

Back and forth to the beginning

We know that our division of history into events is arbitrary. Time is flowing, like a stream, and it only makes sense to call this ripple "modern" or that current "the Cold War" against the background of an understanding of the ideas and life-forms associated with these periods. The water flowing through a ripple is never *the same water*, and our division of time is much like this picture. We say a war begins when one country says "War!" to the other, but the causes and consequences of this act extend in time backwards and forwards like ripples in water. Likewise we may say that this story began at the time of birth of the writer, the moment his ((great)grand)parents met, or even with the division of the first single-celled organism in the early years of our planet. Or maybe the moment you started reading these words. It is perhaps more accurate to say that this story began every time the writer became dissatisfied with the pictures of pictures that supposedly defines his world. These words are a ripple in the stream of history called discontentment. Discontentment as a movement towards discontinuation of false pictures.

To dispel a false picture one will have to negate it. Negation in this context is a pure and positive act and it has nothing to do with an argument as understood by debating societies (who like to hold competitions in the art of picturing pictures). Thus, these words are also an exploration of the other sides of the pictures that have made me uncomfortable. More than that, these words enquire into the connections between these pictures because the collection of pictures that construct and uphold our identities are often fragmented and thus come into conflict. This conflict is experienced in many areas of our daily lives and is the starting point of this enquiry. Pictures in isolation are unable to support a *whole* view of the world.

I remember once when I was asked, together with four fellow Danes, to present a sketch about Denmark in a gathering of international people, who likewise presented their particular countries and cultures. We were at a loss. What does being *Danish* entail? In what ways were we representing Danish culture(s)? What was our culture in the first place? Five Danes without idea about what it means to be Danish. Maybe we weren't very good representatives of our nation, but our confusion points to something deeper. It was the first time I was confronted with the intangible pictures that somehow were a part of me. These were pictures other people reflected and thus pictures that reflected the person I was supposed to be. Yet this 'I' seemed unable to grasp the picture. Being Danish was certainly not the same as being Swedish, that much we knew, but what was it *really*? In the end we sat down around a table (on which we placed empty bottles of beers) and related anthropological facts, told jokes and stories loaded with a good deal of self-irony. There seems to be something about irony (and beer) that pervades Danes, Danish and Denmark.

Although 'Danishness' is hardly definable it appears as an important factor in the consciousness of most Danes. Indeed, nationality seems to be important to people in most places. In Denmark today, you might even have to prove your 'Danishness' in order to be formally accepted into society. Danes who have married and started a family outside Denmark are required to prove that the family on the whole is more 'Danish' than 'foreign' if they want to move to Denmark. This can be a hard task if your children are raised in a different country and speak a foreign language, and there are a good deal of Danes who are unable to move to Denmark as a result. In this way this particular picture of a picture becomes very concrete and real to some Danes (and virtually anyone else who might want to move to Denmark). There are of course commonalities shared by people in any nation like languages, religions, histories and sometimes ethnicity. The point is that reality is much more blurred than the boundaries set up by such pictures of pictures.

In the midst of these pictures our lives unfold. Some might not be allowed to unfold in this or that country because a certain picture is attached to it, and some might even be inhibited in a more serious,

psychological way because of pictures, but unfold they do (much like the flow of the river from before). In this way life itself seems to move against the stillness that is associated with most pictures. We have to reject and adopt new pictures all the time if we want to describe ourselves accurately, we are infants, youths, adults and old all in one life. Some pictures stay with us through life, like in my instance does 'male', and so we come to think that there is some *core picture* which is the 'I' that is writing or reading these words. Pictures identify and the rigidity of pictures often taint our identities. This rigidity may eventually overwhelm us, and so we think we are the images we reflect to our surroundings. We may fail to identify what is most fundamental to our being and instead identify with something narrower, like being Christian, Muslim or Hindu. Picture becomes category becomes label of thought becomes picture. But 'being' comes before 'being this or that'. If identity fails to acknowledge this fact of life it is necessarily an illusion – a picture of a picture. And as illusions come alive by word of mouth and thrive in our stories, it is in stories they must be scotched. This is what is meant by the negation of a picture.

If our story begins every time someone relates to us against a background of a false picture, it is continually beginning. We might call it a movement, which is probably more accurate as this denotes action through space, the act of negation. And this does not mean that we will have to analyse ourselves all the time, setting this picture against that, replacing one argument with another argument. Our enquiry is not analysis. It is simply bringing to light *what already is* through observation, letting it sit in the light until it disappears. All that is required is the common sense that is our inheritance as a species. We will move back and forth between related pictures to examine their internal relationship in the movement of beginning. And on the way we hope to gain a clearer view of our current climate.