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THE AESTHETICS OF A BLOOD SPORT

With the earliest known reference to angling with a fly dating from the Chou Dynasty, more than 2,300 years ago, it should come as no surprise that when asked to justify their passionate devotion to fly fishing, many anglers will refer to the rich and venerable literature the sport has generated. Ranging from Plutarch's references to Nile fishing in the *Life of Antonius*, to Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*, to the fifteenth century classic, Dame Julian Berner's *The Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle*, to the sport's bible, the 17th century *The Compleat Angler* by Izaak Walton, to literary treatments in the work of authors such as John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound and Ernest Hemingway, the wealth of literature devoted to fly fishing appears to be out of proportion to what is, ultimately, just a way of seducing an animal with a brain the size of a pea into inhaling a hook upon which some feathers, furs and tinsels have been lashed. What then, one may legitimately ask, is it about this sport that creates fanatical devotion on the part of its practitioners, who tend to regard it with such zeal and passion as is commonly reserved for art and religion?

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It has been argued, for example by Lumsden and Wilson (1983), that the discovery of hunting was an important contribution to man's evolution from his man-ape ancestors. Whatever the accuracy of this hypothesis, it is undeniable that early man devoted a portion of his time and ingenuity to hunting and, given a supply of fish, fishing. Meat is a preferred food of hominids, so it is reasonable to assume that fish flesh formed a part of our ancestors' diet whenever they found themselves near bodies of water. Furthermore, contemporary anthropological evidence suggests that they clothed fishing in some sort of ritual. Peter J. Wilson (1983) speculates that the development of ritual is synonymous with the passing of the baton of evolution from biological determinism to cultural creativity. Ritual, he suggests, effects the creation of symbolic entities, such as group and individual identities, which themselves are able to interact in the complex and unpredictable ways that characterize cultural organization. There are as many examples of the ritualization of biological activities as there are human concerns. Most have survived in some form or another. For example, all the activities that are essential to human survival, such as alimentation, reproduction, child rearing etc. as surrounded by multiple rituals. However, perhaps of all the life-supporting tasks that characterized the key concerns of early man, hunting and gathering have most fallen victim to the division of labor so typical of our species. For the most part, we have relegated the work of food production and procurement to specialists. Very few of us hunt, fish or farm out of sheer need. Instead, especially in the West, farming has become gardening, and hunting and fishing outdoor recreation.

And yet, although the sporting nature of hunting, clearly the closest kin of our ancient forms of the chase, is often defined by the refusal to eat the prey, hunting and fishing remain blood sports. We may abjure what is presumably the only biological reason for hunting and fishing, but we still remain massively in the biological realm insofar as we spill blood. There is only one exception, a relatively recent development in fishing philosophy centered almost exclusively in the United States. Known as catch and release fishing, this is an attitude towards trout which deems them as too valuable a resource to use only once. And of the practitioners of this bloodless form of the chase, an overwhelming majority are

fly fishermen.

No-kill fly fishing, therefore, is a kind of hunting in which all but the form of biological necessity has been abstracted. What remains is a relatively pure example of the ritualistic aspects of a basic survival activity. Because in fly fishing the material components of the hunt are de-emphasized and its cultural components highlighted, fly fishing, especially in its currently dominant American catch and release form,* is a kind of archaeological document, a remnant of the complex web of interactions between biology and culture that certainly accompanied and probably occasioned our evolution into *Homo sapiens*. In other words, insofar as it is a form of the chase which distances itself as far as possible from the utilitarian aspects of hunting while simultaneously highlighting its cultural dimensions, fly fishing may be a fortuitous remnant of the kinds of conditions and choices that enabled our ancestors to break the bonds of deterministic genetic evolution and to begin the exponential growth of cultural evolution.

Athough all sportsmen are a superstitious lot, fly fishermen are notorious for the immense number of prescriptions and proscriptions surrounding their pastime. In England, birthplace of the modern form of fly fishing, it is still taboo on some waters to fish with flies that sink (wet flies or nymphs) or to fish against the current. Here in the New World, where the sport was to some extent reinvented, strict adherence to such aristocratic codes is eschewed (although there are many individuals who follow them voluntarily; for example, those who fish exclusively with flies that float are called dry fly purists), but any number of unspoken rules govern proper behavior on the stream. A fisherman fishing downstream must yield to one wading upstream; when aquatic insects are hatching it is considered more noble to attempt to match them with artificial flies than to use attractor flies; one should never assist another fisherman when he is landing a fish

* Strangely enough, the originators of modern fly fishing, and, until this century, the guardians of the flame, the British, still do not understand the concept of catch and release. There are many reasons for this, the main one being that British trout streams are almost exclusively in private hands and do not have to be managed for mass public use like our American trout waters.

unless explicitly asked, etc. However, over and above these specific codes of behavior, there is the overwhelmingly ritualistic nature of fly fishing in general. Although some people will dispute it, I think it is clear that fly fishing is not always the most efficient method of capturing fish. (The argument would only be over sport fishing methods. Clearly there is no gainsaying the pure effectiveness of dynamite, for example, in bringing home the bacon, at least in the short term). In fact, during certain times of the year and under certain conditions, it is an enormous handicap. Yet, given the option of using other, perhaps more killing methods, most fly fishermen will behave like zealots, doggedly refusing to be tainted by even a consideration of alternatives. For these anglers, the overwhelming concern of their sport is not to catch fish, but to catch them in a certain way. Ultimately, every fly fisherman has made a decision to value form over sheer effectiveness. A crucial component of the code that governs fly fishing is that the code itself is superior to other codes. Fly fishermen assume a hierarchy of fishing methods with themselves occupying the apex and, interestingly, practitioners of other fishing methods generally concede both the hierarchy and fly fishing's position in it. To fish well, that is, according to the rules laid down by tradition, while catching few or no fish, is more desirable for the average fly fisherman than blind success with, say, a worm. A trout caught on a worm is no longer entirely a trout. Most fly fishermen consider a trout with the poor breeding and lack of taste to succumb to what is known in the fly fishing lexicon as "garden hackle" as possibly sharing some genes with a carp.

Some four million years ago our man-ape ancestors, perhaps *Australopithecus Afarensis*, probably fished because they found fish flesh appealing. They fished with their hands, or with spears. Some of their descendants in the ensuing millennia became commercial fishermen, thereby continuing the tradition of seeking to obtain the greatest number of calories for calories expended. Yet, at least for some of their fishing, a few of our forebears also learned to sacrifice the clear advantage of caloric hording for seemingly uneconomical behavior. Growing reverence for the prey must have accompanied the ritualization of its capture. And with ritualization, aesthetic considerations began to supplement, if not supplant, caloric ones. The question, of course, is why. Ultimately, any investigation into

the motivation for aesthetic activity that accepts evolution as the best available model for understanding human development must postulate some sort of survival advantage for a species which incorporates art into its basic biological activities. The concepts of beauty, ritual and art must offer the species something, otherwise, there is no way to explain their adoption. Whatever this survival advantage, it should explain not only the deferral, if not the suspension, of biological satisfaction brought about by fly fishing, but also help to illuminate the value of the aesthetic in general to human beings.

Before proceeding to address this issue directly, let me digress slightly. Modernist and postmodernist criticism has grown increasingly wary about any theory of art which adopts some kind of natural standpoint. Whether in the theory of art for art's sake, in Derrida's (1976) "There is nothing outside the text," in various kinds of historicism such as Foucault's (1972) archaeologies, or in Baudrillard's (1975) theory of rampant simulation, a powerful branch of aesthetic speculation during the twentieth century has systematically disputed both the possibility of any real knowledge of the natural world and the gesture by which such illusory knowledge is used to found theories of art. Interestingly, as a natural standpoint for aesthetics has been progressively undermined, both by philosophers and by artists, the notion of aesthetic value has become increasingly obstreperous. In fact, in mainstream postmodernism, it is an idea which rarely ever gets invoked. It appears fatuous, I suppose, to concern yourself with the relative significance of art works when you have already postulated the apocalyptic explosion and fragmentation of meaning. If reality no longer serves as a safe bedrock for ontology, then it would be indeed misguided to assume that even the form of a question concerning aesthetic value is meaningful.

In my view, this hermetic view of human culture, which sees it as a "prison house" which so distorts the ambient natural world that for all intents and purposes culture is assumed to be trapped in narcissistic self-reference, is the single most pernicious error in contemporary critical and aesthetic theory. Postmodernism hasn't reached the world of fly fishing, nor will it ever. I feel safe in making this prediction. The reason for my certainty can, I believe, suggest an answer to the question concerning the evolutionary

value of aesthetics and ritual. The crux of the issue is, I believe, the concept of performance. The crucial question is this: what constitutes a good fly fishing performance, effectiveness in catching trout or adherence to traditional rules? Of course, as I argued earlier, someone who has chosen to fish for trout with a fly rod has already decided that aesthetics is more valuable than numbers of fish hooked. However, his choice is one of emphasis, not one of essence. He may valorize the ritualistic aspects of fishing, but he refuses to leave the horizon of the ancient mammalian quest for fish. Were a fly fisherman to dispense with the criterion of catching trout, he would not be fishing but merely casting or fly tying. On the one hand, therefore, fly fishing success depends on hooking trout. On the other hand, sheer effectiveness is precisely what the fly fisherman chooses to de-emphasize by his very choice of method. On the one hand there is blood, on the other art. Are these apparently conflicting demands in fact irreconcilable? If they are, as the culture/nature schism of much contemporary aesthetic theory would have us believe, then fly fishing is at best a particularly poignant form of modern alienation.

I wish to argue that this contemporary dualism is not an adequate interpretation of either fly fishing or of aesthetics in general. Broadly speaking, the error of postulating an unbridgeable gap between culture and biology is the failure to see human culture in a truly historical, that is, evolutionary, context. If fly fishing is conceived of as a process which recapitulates certain aspects of our evolution as a species, then we should not expect it to be cleanly bi-polar, but, on the contrary, a stratified nexus of practices related to each other as levels in a complex and often tangled hierarchy. In other words, fly fishing should be a palimpsest reproducing the form of its own evolution. And, if that is the case, the natural world is not hopelessly cut off from the sphere of fly fishing, but can be more fruitfully understood as its micro-structure. Furthermore, if fly fishing is indeed a window to the transition from a kind of evolution that emphasizes genetic variation to one which operates in the incomparably faster domain of culture, then it might suggest more holistic ways to conceptualize the status of other activities whose ritualistic and aesthetic aspects are emphasized. If we assume that culture is the crowning achievement of human evolution, then we would have much to learn about the selective

advantages of ritual by observing the attitudes, beliefs and practices of contemporary fly fishermen.

Ritual does not appear to be terribly cost effective, yet it must offer rewards that compensate for its wastefulness. Using fly fishing as a kind of archaeological sample, we can make a provisional catalog of the profit to be realized from ritual. First, fly fishing is an intensely pleasurable experience. In fact, there is much similarity between boisterous forms of sexual and religious activity and moments of heightened attention experienced in the course of fly fishing. Especially during a hatch or spinner fall (a hatch is the transformation of aquatic insects from their larval form to the adult stage; a spinner fall is the return of the sexually mature insects to the water to mate and oviposit. The availability of insects during both of these events make them prime occasions to fool trout.), anglers frequently feel a loss of self, a glorious sense of flow, harmony and transcendence. Second, there are the pleasures of community, the feeling of connection with other fly fishermen and with revered ancestors. Third, with the trout playing the role of totem animal, fly fishermen engage in what Levi-Strauss (1966) calls "an eminently sacred pursuit": the classification of natural phenomena into coherent systems. This is the pleasure of order, meaning and rationality. These three pleasures are perhaps just so many aspects of the immensely civilized and astoundingly creative "savage mind." Like Levi Strauss' primitives, fly fishermen have invented "a natural philosophy," that is a sophisticated organization of the world that demands an almost religious reverence for the trout as well as a profound sense of shared commitment on the part of a community of fly fishermen. Fly fishing competes with religion in offering a coherent cosmology. A pagan cult of sorts, the tribe of fly fishermen organizes experience into a set of meaningful patterns which extends far beyond the stream. A few hours spent on the banks of a famous stream like the Beaverkill River in upstate New York, the Henry's Fork in Idaho or the River Test in Hampshire, will convince any skeptic that these waters are hallowed in the eyes of the faithful who flock to them with rhythmic regularity.

There is, however, more to the ritualistic aspects of fly fishing than a passive organization of natural data that are essentially "out there." As Peter J. Wilson suggests, the primary function of ritual

is generative: "The actions of ritual are, to use J.L. Austin's term, performative—as acts, they are ends rather than means; they are what they do" (p. 107). This idea is developed by Frederick Turner (1985), who argues that ritual is an activity through which we create and criticize our world:

> In anthropology and religious studies, it became clear that ritual, far from being a mindless activity, is often (indeed in many societies, exclusively) the place where society stands back from itself, considers its own value system, criticizes it, and engages in its profoundest commerce with what lies outside it, whether divine, natural, or subconscious. In ritual human beings decide what they are and stipulate that identity for themselves, thereby asserting the most fundamental freedom of all, the freedom to be what they choose. (p. 8)

If language, ritual and art developed at about the same time, and if their conjunction was a crucial step in the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, then I hypothesize that their survival advantage is that they are a kind of technology which can do the work of evolution at a blinding speed. Lumsden and Wilson describe culture as a rapid mutator: "Yet culture is not just a passive entity. It is a force so powerful in its own right that it drags genes along. Working as a rapid mutator, it throws new variations into the teeth of natural selection and changes the epigenetic rules across generations" (p. 154). By giving an organism time, culture saves time. Culture is a kind of investment, a temporary detour from the direct path to satisfaction which yields exponential results. Aesthetic and ritual activity facilitate the work of culture by constituting a performative community able to weigh innovation and tradition in the service of the evolutionary imperative to vary and select, that is, to generate new choices whose adoption modifies the existing culture. Rather than waiting for aleatory genetic mutation, culture uses the distance and self-reflection of such activities as art and ritual to create a space of communally willed criticism, rejection and affirmation. In other words, ritual is a crucial component of what Karl Popper (1983) calls World 3, "the world of the products of the human mind, such as stories, explanatory myths, tools, scientific theories (whether true or false), scientific problems, social institutions, and works of art" (p. 38). The evolutionary advantage

of art and ritual, then, is that they institute an "opening" wherein the crucial decisions concerning our species' future can be modelled before they are made.

Fly fishing is extended between two performative communities: a relatively primitive biological organism and a human society bound by tacitly shared ritualistic elements and symbolic associations. Trout are widely reputed to be intelligent fish, however intelligence here needs to be understood in the context of a trout's position on the evolutionary scale. A trout is called intelligent precisely because it isn't intelligent in the human sense. Certainly, it is wary, possessed of acute vision, and skittish, but insofar as intelligence is concerned it poses no challenge to a rat, no less to a human. I think that a large part of the attraction of fly fishing derives from the need to seduce a prey which is not receptive to the wiles and strategies often necessary in human social commerce. There is something deeply gratifying about matching wits with an animal representing an evolutionary stage which we have incorporated into our own much higher level of development. In other words, to fool a trout is to move backwards in time, to reduce yourself to a level that is meaningful to a fish. The common claim on the part of hunters and fishers that they enjoy matching wits with their prey because in the process they become "one" with it should not be dismissed as mushy romantic hyperbole. A trout can know nothing about the world of more highly evolved species. It is a kind of flatlander in a universe of many dimensions. It can see the entire universe, but only as a two dimensional section. Consequently, a fly fisherman's success with the trout is determined totally by his ability to step into a world that is radically more primitive than his own. He must see the world as a trout sees it, he must understand the stream's rhythms, its cycles of aquatic insects, its swings of temperature and its seasonal levels. At least at this level, the fly fisher's communion with his prey cannot be understood as mere metaphor. When he convinces the trout that his imitation is legitimate food, he is in fact participating in the trout's world.

Simultaneously, fly fishing is a human ritual. At this level, its rules are those of human culture, a level that is simply non-existent for a trout. It is not so much the case that the fly fisherman needs to please or impress other human beings, but that the criteria which

constitute his competence, which determine how successful he is, are of a radically different order from those which define his effectiveness in hooking a fish. As human ritual, fly fishing generates a set of effectiveness criteria having relatively little to do with bringing home the bacon. It is at this level that fly fishing is judged to be an artistic enterprise. Here its most prized qualities are aesthetic: the beauty of the surroundings in which it is normally practiced, the grace of casting, the elegance of the artifical flies one casts, the sleekness of the quarry, and the long literary and oral tradition which informs the present generation of anglers. This is the realm of ancestors, of literature, of custom, of rules willingly followed despite their occasional inefficiency.

As with all aesthetic questions, success at the ritualistic level of fly fishing is difficult to define. I do not think that this is either a philosophical shortcoming or, for that matter, an undesirable state of affairs. Determining criteria for judging aesthetic objects and practices is notoriously difficult. For example, a heated and often vitriolic debate has raged in England during the last two centuries between proponents of dry fly fishing and proponents of wet fly (or nymph) fishing. To this day, fishing with a subsurface fly is prohibited on many of the shrines of fly fishing. Even a superficial reading of the polemics of both sides makes it abundantly clear that the debate is hardly over the issue of catching fish. On the contrary, the tone adopted by the adversaries is moral. The wet fly/dry fly controversy is best likened to a religious war, with the champions of each side defending their position with messianic zeal. Furthermore, even though the stakes appear to be far smaller in the case of fly fishing than in aesthetic disputes, the passions engendered in defense of one's position are equally intense. The reason for this is, as I argued above, that fly fishermen are not arguing about the effectiveness of their methods in catching trout. The debate occurs on the aesthetic level, and the aesthetics of fly fishing are as undetermined as the aesthetics of the visual or literary arts.

Perhaps the best way to investigate this seemingly irresolvable indeterminacy in fly fishing is to return to the notion of performance. In a sense all human activity (and arguably all activity) is a performance of sorts to the extent that its value is determined by an audience of other beings. In the case of building

a house, for example, it is important to satisfy the physical demands of purely material objects such as wood and masonry. At this level of description, simple matter becomes a kind of performative community, offering the criteria through which success or failure can be determined. However, a house is not simply an exercise in the manipulation of matter. It is also a place for people to live, and at this level aesthetic considerations are crucial. Most of us are not content to live in a space that has been constructed with no attention to the non-material components of life: beauty, grace, complexity, reference, humor etc. The best kind of architecture is clearly one which combines a sound knowledge of both material and aesthetic performance. The case of fly fishing is essentially the same. The fly fisherman must perform in such a way as to satisfy the simple requirements of a primitive audience—the fish. Here, the performative community enfranchising the fly fisherman's being consists of the ecosystem of a trout stream. Simultaneously, the trout fisherman plays upon the stage of culture, before three layers of audience: first, the world of other minds; second the mesh of history, tradition, literature and ideas we might call the sociosystem; and third, at the experimental level suggested by Lumsden, Wilson and Turner, wherein a community engages in ritual in order to invent its future, the world of unpredictable novelty. At this complex level, the criteria for success are nebulous at best. The approval of others is difficult to gauge. However, the obstreperousness of concrete human beings is negligeable compared with the silence of such quasi-abstract entities as community, history, tradition, memory etc. Yet even this band of ghostly voices appears monumentally real compared to a set of criteria which has yet to be invented, which even the most exhaustive Laplacian analysis of its antecedents could not predict.

Fly fishing, therefore, is given value by a hierarchy of different performative communities. A fly fisherman must satisfy the demands of physics (a good caster, for example, intuitively understands the laws of gravity), chemistry (the chemical constitution of a stream, for example, determines the nature of the biosystem it can sustain), biology (the trout), subjectivity (his/her own, those of other concrete individuals) and of culture. Each of these levels generates its own demands on the angler and each

offers its specific rewards. They range from the pleasures of matter, to the somewhat more heterogeneous and contradictory, but, for all that, more intense satisfactions of biology, to the most tenuous and significant rewards available to humans, the rewards of creation. Contemporary aesthetics would do well to learn a little from fly fishing. As obsessed as our era is with the relativity of cultural production, our postmodernist critics stand to receive a healthy kick in the seat of the pants from the descendants of Izaak Walton. For if, like fly fishing, all art is simply one of the top layers of an enormous hierarchy of performative communities, then art can no longer be thought of as purely relative. The history which enabled its coming into being is still present, exerting pressures on its range of choices. Although I would indeed argue that aesthetics and culture are to a significant extent unpredictable creative processes, they are only in a position to be free because of the lower, less free, performative communities which support them. Fly fishermen rarely forget their debt to the trout. They know that their little piece of culture would be hollow without a respect for the products of nature's earlier inventions. There was a time when a trout-like animal was the most unpredictable, imaginative and free entity in the universe. Perhaps the most compelling thing about fly fishing is an intimation that fishing for trout is somehow like the process that enabled the evolution of the trout themselves. At such moments it becomes clear how impoverished anti-mimetic aesthetic theories are. To imitate nature may be as terrifying and liberating an activity as is available to human beings.

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