

Book Night

CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB

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David W. Maher, Leader

Reviews of

Meditations on Hunting

Jose Ortega y Gasset

The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game

Paul Shepard

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The world is divided into two classes of people -- those who think of wild deer as Bambi, and those who think of wild deer as venison on the hoof. I happen to be in the latter category. I like to hunt, and I like to eat what I shoot.

Every year at about this time, when the newspapers run out of war, famine and pestilence to report, they can be counted on to run a feature or two about hunters, the hunting season, and what to do about it. Occasionally, of course these articles may be mildly sympathetic to the hunter, but they are usually written from the viewpoint of Bambi.

A few examples should suffice:

Richard Rhodes in the Tribune on October 14 (although the story is a reprint from the New York Times) -- the city writer goes out to the country to do a piece on farm life. He is invited to go deer hunting, wounds a deer, loses it and then proceeds to handle his gun so carelessly that it goes off unexpectedly and the bullet barely misses his host. The moral of course is that city boys should stay in the city.

Robert Williams in the Sun-Times on October 8 (another Easterner -- the assistant news editor of the Washington Post) -- his experience is a return to the Catskills where he has had years of hunting experience. It all comes to an end when, I quote, "it was like some Walt Disney movie." Thirty deer suddenly appear, Williams watches them and then returns home, having presumably given up hunting and become a finer person.

There is some balance in the press, however. Bill Stokes in the Tribune on November 27, on the op-ed page, wrote: the hunter,

"if he is not the slob, and if he does his hunting efficiently, with respect for the hunted and reverence for it in death, then he can be comfortable with who he is. He is a predator.... Instead of being derided for barbaric endeavors, the hunter should be accepted as a survivor of the great evolutionary wars and accorded the privileges and respect of a veteran thereof. The ancient campfires still burn. The hunter knows that, and it makes no sense to shout at him across the old flames."

There is hunting literature and there is hunting literature. I am one of those who regards the Alexandria Quartet as a classic work on duck hunting. But I am forced to admit that most hunting books, that is those that are explicitly about hunting, unlike Mountolive, Clea, Balthazar and Justine, are probably not the sort of books that could successfully be reviewed at a Chicago Literary Club book night.

There are, however two hunting books that I consider worthy of review, which explains why I am here. They are Meditations on Hunting by Jose Ortega y Gasset, and The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game by Paul Shepard. Ortega y Gasset you recall as the author of Revolt of the Masses. He was born in 1883 and died, in Madrid, in 1955. Ortega y Gasset is remembered as a philosopher whose critical method often took other works as a jumping off place for his own ideas. His doctrine of "vital reason" is first announced in his work, Meditations on Quijote, and the work we are considering tonight, Meditations on Hunting was first published as the prologue to a work by a friend, Count

Yebes, who published his memoirs under the title Twenty Years a Big Game Hunter. This work and the prologue by Ortega y Gasset first appeared in Madrid in 1943. Not much has been heard since of Count Yebes' work, but the prologue has been published three times in Spanish, three times in German, as well as in Dutch and in Japanese. It first appeared in English in 1972, translated by Howard Wescott.

Wescott summarizes Ortega y Gasset's philosophy as follows:

"Life is the dynamic interchange between the individual and his surroundings, and his surroundings include his own emotional and intellectual responses to life's problems. Thus knowledge, for Ortega, is knowledge of how to act, knowledge of what to hold to, and pay attention to, in the face of life's demands."

Wescott concludes:

"It is not surprising then, that the drama of the hunt should interest a man whose philosophical stance is based on the drama of biographical life. He looks at hunting from the perspective of what that activity has demanded of a particular individual and what it has meant to him within the context of his life."

Ortega y Gasset opens his Meditations by considering hunting as a diversion, but he points out that it is considerably more than what is commonly referred to as diversion, simply because it is taken so seriously by its practitioners. He then considers hunting as pleasure and shows that it cannot be simply this because there is often so much hard work involved. He summarizes the distinction between work and sport by saying that "sport is an effort made completely freely, for the pure enjoyment of it, while work is an obligatory effort made with an eye to the profit."

Ortega y Gasset then turns to history to show the importance of hunting as a sport in all recorded civilizations. In a series of aphorisms he sums up the essence of hunting as well as I have ever seen or heard it done. For example: "Hunting is what an animal does to take possession, dead or alive, of some other being that belongs to a species basically inferior to its own." "...the superiority of the hunter over the prey cannot be absolute." "It is not essential to the hunt that it be successful." "The beauty of hunting lies in the fact that it is always problematic." "There is then in the hunt as a sport a supremely free renunciation by man of the supremacy of his humanity." "...hunting really is a contest or confrontation between two systems of instincts."

Ortega y Gasset discusses how men use other animals, such as dogs and falcons, to assist them in hunting. He then turns to the issue that is probably the most difficult for the non-hunter -- the ethics of hunting and the question of killing. Another aphorism: "Every good hunter is uneasy in the depths of his conscience when faced with the death he is about to inflict on the enchanting animal." But death is necessary for hunting. As Ortega y Gasset says, "one does not hunt in order to kill; on the contrary, one kills in order to have hunted." Ortega y Gasset is blunt in his condemnation of photographic hunting; it "is not progress but rather a digression and a prudery of hideous moral style."

Ortega y Gasset concludes by describing the hunter as the "alert man" and pointing out the similarities between hunters

and philosophers: "Like the hunter in the absolute outside of the countryside, the philosopher is the alert man in the absolute inside of ideas, which are also an unconquerable and dangerous jungle. As problematic a task as hunting, meditation always runs the risk of returning empty-handed."

No one who reads Meditations on Hunting will, however, return empty-handed. It is a beautiful and fascinating book, well translated, handsomely illustrated, and just the thing to counteract the nose-bleeds of the popular press.

The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game is an entirely different book. Its author Paul Shepard, is a naturalist who has taught at the University of California, Knox College and Dartmouth. By coincidence, he also wrote the preface for Ortega y Gasset's Meditations on Hunting in the English edition.

Shepard is also a supporter of hunters and hunting, but he comes at the question in a more scientific and less philosophical way. To Shepard, man must come to grips with his past as a hunter-gatherer and abandon the pretence that the shift to an agricultural and finally industrial society represents progress.

Shepard's book is primarily a treatise on ecology with an emphasis on the development of civilization from the standpoint of a naturalist who deplures most of what society has accomplished in the last 10,000 years. He writes a very persuasive account of the way in which pre-agricultural men and women lived in harmony with their world.

According to Shepard,

"In his relationship to other individuals, and in his ecological relationship to the whole of his environment,

man the hunter and gatherer has a great advantage in that the social and environmental perceptions necessary for his way of life are similar to those in which man evolved, so that his life style is the normal expression of his psychology and physiology. His humanity is therefore more fully achieved, and his community more durable and beautiful...

"The cynegetic life is authentic because it is close to the philosophical center of human life. It constantly contrasts two central mysteries: the nature of the animal and of death. These are brought together in hunting. All other ways of life weakly confront the wild or are designed to avoid it altogether."

Shepard then quotes Ortega y Gasset:

"When one is hunting, the air has another, more exquisite feel as it glides over the skin or enters the lungs, the rocks acquire a more expressive physiognomy, and the vegetation becomes loaded with meaning. But all this is due to the fact that the hunter, while he advances or waits crouching, feels tied through the earth to the animal he pursues, whether the animal is in view, hidden, or absent."

By contrast, "the farmer sees only 'what is good or bad for the growth of his grain or the maturation of his fruit; the rest remains outside his vision and, in consequence, he remains outside the completeness that is the countryside'".

Shepard's book is not simply an ecological history or a lament for the simplicity of the hunter and gatherer's world. Shepard has a program, a utopian vision, although he denies that term. Shepard says that, in order to survive, we must find a way to restore the bond between man and earth that the prehistoric hunter enjoyed.

Shepard's program, which he describes as a vision of a new civilization, would require the abandonment of huge areas of land presently under cultivation. Humans would be restricted to approximately 20% of the earth's surface, preferably along the

ocean shores. Food would be produced by microbial action in factories, although small gardens would be tolerated for production of food for private consumption only. Domestic animals would be banned entirely and zoos would be closed.

Housing would consist of compact quarters in very large buildings. Eating and recreation would be conducted in clans of approximately 30 family members, who would in turn belong to a group of 500. One hundred of these groups, or a total of 50,000 people would make up a city.

The point of all this is to restore men and women to their natural relationship with nature. Education would, of course, have to be reformed. Children from six to twelve would study biology, geology, languages, geography, astronomy, oceanography, soils, and perhaps certain social sciences. Chemistry, mathematics and physics would be put off until the student is about twenty, and history until thirty.

The real education would come of course from excursions into the 80% of the world that is wilderness. Young men, and to a slightly lesser extent, young women would be required to learn hunting, all of which would be performed with hand weapons and without firearms. All game would be eaten, and except for the city, the world would be returned to a state of pre-Neolithic simplicity.

Well, it sounds utopian to me, and even though I love hunting, I don't see myself as a happy inhabitant of Shepard's city of the future. In fact, I don't see the world as signing on for his version of an ecological paradise, but it might give one

of our Democratic candidates for President an opportunity for a unique platform.

Except for Shepard's plan for saving the world, he and Ortega y Gasset agree on the important things about hunting, and I found that the two books have helped me to articulate why I believe that hunting is the most fun you can have outdoors, in cold weather.