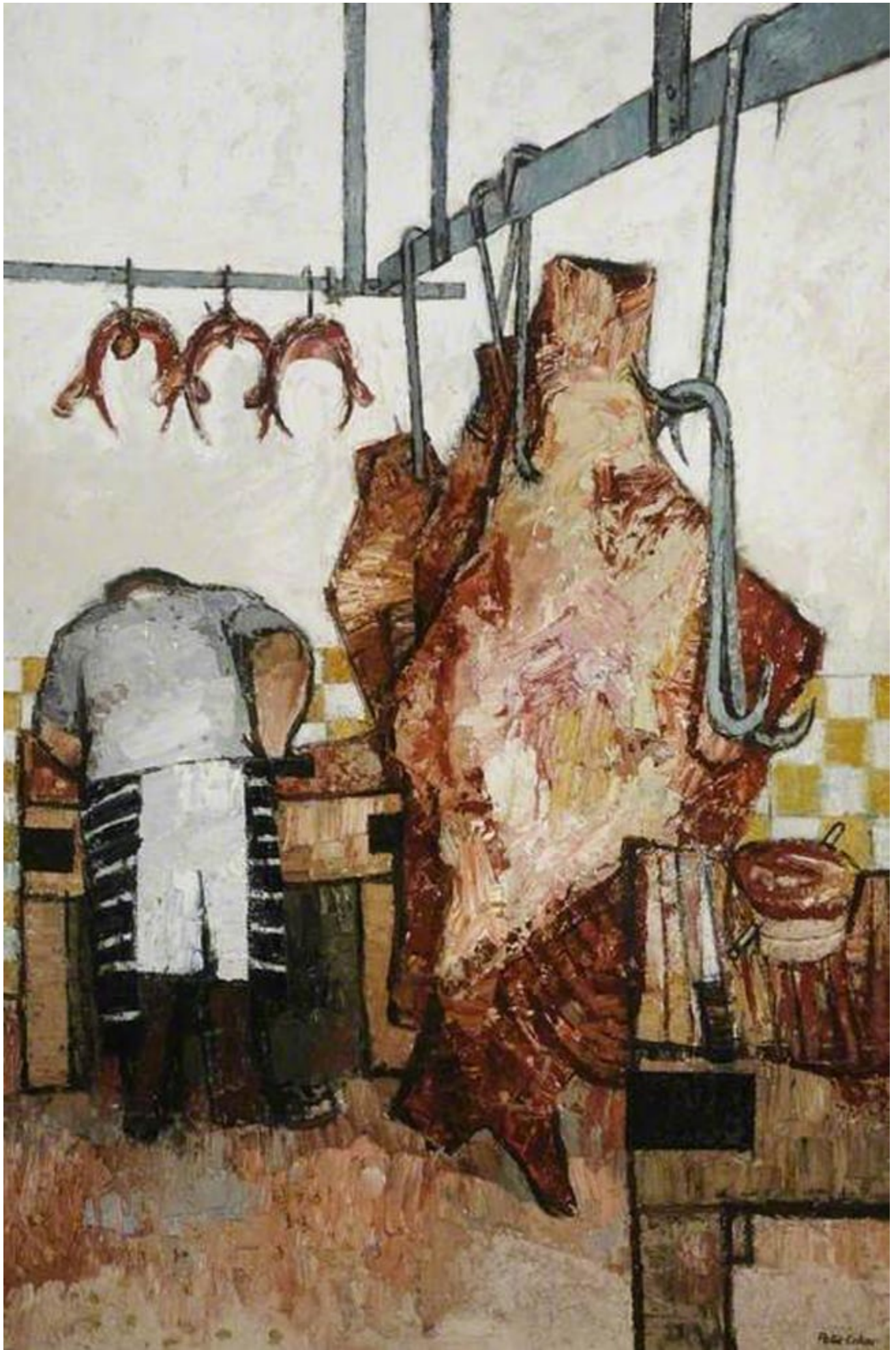


Eating Animals: Confessions of a French Hypocrite

by [Cristina Nehring](#) (August 2023)



Butcher's Shop I, Peter Coker, 1955

"The animals served here have been born, raised and butchered in France," reads the hand-scrawled chalkboard on the wall opposite my cozy café table. I am reclining on the sofa of my favorite neighborhood bistro with my afternoon coffee.

What jarred me about this sign was the language, especially the last phrase that the animals are *abbatus* en France." "Abbatus" means "slaughtered" but it stems from the word "battre"—to batter—in this case, to batter to death.

The owners of this establishment obviously do not expect their patrons to be discomfited by the reminder that the handsome meal on their plate had a painful death. And perhaps this is no wonder. On the street I live near *Les Halles* butcher shops exhibit entire rabbits sliced down the middle. They exhibit wracks of cow ribs the size of accordions. They exhibit chickens with their necks, heads, claws and feathers still attached. After all, before becoming a shopping mall *Les Halles* was the food market of Paris—with rows of live animals displayed for human consumption.

If French people are often not squeamish about the sources of their food, I suspect many Americans and English are. I suspect that most of us set before a long-lashed, large-eyed, unblinking cow and asked if they wanted it killed and stuck between two patties, would decline. It is largely by disguising and distancing the process of killing that this process can continue.

200 million animals are slaughtered for food every day worldwide and yet normal persons living normal lives will never set foot on the sort of factory farm described in Peter Singer's classic and just now republished, *Animal Liberation Now*. They will never witness so much as a family farm. They will never make an emotional connection between the ketchup-

covered quarter pounder on their dinner plate and the ambling, meditative, peculiarly human animal on the field.

And even should they make the connection, they will persuade themselves—as I regularly persuade *myself*—that they are powerless to change the order of things. The cow, the sheep, the deer, the chicken, the rabbit is already dead; there is no bringing it back to life by depriving oneself of the pleasure of consuming it with a tasty condiment.

There was a single time in my life that I was consistently vegetarian. That was when I made my home, for some months, in a remote and rural village in Greece. I knew, there, that when I ordered a piece of mutton, the chef would repair to the back of his taverna, slit a lamb's throat, skin it and stick it on the spit to grill. Perhaps he did not do it on the very same night but he certainly did it the day before and the day after. The chain of supply and demand was impossible to overlook. So for the time I lived in Greece the only thing I ate off a spit was grilled eggplant, grilled tomatoes and grilled peppers. And I might say they were delicious.

When I returned to “civilization” in Paris my behavior (by my own standards) deteriorated instantaneously; I returned to buying pre-packaged meats from the supermarket and ordering “steak tartare”, (raw ground beef with some spices and an egg on it.) After all, the deed was done; the creature was dead and I might as well eat it. What was the use of grandstanding, of proclaiming virtuous abstinence when there was nothing to be salvaged, nothing to be gained, basically, but an ego boost?

The paradoxical relationship between humans and animals is a subject that demands far more reflection than it has received. Almost everybody proclaims to love animals. In first-world countries certain animals are emperors. People pamper their pooches and groom their kittens often more than they pamper or groom themselves. Pet spas and suites are a booming business

in the United States and elsewhere.

And yet the moment you are not the right species, all bets are off. No matter that most mammals share comparable sensitivities and intelligences, if you're the wrong kind of mammal chances are you spend your short life imprisoned in cells hardly bigger than your body, that you are experimented upon, factory farmed, hunted, killed and eaten, as opposed to coddled and cuddled.

As a child it was always explained to me that animals were inferior to human beings and that therefore we had the right to kill them. Never mind that the opposite argument was made to me as well: animals killed each other so we—being animals as well—had the right to do unto them what they did unto each other. On one hand we were equal to animals and so we could kill them with impunity; on the other hand we were superior to animals and so we could *also* kill them with impunity. Talking about self-serving logic.

Now that I am no longer a child but rather have a child of my own, a child who has been raised on stories of pigs and elephants (Wilbur of *Charlotte's Web* and Dumbo of Disney), deer (as in *Bambi*) and monkeys (as in *Curious George*), rabbits (as in *Thumper*), bears (as in *Winnie the Pooh*), ducks (as in the *Ugly Duckling*), mice as in *Mickey Mouse* and chickens (as in *Chicken Little*), I am paralyzed with fear of having to explain to her one day that all these animals she loves we routinely kill. Some of these animals she has already eaten. How many chicken wings has she happily gnawed on already, not knowing where they came from?

Nor does the tale end with storybooks; there are also stuffed animals, the fuzzy beasts my daughter goes to sleep with, around whom she throws her chubby arms and in whose soft embraces she drifts off into dreamland.

Why is it that human beings seem—for many practical and

pedagogic purposes—to prefer animals of different species to animals of their own species—and simultaneously to butcher them? Why is it that for every Little Red Riding Hood there are a hundred Porky Pigs, for every Raggedy Ann there are a dozen furry cartoon rabbits—if not because we adore these animals—often more spontaneously than we do our own kind?

But what message do we send children when we teach them to adore them as well—and simultaneously to accept their murder?

Is it really so incomprehensible that a certain number of children turn violent as they grow older, that many young adults become desensitized to the pain of the creatures they once considered their best friends? It is testimony to our ability to compartmentalize that we do not become even *more* cynical about loving relationships as we grow older. After all, many of us learned to love by learning to love our animals—be they in our cribs or on our doormats, in our storybooks or in our I-pad movies.

I wish I had the answers to all of these problems but the fact is I don't. I myself have a carnivorous palate. If I consulted my taste buds alone I would live off of *foie gras* and *steak tartare*.

I would like to think, however that taste buds do not prevail over morals and that—as someone once memorably said— “I will not kill any animal that is afraid to die”—*nor*, either, will I accept to be complicitous in its killing.

I suspect that history will one day judge us for the destruction we have wreaked upon the animal world in a comparable way that history has judged slaveholders for holding slaves and maybe even for Nazis gassing Jews.

Indeed, the late Nobel-prize-winning Jewish author, Isaac Bashevis Singer has had the protagonist of his story, *The Letter Writer*, declare that “all people are Nazis” in relation to animals. “For the animals, every day is Treblinka,” Herman

Gombiner asserts—he who (like Isaac Bashevis Singer himself) has lost several family members in concentration camps.

France is not going to become a vegetarian oasis for some time. After all, it was only in 1976—considerably less than 50 years ago!—that animals were declared to be “sentient beings”—as opposed to machines or merchandise—by Article L214-1 of the French rural code. (There is now an animal rights’ organization in France called “L214: Ethique et Animaux.” dedicated to eliminating the “worst” forms of treatment, transport and slaughter of animals and to move toward a vegetable-based diet. And yet if there are vegetarian restaurants in Paris they remain (as in most of the world) anomalies. And if there’s a meatless sausage in a natural foods store it’s still cause for remark—generally disdainful.

The last time I went to that local bistro of mine, however, the blackboard proclaiming the local “battery” of animals had been taken down. It may be an accident but I’m going to be optimistic. Perhaps it is progress. Perhaps Parisians are starting, slowly, to become sensitive to the quotidian cruelty of their culinary practices. Perhaps not only the French but the rest of us, too, will one day put principles before palates. I can’t help hoping.

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