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The Mastermind of Electricity

Translated from Croatian by Vesna Marić

It is not widely known that when Nikola Tesla was in his twenties and living in Graz, he spent entire *days* gambling and playing cards. This may not fit the image of a technical genius and fanatical workaholic, but these characteristics of his only manifested later. When his parents heard about the gambling, their reactions were diverse. His father, a village priest, got angry. His mother reacted in a wiser way. Like the most inspired psychologist, sensing that ‘more of the same’ (such as threats, lectures, pleading, calls to personal responsibility, tears, and so on) would not bear the desired outcome, she performed a skilful manoeuvre. When the prodigal son came home penniless on one occasion, his mother handed him a wad of money along with advice to have fun and spend everything as quickly as possible. ‘The sooner you spend everything we’ve got, the better.’ The young Tesla was so shocked by this that he never gambled again.

Similarly, in the manner of a rigid puritan, he gave up coffee and cigarettes. As soon as he noticed heart palpitations, he immediately stopped consuming the incriminating substances. Taken out of context, such episodes might paint a picture of Tesla as an unlikeable ascetic, but he was anything but that.

On the contrary, he liked the good life. When he had money, he lived in luxury. Always well dressed and with an inherent elegance, speaking around ten different languages, and widely popular, he had no difficulty penetrating the inner circles of the New York elite. Towards the latter part of the 1880s, the hottest place in New York for the celebrities of the day was the *Delmonico* restaurant, an exclusive gathering place for those on the 400 List, the crème de la crème of New York society. Dressed in silk shirts and a different tie every day, wearing white gloves and a top hat, obsessively neat, there was a royal air about Tesla. Tall and gracious, he reminded of the aged magician Mandrake, only his magic tricks, such as for example, the radio, work to this day.

During the 1890s, his favourite spot for evenings out was the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. This is what *Citizen* magazine wrote about Tesla in 1897: ‘He arrives at the Waldorf Hotel at 8pm on the dot. He is dressed in an immaculate evening suit. He never wears a suit in winter, only coat tails. He finishes

dinner at exactly 10pm and leaves the hotel to go to his room to read, or returns to his laboratory in order to spend the night working.' And the dinner, by no means ascetic, was often composed of chicken stuffed with walnuts or duck with celery - combinations I have just imagined. As he aged, he ate more fish, and towards the end of his life his diet had become more or less entirely vegetarian. As a true Balkanite, he was annoyed when the Prohibition was announced in the US in 1919, because as an old man, he enjoyed a drop of whisky. One of his theories, when it came to drink, was that his ancestors had reached an advanced old age thanks to the benefits of drinking brandy. He used to say that drinking whisky would allow him to reach the tender age of a hundred-and-twenty.

A gentleman that he was, a striking six-foot product of his Serb genes and Croat homeland, surrounded by journalists and gracing the front pages of magazines, an inventor financed by magnates such as Astor and Morgan, a man with soft, sad eyes, Tesla was attractive to women. Beautiful, rich, intelligent women. A certain Sarah Bernand was intrigued by him, but he seemed unperturbed. A flirtily dropped lace handkerchief simply made Tesla politely call out: 'Young lady, your handkerchief!' It's the modern equivalent of someone brushing off Nicole Kidman! The letters written to him by Katherina Johnson, the wife of his closest American friend Robert Johnson, in whose house Tesla was a regular guest, breathe with a barely suppressed desire for intimacy. 'Oh how your ears must have burned, because all we talked about was you, then Rome, then you, then America, you, Serbia, you, and you again and you and you. I'm afraid it was me that talked about you the most.' Tesla remained cool. Anne Morgan, the daughter of his incredibly wealthy financier J.P. Morgan, is said to have also been in love with Tesla. She was rejected, too. (Come to think of it, perhaps Tesla could have played it a bit more wisely... Really, when it came to women and money he was not at his best.) Finally, the poet Laza Kostić found a good, excellent even, potential spouse for Tesla - a rich, much coveted beauty from Vojvodina, Serbia, a certain Lenka Đurđenski, who even stated that Tesla (whom she'd only ever seen in a photograph) was the love of her life. Even if Tesla had accepted, the wedding would not have happened because poor Lenka suddenly died...

Of all the women in his life, Tesla actually singled out his mother as the most important. He claimed that he inherited her gift for invention. What's more, one gets the impression that he was incredibly close to his mother throughout his life. Since, as far as it is known, he had no intimate relationships with women, it has been claimed that Tesla was a homosexual. And although the local and international LGBT community would love to make him into a gay icon, there is no indication of Tesla having entered

into intimate relationships with men either. The truth probably lies in his ability to stick to a decision, once and for all. This is what he said on the subject. 'I have decided to dedicate my whole life to work and that is why I have refused love and the company of a decent woman; and more than that. I think a writer or a musician should get married. They get inspired by love, and this drives them to further successes. But an inventor has such a strong temper, with so much wild, passionate eccentricity that he'd have to forsake it all in order to dedicate himself to his wife. It's a pity though; we sometimes feel lonely too.' One has to admire Tesla's self sacrifice. Celibacy obviously has its benefits. Because, Tesla might have been ecstatically in love, but we'd have been blundering about in the dark.

His rather phenomenological experience of femininity was possibly best expressed in a 1925 interview. 'Women's struggle for equality will end with a new gender order, in which women will be superior. A contemporary woman, who is already superior even when it comes to superficial phenomena, is a symbol of something more profound and powerful that is maturing in humanity as a whole. Women will not use superficial manners such as imitating men to show their qualities and power - we will see the awakening of the female intellect. The female mind has already displayed the ability to reach all of the intellectual achievements of men. As the new generations emerge, this ability will be greater; an average woman will be as well educated as an average man, and then even better educated, because the dormant abilities of her brain will be moved to working harder and more powerfully due to the many centuries of a woman's intellectual passivity. Women will disregard the past and surprise the world with their progress.' Tesla stated this three years before women in Great Britain were granted the right to vote.

Despite the fact that he liked to have money, primarily for the financing of experiments, and although he evidently had enough to finance key inventions, Tesla was regularly losing out on the greater sums. The first time this happened was while he was working for the notorious Thomas Alva Edison, whom he was helping develop the primitive dynamo machine. The irritable Edison promised Tesla fifty thousand dollars if he succeeded. Tesla worked on the machines for several months, which meant spending eighteen hours a day in the lab, from 10.30am to the following morning. Including Sundays. When Tesla finished and asked for payment, however, Edison said that Tesla had failed to understand the American sense of humour. This meant the end of their collaborative work. What's more, after that, considering that Tesla - luckily for us - promoted alternating current, Edison tried his best to badmouth Tesla's work. He even took an infamous country-wide tour during which his employees gave

out leaflets that bore hysterical statements about the deadliness of the alternating current; there is also the bizarre story that Edison paid local thugs 25 cents a piece to bring him cats and dogs, which he then publicly electrocuted with 'Tesla's electricity.'

If he had succeed in what he had set out to do, the world today would be quite different - every small town, every large city neighbourhood even, would have to have its own power plant. Even so, Edison became a multimillionaire, a synonym for inventors, and his name is known by every American schoolchild. One comes across Edison's name frequently in popular science books.

Another serious mistake of Tesla's was the episode of the founding the Tesla Electric Light Company, when his investors ruthlessly tricked and threw him out of the shareholders' society. The third, and probably most serious financial faux pas that Tesla made, which marked him for life when it came to his relationship with money, was the eccentric scene around a contract with Westinghouse, Tesla's investor and owner of Westinghouse Company. The incident took place in circumstances in which himself Tesla had to make a decision on the fate of the company.

Westinghouse had, in the spirit of American pioneers, accepted Tesla's vision of a multiphase electric system at a time in which Edison, now a former employer of Tesla's, was the main player in the field of electrics, and a rigid propagator of the direct current. Tesla was grateful to Westinghouse for the trust he invested in him. If Tesla disregarded his contract, Westinghouse would remain in charge of the business, and the profits. And so, entirely unwise when it came to big business, and without the Anglo-Saxon sense of economics, Tesla acted eccentrically, with a Slav's generosity, trusting, penniless. By foregoing his contract, he gave up a fortune. He could have been the Bill Gates of his times.

But money obviously did not hold enormous sway over Tesla. He was an engineer-poet, romantically, passionately in love with electricity. When he was not busy experimenting, a different side of his personality came out - the artistic one. *Fragments of Olympian Gossip* was the title of a 1934 poem which he sent to his friend, the avant-garde poet, George Viereck. 'While listening on my cosmic phone / I caught words from the Olympus blown / A newcomer was shown around [...]' (These lines certainly support the idea that Tesla was an alien!) Tesla enjoyed the company of artists, poets, writers, painters, sculptors, opera divas, musicians... He knew the Yugoslav poet Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, whose poems he translated with the help of his friend and poet Robert Johnson. Johnson dedicated a poem to Tesla,

entitled *In Tesla's Laboratory*. He was close to the Nobel winner Rudyard Kipling, the author of *The Jungle Book*, hung out with the Czech composer, Antonin Dvořák. Of special note is his friendship with one America's best known authors, Mark Twain. When Tesla told Twain that it was his books that helped him overcome a particularly difficult childhood illness, Twain is said to have shed a tear. He regularly visited Tesla's laboratory, participated in experiments, and when he died, Tesla was deeply shaken. The fact that Tesla sent money to Twain's old address just before the author's death is testament to the depth of their friendship.

Tesla also spent time with Ivan Meštrović, Croatia's best known sculptor. They strolled and fed pigeons together in Manhattan. (I spotted *Tesla's Corner* there once.) They wrote to each other for years. Meštrović, who considered Tesla one of the greatest men alive, made a sculpture of him and gifted it to the *Ruđer Bošković* institute in 1956. Meštrović was also the only artist that Tesla agreed to sit for, and many artists had requested it. Meštrović was excited to complete the project, but it was too late. WWII had started, and Tesla died soon after.

He died on 7 January 1943 in the New Yorker Hotel, which is now owned by the Union Church and presided over by Sun Myung Mun.

Nikola Tesla was a thoroughly controversial man. This Croatian dandy who received birthday cards from Albert Einstein and whose portrait was published on the cover of Time Magazine, was simultaneously an ascetic and a hedonist, a wild, passionate inventor, and a modest gentleman, a Midas who died penniless. This mastermind of electricity and the patron saint of electrotechnics whose surname has become a unit for magnetic induction, a loser of several Nobel prizes for Physics, has finally become an *owner* of a crater on the dark side of the Moon. Is this enough for a man who invented the future?

Croatia 'On Sale'

The future arrived some time ago, but it has neither turned out to be the way we had imagined it, nor do we like the way it has turned out to be. We expected it to be bright, and it has turned out to be dark. We believed it would be better, and it is turning out to be worse by the day. What's more, there is an unpleasant feeling that, since the future is already here, it now needs to be lived or survived, and that we are not to expect or hope for anything from it, that everything has already been used up, that even the past has been consumed in the waiting for that better day when all our hopes and dreams will be realised so that we will finally be able to enjoy life without anxiety and worry. We wasted the past expecting the future, and now, it seems, we have lost both. They've been eaten up by moths.

The present is nothing but debris. The present is a cacophony of sound bites, a deceptive interplay of irrelevant information and relevant misinformation, the present is an irritating flickering of a million images, mail boxes packed with adverts, we are being robbed of the present systematically, daily, the present is impoverished and undermined, because we are being successfully convinced that reality, as it is being imposed on us, is without an alternative and that it is necessary to live according to the tyrannical rule of the 'sales' and the lesser human drives. The present is dinosaurs, from the soft toy ones in babies's cots, to those on 3D cinema screens, the present is zombies, the living dead, wolves and werewolves and a whole bunch of vampires who can already serve as examples of lost humanity. The present is a plastic bag carried by the wind past graffiti-scribbled crumbling walls, signatures of a youth that has no past or future. New generations are growing up with nothing to hope for because through observing their parents they have concluded that hope is equivalent to foolishness, that to have faith in those posing next to a hippopotamus they shot dead in a bloody African swamp, or those who like a Woland entrance an entire nation, is equivalent to perdition.

Because 'Thus spake the Lord: 'Cursed be the man that trusteth in man — Who places that confidence in the wisdom or power, the kindness or faithfulness of any man or number of men, which ought to be placed in God only. He shall not see when good cometh — Shall not partake of any good; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness — From whence he can derive no profit or consolation; in a salt land [...]' To expect that those who are already trodden upon will ensure a safe and dignified life for anyone but themselves is endlessly naive and leads to feelings of disappointment and a consuming rage, causes one to fall into a pit of depression. The insidious feeling of betrayal eats up a man and

makes him seek the culprits for his powerlessness, and he directs his rage onto those who are close to him in some ways, but different enough to be the 'others'. As if the 'others' are not also cheated, robbed and deceived.

While those with swords and daggers for teeth devour the poor and unfortunate of this Earth - telling them all the while that they are taking them to the promised land - the poor and unfortunate offer themselves as sacrifice. Meanwhile, the 'saviours' shamelessly announce that they will privatise and sell national waters, land and air at market prices. Should the poor and unfortunate in this country - i.e. the majority - let themselves be deceived into thinking that they have to hate one another, rather than reaching the promised land, they will finally end up in the tightest chains of slavery they have ever endured. And they already find themselves without the present.

Time waits for no man, they say. It flies. Rumbles past. Tick-tock. Our grains of sand seep away, one by one, and by the time you utter 'neoliberal capitalism', you're one step closer to death. You read the newspapers, watch the news, shout and bicker in your local bar - luckily, there's beer - about stuff that you have no control over (any longer). You're closer to the grave by the hour, a day, or two. Our tombs await; the burial pit does not ask if you spent your precious time, the time that has been gifted to you, if you spent your unique life, a miracle upon miracles, on trifles - your own private trifles - or if you wasted it commenting on the trifles of the power structure, the structure that keeps its iron hands inside velvet gloves.

New people take shape inside women's bodies, new generations are coming into the world, new human beings who have no idea where they are from and how they ought to live, so they absorb what is offered to them as 'reality, in 'affordable' packages. And the youth finds virtual reality incomparably more attractive and realistic than the one we are giving them, the one that we - incapable of creating an honourable reality - have polluted to such a degree that they find it abominable. The youth, recalling the rights that we gave them, are pulling away from us as far as they can. We have betrayed them, taken away their future, and now they are leaving us and going into the embrace of those who will configure their brains to a measure fit for a new age, new hierarchies, a measure of this great new world in which silence is strictly forbidden, in which self-reflection is an eccentric excess, in which displaying one's personality means taking a picture of your own backside with your 'smart' phone, and

the pinnacle of a social interaction is to post a comment telling a communist or a fascist to fuck off, or at least to 'like' such a post.

Finally, it is our words and actions that are creating a nasty and powerful egregore*, aided especially by our thoughts, our hatred, our schadenfreude, blindness and stupidity, and this monster is pestering us, hovering over us, while we think that our fight is against something palpable. We did not want to listen to that wiry prophet from a tent, who was been trying to get people for the past two centuries to think, speak and act differently - possibly even in this country - and he spoke thus: 'After all, brethren, all that is modest, just and righteous, all that is innocent and good, and all that is virtuous and worthy of praise, let that be the content of your thoughts!' So if millions of people around us do not have that as the content of their thoughts, but their thoughts are filled with the opposite of that, the egregore grows and strengthens above us. Thoughts matter. Words matter. Actions matter. Everyone's and always.

Perhaps, when considered globally, there is no hope for collectivity, or perhaps there never was. Perhaps the meaning of life exists only insofar as the individual can find it in himself.

*Egregore (also egregor) is an esoteric concept representing a 'thoughtform' or a "collective group mind", an autonomous psychic entity made up of, and influencing, the thoughts of a group of people. The term is taken out of the Greek word ἐγρήγοροι (egrégoroi), meaning 'guard/watcher'.

Guns & Bibles

Some twenty years ago I saw a satirical black comedy on the TV called *The Bible and Gun Club*. I can't recall the Croatian title, but I do remember the bizarre content of the film. It was a story about a group of travelling salesmen, neat young men in ties and white shirts, who found themselves somewhere in the heart of the United States, going around the streets of the towns in the Bible Belt, where everything - at first glance - is flawless: white-painted wood fences, neatly groomed lawns and cottages with characteristic hedges (like something out of the first scenes in *Blue Velvet*) ... anyway, who, were selling the Bible, various editions of the New Testament (The King James Version, Holman Christian Standard Bible, International Standard Version, etc.). The fact that White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the devout and pious brethren, the descendants of the brave pioneers, all those Adamses, Brewsters, Cartwrights and Joneses, and so on, were selling the Bible is not at all strange, of course. The Bible in the US is commonplace, it is as ubiquitous and deeply embedded in American culture and the collective unconscious as The Star-Spangled Banner and Coca-Cola. The bizarreness from the film's opening scenes refers to the fact that along with the Bible, the men were also selling firearms. Equipped with various samples, they demonstrated, with utter professionalism, how to handle beauties such as the Colt M4 Carabine, Remington 700BDL, Heckler & Koch P7, and so on.

Standing before a middle-aged couple - the lady wearing a flower dress and with a job at a nearby Wal-Mart, and the husband, a lorry driver who, while driving frozen carcasses from coast to coast, listens to Dolly Parton and wears a Stetson that does not come off even in his living room - these young men would neatly line up leather-bound samples of the Word of God, and next to the Holy Books they would open up small cases containing guns and rifles. (They did not sell blades of any kind.) They alternated between praising the new model (Glock 17L) and the new translation (The New Century Version). The hostess would carefully leaf through this or that copy of the Bible while the host tested the gun (Smith & Wesson M & P15, on special offer, very affordable!). Or vice versa. No problem, sir! From my Croatian, but European perspective, the whole scene seemed surreal, grotesque even; I tried to imagine something similar at home: one of our dynamic young chaplains or benevolent parish priests, after blessing the villagers' houses, offers them a bulletproof vest or a new edition of a Croatian Pistol (HS 2000). Or, after the *Ite, missa est*, in the sacristy or at the parish court, he sells, at discounted prices, carabiners and snipers. What is difficult for us to understand is that in the United States, that

controversial country brimming with paradox, selling weapons alongside the Bible is simply presented as another business opportunity. Market economy, bro! And in a country where even teachers own shotguns, the sale of firearms is more than a lucrative business. Better than the sale of the Bible, but, hey, if one can aid the sale of the other, why not? Perhaps in the meantime a shop has actually started selling Bibles and rifles, as there are, for example, banks where, with the opening of an account, you get firearms as a gift. For, everyone has a constitutionally guaranteed right to their personal security and everyone has the right to a faith. This is a free country.

And so it happens that every so often a young man gets hold of the home arsenal and, because his mother really got on his nerves that day, he goes to the school where she works as a teacher and produces bloodshed. Or the kids who apparently wouldn't hurt a fly, although they are a bit 'weird' after spending a million hours playing Search & Destroy computer games which they then decide to try out in a realistic environment (anyway, with every new version of the Play Station virtual reality becomes more similar to the real reality).

Over the last thirty years there have been over sixty cases of mass murders; three quarters of the rifles and pistols used were legally obtained. Half of the murders were carried out in schools or workplaces. Among the dozens of perpetrators there was only one woman (seven dead, Goleta, CA). There are, of course, hundreds of studies trying to explain why this is so, or what caused the massacre at Columbine High School on 20 April, 1999, or at Virginia Tech Campus on April 16, 2007, to mention some of the most notorious cases. The reasons are surely numerous and complex, but I remember the comment given to Michael Moore in his famous documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*, by the notorious Marilyn Manson, the shock-rocker who made a career as a purposeful freak and the face of the dark side of the suburban idyll, à la *Blue Velvet*, a man who presented himself as a Satanist, and so on. Let's ignore the fact that actual Satanists look like perfect gentlemen who are engaged in profitable businesses and are considered the epitome of moral righteousness in their communities (because, for God's sake, shouldn't Satan at least know how to mask himself properly?!). Manson is a rock comedian, who was proclaimed, by a diverse range of American patriots, politicians, and businessmen - all of them declared men of faith and some of them closely related to the military-industrial establishment responsible for wars and deaths worldwide - to be the culprit of what Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold did at their school. Brian Warner, on that occasion, told Moore that the climate in the United States was based on 'fear and consumption', citing examples of subtle intimidation through TV advertising and the fact that the

mainstream media would sooner shift focus on his persona than look at, for example, Bill Clinton who - a year after Zippergate - was bombing people on the other side of the world. One can think what they like about M.M. but there is insight in those words.

And so ... a massacre is followed by a week or two of gun laws debate, but then everything goes back to the way it was. Dozens and hundreds of broken people must carry on living their American dream. There's too much money involved. The figures speak for themselves: firearms kill more than 10,000 people per year in the United States, unlike in Japan, Canada, Germany, Britain ... where the figure does not exceed - as if it were low - around fifty victims. The advocates of gun ownership shrug: guns don't kill people, people kill people. Which is, of course, word play and a cynical twisting of facts. Their reaction after the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in a town the size of Zaprešić, in one of the calmest parts of the country, was not even cynical; they stated that the solution to these cases is simple: teachers need weapons too! That is not cynicism - it is Evil that is laughing over the dead bodies of the kids and their teachers.

Since I worked in a school for a long time myself, I was moved to tears when I read about a young, 27-year-old teacher, Victoria Soto, who hid the Year One students inside classroom cabinets and faced the killer ... and died. Rest in peace, you brave woman.