

RADICAL VEGETARIANISM: A Dialectic of Diet and Ethic

by Mark Mathew Braunstein
Panacea Press, 1981, 1993 (revised),
\$9.95, 140 pages

The fourth printing of *Radical Vegetarianism* is a thin book thick with thought, the work of a wise wordsmith and philosophical polemicist. Now standing on its own without its former foreword, shortened, tightened, with an updated bibliography, reworked preface and conclusion, *Radical Vegetarianism* makes a second debut. "Few new books are good because most good books are no longer new." The newly revised *Radical Vegetarianism* is both good and new - or nearly new. It is the old book improved.

Mark M. Braunstein can be considered vegetarianism's most eloquent and original voice. The twists and turns of phrases contouring his thought take his readers on an often thrilling ride through a panoramic mindscape. "It is a long hard climb for the body up the mountain of the mind," he says, but his words are guaranteed to take you to the top. Braunstein's language whets the appetite for more of the same - and keeps us reading (and eating up his words), savoring morsels such as: the suffer table, poison-ivy league professors, abracadaver, domestication, the land of milk and money, the picnic casket, or those who keep their stock in bonds.

Rife with alluring alliteration and eloquent epithets, *Radical Vegetarianism* is sometimes linguistically self-indulgent and logically lax, with a few pontifical generalizations, unsound syllogisms, nonsensical non sequiturs, unfounded fancies and bits of playful fluff; but these serve to provoke rather than irk, and to unmask the person behind the poetic prose. Its substance is as satisfying as its style. "Let no one mistake that vegetarianism is a philosophy only of the gut."

Radical vegetarianism is not just following a vegan diet; nor is it just eating fresh, raw, and whole foods, and occasionally fasting. Radical

vegetarianism is soul food as well as fleshless suppers. That there are no recipes included (for these see Braunstein's 1993 *Sprout Garden*) is a clue to the book's contents: the only ingredients we find are for what philosophers call "the good life." Because half the book concerns the philosophy of diet and half covers the ethics of eating, its sections on diet and ethics are no more separate than the moral and the meatless in a radical vegetarian's life. Braunstein's aim is to connect "the moral necessity of health" and "the unhealthy consequences of perdition" and to exhort us to "eat with judgment, to digest with deliberation." Mere nutrition fails if we neglect spiritual well-being; likewise "spiritual health demands a vegan diet." Thus the dialectic resolves itself in us.

To his credit, Braunstein chose not to frighten us with horrific tales of abattoirs and pesticide residues in meat, but rather to enlighten us with an incisive look at traditions, industries and professions. Nowhere does he pass judgment on pre-vegetarians (although he calls them "carnivores") who he admits can be good, kind and healthy. "Vegetarians are not a better sort of people," he says; what he means is that vegetarianism is a better sort of practice, for "it is wrong when one's pleasure must depend on another's pain." Braunstein, vegan since his teens, concludes the revised edition with his desire to be fed to alligators after his death, in effect to finally become a carnivore. Hence we cannot accuse him of prejudice against meat-eaters - at least the non-human variety. But for humans, "What life is worth eating?"

Braunstein can be congratulated not only on the imaginative work he has written, but also on the actions it will command. "Some things are easier done than said." Now that Braunstein has said it, it should be easier for his readers to do it. For them, his nearly edible literary feast (vegan, of course) will inspire the intellect, nourish the spirit, and tempt the palate.

— Reviewed by Kristin Aronson, PhD