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AN IRREGULAR HISTORY OF HUNTING

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Abstract: *Ortega was an excellent hunter and a brilliant pathfinder. His treatise entitled Meditations on Hunting (1942) is a foreword to architect Count Eduardo Yebes's hunting manual. Count Eduardo was Ortega's old friend and hunting partner, and his work provides a detailed analysis of the sport so long pursued by men. This paper addresses readers who are captured by philosophical reflections on scholarly interpretations of hunting stories. The author, who has never practised hunting himself, is a historian and philosopher, who delights in adventures of the exotic world of hunting.*

Key words: *behavioral civilizational pattern, assymetrical agressivism, mutual combat, animal welfare, libido dominating hunting.*

1. Introduction

Let us establish a fact right in the beginning: Ortega is an excellent hunter and a brilliant pathfinder. His treatise entitled *Meditations on Hunting* (1942) is a foreword to his old friend's, the architect and hunting partner Count Eduardo Yebes's hunting manual, which provides a detailed analysis of the sport so long pursued by men. The essay seems to directly address educated readers. An attractive phenomenon is captured, or rather, *point blank* [1] brought down (Ortega y Gasset 5-6) for philosophical reflection by a scholarly enthusiast of hunting stories, who was meek as a lamb and never practised hunting himself. A philosopher who delighted in adventures of the exotic world of hunting and was a great master of style at the same time is indeed worthy of being considered far more than a philosophers' philosopher after the end of his days.

Writing on hunting in the 21st century means revealing issues concerning an activity that is surrounded by confusion, lack of comprehension and rejection. Count Yebes, a dazed devotee of hunting seems almost to recreate the very act of the chase, speaking about all that relates to hunting with enthusiasm verging on mystic rapture: the fields, the hounds, the rifles and the game. The very words radiate with the discipline, training, and the considerable amount of sacrifice and danger brought along by a quarter century spent in the hills and valleys. (Ortega y Gasset 6). With a zeal akin to Count Yebes's, the Spanish master of existentialism on his intellectual adventure trip traces the forces deeply embedded in hunting, the mechanisms working within the huntsman and his emotional and intellectual motifs. The philosopher probes the nature and deep sense of the activity that is hunting with an aim to show the original and peculiar quality of a hunting lifestyle. In this essay interpreting the recto and verso of hunting, the activity itself

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surfaces between the lines as a *problem of life*; hunting is constructed by Ortega out of the very depth of existential being and, as opposed to the constraints of work, it is identified with the experience of real living.

2. Nature vs. Nurture

Hunting as a sport originates in time immemorial but has continued to be a certain privilege throughout the ages. It is also an enthusiastic activity and a source of pleasure and joy to the chosen few. Delightful madness, we could say; a sort of entertainment. Ortega nevertheless sets out to dispute the view solidly grounded in the modern Western world which considers hunting a less than serious pastime. The Spanish philosopher interprets this activity with respect to man as *diversion*. "Since to be di-verted (di-vertirse) means to be temporarily liberated from what we habitually are – on these occasions we exchange our actual personalities for a certain period of time with another, seemingly arbitrary character and attempt to transport ourselves for a moment from our world into another one which does not belong to us." ((Ortega y Gasset 7). According to Ortega, who in this point follows Polybios, the 2nd century BC historiographer, diversion is in fact the complete opposite of our everyday notion of entertainment: it is not specified as idleness, a peripheral phenomenon or illustrative element of human existence but as a complex behaviour pattern involving total self-surrender, risk-taking, struggle and effort. Diversion thus loses its passive quality and is transsubtstantiated into an activity of the highest degree. The most active deed one can do is not simply doing something but *devoting oneself* to it[2]. (Ortega y Gasset 8). In this respect, the hunter is a vessel of a certain kind of sacrality, and, as such, should be given due respect.

Man, an otherwise remarkably solid, hard-to-shape being, for whom every change is made with blood, sweat and tears, is able to break away from the domain of the everyday and abandon the jewels of a culture of intellectual and anthropological meaning. He may leave behind the safe fields of culture for a longer period of time and retire into *the World* from the noise of culture. The cultural being, turned into a risk-avoiding fawn by the civilisational process which eroded inborn instincts now raises himself above the anxiety- and doubt-ridden civilisational atmosphere, steals away from the myriad roles pressed on him by culture, gets rid of the ballast of common sense and re-enters the world of sheer immediacy. From the cultural context of competition and rivalry he steps over onto the radically different, biological side of competition and caution with dissimilar strategies of coexistence and beacon lights of conduct. He is temporarily relocated into a natural form of existence that is alien to his age and that floats on the borderline of humanity and non-humanity. He is transported into a complex unity inscrutable by the human intellect, where he can move around with the same ease as in the world he came from.

Breaking away from civilisational patterns means the suspension of cultural self-identity and a dissolution or disappearance of civilisational expectations and social norms. What then follows is a marked shift towards reflexive functions; instincts, elemental forces and energies replace taught behaviour patterns. The hunter thus distances himself from his very own cultivated persona, entering into a secondary condition of savagery and dishevelment in the peaceful and rugged world of nature. He assumes a behaviour pattern of closed order that is entirely different from that of the cultural being. Zoological aspects gain superiority in his

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existence while his primary reactions to the environment become naturally spontaneous. Man is promoted to be an apex predator, yet he is not possessed by the devil: we must not view this phenomenon as antisocial character disorder although it is indeed dehumanisation in a sense, since the huntsman's reactions are mostly determined by the biology of his body. The borderline and the substantial differences between the modus vivendi of hunter and prey are melted. The sports hunter's life is determined by *the actual blending into* nature in all its internal delicacy. The passion and ritual enthusiasm of the Count to sports hunting, which demands courage, stamina and perseverance may actually be seen as reminiscent of antique Dionysia where all natural and elemental traits of human beings were set free.

In Ortega's interpretation the main elements in the behaviour of the hunter, this man with an animal heart, are tied to instincts and biological patterns. Instinct is known to be a great driving force in the animal kingdom. At the same time, there is a certain kind of *smoothly* operating *internal*[3] system of checks in this instinctive behaviour that is distinctly separated from moral norms and principles. Hunting encapsulates a whole set of morals, and that in its exemplary and perfect order. Having appropriated this sportsmanlike moral, the huntsman complies with it in utter solitude, his only witnesses being mountain peaks, fuzzy clouds, stern gazing oaks, shivering cypresses and the wandering game. Hunting has always been looked upon as pedagogy of the highest quality or one of the most appropriate means to shape one's character. (Ortega y Gasset 21, 23) The hunter lives as is biologically fit. At the same time, the secondary wildness of man does not mean he is a barbarian. Distracting oneself from culture entrenched in expectations of law, ethics and morals does not necessarily lead to deformation of character. In fact, hunting is not a sports spectacle. There are no onlookers and in the space and time provided by nature no one expects the hunter to exhibit a perfectly cut moral profile once he sets himself free from restraining norms and rules. There is yet a certain something created in the hunter, who is overjoyed with existence and free to the bottom of his heart: in want of a better phrase we might term this a manner of life or conduct of conscience.

The question remains whether we might speak of conscience in connection with the hunter who enters voluntary exile from culture if the existence of conscience itself is doubtful within the defensive walls of cultures. Classical Arabic for example lacks the expression for 'conscience' [4]. (Hankiss 74) In the Muslim world, where the absolute power of divine will is professed, the ethical notion of sin does not exist – and in our culture it is indeed a notion connected to conscience which defies exact specification and has no sharp borderlines. There are clearly set anchors and guidelines in the organisation of human life for the followers of the Prophet. Moral principles and norms do not need to be self-picked by the individual.

3. Hunter and Hunted

In his essay, Ortega nevertheless draws up the moral silhouette of the sports hunter's conscience in clear outline: he is convinced that issues connected to the eternally complex nature of conscience can never be left behind in a huntsman's life. Hunting is an instinctive gut activity which at the same time is rather sophisticated. Its fundamental element is the competitive situation created by the hunter. There is no hunt without offering loopholes of escape and chances to disappear. Attention

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devoted to the prey and providing a chance of escape to it is actually paying homage to the future prey in acknowledging its power. Hunting is not an extreme act of unruliness. Fair contest is one of its basic features. The human being, in full possession of his free will and in full control of his life *puts restraint upon himself* exactly to the degree his weapons have been perfected. He leaves a *field of play* for the animal to avoid the extreme imbalance of means between the two of them. Should he transgress against these limits, he would destroy the very essence of hunting, transforming it into mere massacre. Instead of doing everything he is capable of, man checks his limitless abilities and starts imitating nature, i.e. *reverts to the natural way of life* [5] by taking a step back. (Ortega y Gasset 34, 4)

Mastery of hunting enfolds within these self-imposed constraints, acting along the fundamental principles of patience, humility, and self-control. The hunter checks himself, out of his own will, but there are intuitive decisions based on non-personal motivations behind this attitude of internal self-discipline. Beyond securing technical means and facilities, the single role of reason in hunting is to assume responsibility for the act of self-curtailing, and limit the extent of human intervention. (Ortega y Gasset 35).

This is clearly seen if we take a look at the immense versatility of the animal kingdom, where a similar internal heat of hunting is observed in all strata of the zoological hierarchy – on proximate but non-identical levels. Hunting is thus an essentially zoological phenomenon, a clash and duel between two sets of instincts, that of the hunter and the animal on the run. (42) As giving advance to the prey is also a wide-spread element of hunting in the world of animals, self-restraint may not be viewed as a taught behaviour pattern for the hunter but must certainly be inborn.

Even if the huntsman's and prey's behaviours and intentions are radically different, the essential quality that hunting exhibits is a clash of *nearly equal* chances despite the inevitable vital inequality and the zoological distance between the parties. Hunting is nevertheless eternally *asymmetrical* agression, where one of the animals attempts to bring down the prey while the other wants to avoid being brought down. This naturally means that bullfighting or venatio may not be looked upon as activities belonging to the same group as they represent a *mutual* combat situation (36-37).

The fundamental qualities of hunting facilitate a wide diversity of possible modes of pursuit. Hunting for food and for fun essentially do not differ in hunting techniques and styles; the development of weapons does not introduce basic changes in the core features of the hunt. The only factors that set apart sport and sustenance *within* the phenomenon of hunting are the aims and the means. Hunting for livelihood means that the main goal of the hunter, the result to be valued is the death of the animal. Everything that leads up to this is only a set of devices to reach the ultimate aim, which is none else than the hunter's formal intention. A sportsman is not interested in the death of the prey since this is not his intention. A sportsman is interested in happenings previous to the killing, i.e. what needs to be done to achieve success: and this is hunting itself. Death is of vital importance since it validates the act of hunting; killing the animal is the natural end of hunting (in both senses of the word) but it is *not* the hunter's aim (94-95).

Taking lives has imposed prohibitions in every culture. In dragging the hunter to the pillory we tend to rebuke him with the words of the Old Testament commandment 'Thou shalt not kill', which has a concrete, legal sense. In our times, when we attempt

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to extend our system of moral values onto the animal world, we tend to place the 'Thou shalt not kill animals, either' interdiction next to the 'Thou shalt not kill' one. Animal protection is solidly grounded in Anglo-Saxon countries; the notions of *animal rights* or *animal welfare* are commonly known. Animal protection and animal rights movements are also highly respected.[6] People involved in hunting may not escape facing this strain. A true-cut hunter does indeed experience this burden; his lethal deeds are infused with a sense of guilt regardless the historical period he lives in. As a result, there is a type of internal struggle or trauma he has to go through. A good huntsman's mind is always uneasy about the death he brings to the magnificent animal. (Ortega y Gasset 82). There are no clear explanations to why it so. Heavy clouds weigh down on the intellectual horizon at this point. Although there have been several sweeping scholarly attempts to grasp the basic existential motifs of our being, we only possess vague information on this veiled subject. To put it more exactly: we do not really seem to understand what we know. There are always probelms lurking behind the curtain of culture like the unclear nature of man's relationship with animals or the inscrutable quality of the phenomenon of death: its secret that defies all inquiry, whether we speak of natural death or one induced by interference. Likewise, there are centuries-long debates about the justification of wars while the essence of war as such is not touched upon at all. We may as well be reminded that devastating wars are integral phenomena of various *cultures* and steady components of civilised history targeted to the present day on the annihilation of people. When breath is stopped, one is at a loss for words. The question of how far we are masters of our lives is quite as unfathomable as the problem that life is so easy to crush.

Beyond the inconceivable essence of the ultimate reasons, the world of living seems to be an eternal arena. One of the fundamental motifs of existence is the striving by one creature to overcome and subdue the other. The possessive attitude and hunger for power that is characteristic of living beings has been termed *libido dominandi* by the eminent French thinker Pierre Bourdieu. In the case of hunting this desire is directed to the possession of *life*, whether by capturing the prey alive or by bringing it down. It proceeds from the essential qualities of the activity that the hunter cannot be satisfied with anything less. It is only this event which brings fulfillment to the hunt. Natural drama makes hunting. If the sports hunter brings down the game, he does not do so to kill it. He does not become a murderer; the death of the animal is the most natural way of procuring and possessing it. (Ortega y Gasset 38). The trophy symbolises the success of the hunt, the actual *victory* over the prey and the total appropriation of it. An element of luck is undoubtedly needed at times to triumph. Passion for hunting manifests itself in the collection of magnificent trophies, among other things. Eternal dissatisfaction and a drive to collect yet more trophies are at work in the huntsman's soul. He is spurred on by a desire that never finds satisfaction and the quantitative race for trophies: this means the hunt never ends and is always restarted.

The notion of hunting is difficult to grasp. For this reason, it may easily merge with the notions of the warrior, the soldier or the nature photographer. The ploughman, the stock farmer, the soldier, the botanist or the tourist is nevertheless unable to gain immediate experience of a natural way of life as he leaves his instincts hanging from the rack on departure and arrives as a typical cultural being into nature, which for him exists as an external entity or a humanised domain. (Ortega y

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Gasset 123-127). As opposed to the actual hunt, Ortega strictly separates weekend hunting, which is created out of a painful mixture of drive and resistance and which is seemingly pursued with similar patience and stamina. In this latter type there is no real element of hunting but is only acted out as a fairy play where persons engage in making-as-if attitudes. Mere 'target shooting' of game akin to massacre, executed without effort or simple visual or audiorecordings made by hikers with gadgets hanging from their necks are also not regarded to be proper hunting. What happens in the case of game captured on tape or film is a tension-free, visual or acoustic *pseudo*-possession of life's *traces.* There is no real hunter's passion dwelling in the man who is incapable of killing the animal or will not suffer for its life. Viewed from the fortified enclosure of culture, these are needlesharp, piercing and chilling words.

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[1] My emphases

[2] Ortega quotes a longer passage from the work of Polybios (205-123 BC). One of the ideas in the text is especially important for him: "[…] Scipio, who *devoted himself to hunting,* acquired greater fame than the others by executing any sort of similar venture of high risk […]". (29)

[3] My emphases

[4] Kant argues in several places that coscience is inseparably linked to man as a human being. Conscience, as opposed to morality based on externals, leads man from the inside.

[5] My emphases

[6] "Previous to all science and beyond all science mankind looks upon itself as a race emerging from the animal kingdom and not certain to have completely surpassed it. Animals continue to be too close to us: we cannot help feeling a mysterious kind closeness to them." See José Ortega y Gasset 83.

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