

## **Coursing and the de-Civilizing Process**

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Although greyhound coursing can be interpreted as a quite perfect example of what Norbert Elias call the civilizing process, it can also fit into what could be termed a de-civilizing process, as the work carried out by Sylvie Muller suggests.<sup>1</sup> This is because the context giving the coursing of hares its meaning, that is the relationship between man and nature, has changed over time. Indeed, man has not always thought of himself as the master of the world, and used to have a relationship with nature based on exchange. We will first see that the exceptional exertion the greyhound is forced to display on account of its inefficiency at catching the hare is the idealized metaphor of the warring qualities the fallen knights of the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> We will then see that its modern survival can also be accounted for as a means of repressing socially unacceptable violence, yet of a sexual rather than purely physical nature.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, from a less social and more anthropological yet historical perspective, we will see that the successive versions of a rite using a wren as its centrepiece makes it possible to re-interpret coursing as the survival of a time when man lived in perfect harmony with nature. However, such interpretation suggests that coursing actually is part of a de-civilizing rather than civilizing process.

Although it is said to have originated in second-century Greece, the unleashing of two greyhounds on a hare in order to assess their relative merits rather than kill her was devised by 16th century British elites. Indeed, no such dog seems to have ever existed outside the British isles until a relatively recent past, since it is a very special breed of dog which should not be able to rely on their nose, so that they have to concentrate all their energy on keeping the prey in sight. Various evidence show that such features have been the result of breeding, if only because whereas French, for instance, named the dog after its so-called favourite prey, the same phenomenon in English produced Harrier. This is because live-hare coursing originates from a hunting technique descending from the Saxons, who used to channel animals into some narrow passage opening on to a field in which nets had been laid, that was adapted in the Middle Ages by the aristocratic elites, who substituted bowmen and eventually dogs for the nets. Indeed, according to nineteenth-century commentators, one could not differentiate the English greyhound from the Scottish deerhound, and such features as differentiated them could be gained or lost in a few generations.

Later, Lord Orford, the founder in 1776 of the first coursing club, was to cross his greyhounds with bulldogs in order to impart more aggressiveness to the cross. This is partly because the deerhound has a regrettable tendency to “calculate in (its) own mind where the hare (is) liable to go (...) and at (its) chosen moment swoop in to kill”<sup>4</sup> rather than foolishly rush headlong on the hare whose sideways jerks send the greyhounds tumbling over a few metres past, so that they have to display unflinching energy and courage. Indeed, when it came to deciding on a winner, the Duke of Norfolk devised an elaborate system of assessing the relative merits of dogs based on the extent to which a dog forces the hare to move away from the straightest line towards her escape. However, a dog outrun by one length that finds the resources to take itself one length ahead and forces the hare to merely move away from her path was awarded twice as much as when forcing the hare to take a U turn. Moreover, curiously enough, a dog that has been outrun at the start but makes up for lost time, even

though it may not get level with the other in the end, will be deemed the winner (provided no other point has been scored). Similarly, a dog that falls and yet resumes the chase will be rewarded, and a greyhound at the end of its tether that stands still in the field will lose the contest (provided its opponent merely follows the hare to escape).

Unsparring of its efforts to the point of paralysis, coursing was the idealized metaphor of the qualities the fallen knights of the end of the Middle Ages wished they were atavistically endowed with. Indeed, beginning with William the Conqueror, the chasing of animals was one of the means by which the King proclaimed his manliness, as did the aristocratic elites, who had three passions: hunting, the tournament, and war, for which the first two acted as training, and for which they were mere substitutes. And even though coursing cannot be said to have been as strenuous as hunting called *à force*, which the English aristocracy of the time held as archetypal of war, the qualities with which it was held desirable that the warrior should be endowed were held to be as important as actual force. Moreover even though it was not the most honourable cynegetic exercise available, it was the most honourable activity common to both the old landed aristocracy and a new bourgeoisie eager to mimic its life style, the necessary competitive counterpart of the co-operative effort of hunting *à force*. As such, it partook of the same symbolism.

Therefore, coursing was created between the middle of the fifteenth century and the first version of the rules of coursing as devised by the Duke of Norfolk in 1560, out of the need to accommodate the early advent of a bourgeois elite and as a halfway stage of the so-called civilizing process or gradual withdrawal from direct physical contact with opponents for a class deprived of the exercise of war, which had been largely instrumental in defining them and legitimizing their very existence.

However, the survival of coursing into the twenty-first century casts doubts on such explanation since today's society bears little resemblance with the society that put it into shape. Moreover, however vigorously they deny the accusation, the ordeal of the hare is part and parcel of whatever pleasure coursing enthusiasts derive from the chase, as even though the actual object of the sport is not the killing of the hare, whoever could not make do without greyhounds could still go greyhound racing. Therefore, a huge majority of people would like them to relinquish such barbarous pursuit, as whoever gets pleasure from killing can not belong to humanity.

Yet, according to Jean-Paul Sarré, among others, human beings are selfish, pleasure-seeking, permissive and aggressive individuals taking after animals, and as such, find it difficult to comply with the frustrating demands of social life.<sup>5</sup> Moreover the survival as well as progress of society rest on a subtle balance between repression as well as satisfaction of individual whims. Therefore it may be conjectured that all societies have their own means of regulating whatever pressure they are responsible for: some parallel, symbolic world that returns sociable human(s)-animals to "real" life. Such division may seem ridiculously artificial. However, the dangers of such promiscuity are well-known, and whenever the frontier between play and non-play becomes blurred, the mimetic battle turns into real battle, unless it is the other way around. Indeed, if such danger cannot be ruled out, this is because whatever medium is used in such play sphere, it is necessary that it appeal to whatever urge has to be controlled in real life.

Indeed, it is well-known that according to Norbert Elias, sport contests are mock battles which offer pleasurable mimetic tensions leading up to a climax of excitement which eventually resolves into some cathartic settlement whose effects extend into "real" life.

However, if some spectators will forever fight it out, this is because they cannot make up which sphere is which, this is the danger inherent to their closeness, as it is not so much the outcome of the game as the emotional journey along such Gauss curve that accounts for the phenomenon. Now, according to Elias, there again: “A pleasing tension, an enjoyable excitement culminating in a pleasurable climax and the relaxation of tension is well enough known as the characteristic pattern of the sex act.”<sup>6</sup> However, he does not take his intuition farther, and prudishly turns to fighting excitement, which, when trying to account for the phenomena that extricated man from the original chaos, is a simplistic shortcut, especially so since this is the avenue investigated in numerous studies on animal sports, and since, for Montaigne, for instance, the climax of the chase was the killing of the prey and hunting without killing was like having sex without orgasm. So much so that the race between the greyhounds to the hare can be interpreted as offering pleasurable mimetic tensions, the working of the hare an enjoyable excitement, and the killing of the hare a pleasurable climax that gives the sport its meaning, and makes it possible to relax tension, as suggested by MacMahon, a mid-nineteenth-century Irish novelist whose narrator owns a greyhound, an extension of his manhood, that literally penetrates the hare as it digs its teeth into her.

Therefore, greyhound coursing can be seen as both transgression-some primitive sexual gratification reinstating the original competition between males for females, the original form of ownership, the chaos-and mediation. A sublimation of war aggressiveness devised in the seventeenth century as part of a civilizing process, the survival of coursing into the twenty-first century can be accounted for as a means of satisfying more deep-lying antisocial sex drives. Therefore, coursing is an intermediate rung on the ladder of the unconscious assimilation of modern standards of behaviour that is falling a victim to the civilizing process taking us away from our barbaric origins.

However, many a scholar could easily explain that the fact that in coursing, as in other contexts, the hare is referred to by the personal pronoun “she” and as “pussy”, which is a favourite word for the female genitals as well as for women when thought of as mere objects of sexual gratification, is not meaningful. Such quest for meaning can be regarded as phantasmagorical and fantastical. Yet, in Ireland, many stories happen to stage dogs in general and greyhounds in particular which their owners set on a hare caught in the act of sucking milk from the udder of a cow. In Bandon, for instance, a priest who had caught up with his dogs came upon a woman in a cabin. He asked her to get up. A pool of blood lay where she had been sitting because she had been bitten by the dogs.

This is because for the Celts, vegetation was thought to reproduce thanks to the rotting process it went through in winter. So was human life, which was thought to be reproduced thanks to the monthly decaying blood of women. So much so that there was a strong metaphorical equivalence between woman and nature, as both were thought to reproduce life thanks to the menstrual/seasonal rotting process their inner worlds go through, and as both go through the blood/flowers out of which fruit may be born. Indeed, alternately “in flower” then “in fruit” or “in blood” then “in milk”, or in winter then in summer, life circulated through death thanks to the alternation of seasons, and it was blood, which fed nature when menstrual and women when used for gestation, that made it possible to pass from one season to the next.

Such clear parallel was drawn between the fertility of women and nature that on account of their metaphorical equivalence it was necessary that blood flow, that land take a blood bath in order to impregnate it. This was particularly true of the twelve days that span from December 25<sup>th</sup> to January 6<sup>th</sup> in the Christian calendar and used to span from October

31<sup>st</sup> to November 11<sup>th</sup> in the Celtic calendar. Indeed, the Celtic year used to be fashioned on the moon which undergoes in one month (seven dark nights, seven dark/clear nights, seven clear nights, seven clear/dark nights) what nature (winter, spring, summer, autumn) and women (bleeding, impregnated, pregnant, delivering) go through in one year. However, in order for months not to run ahead of seasons, one (solar) year was made up of twelve lunar months of 29.5 days each plus 11.5 days. As a period nowhere to be found on the wheel of the year, those twelve days were both outside and at the centre of time and life, that is the hub of the wheel which is made to turn thanks to the death of life as well as the womb of the year to come.

Indeed, it used to be traditional for young men to kill a wren on December 26<sup>th</sup> and parade it through the village on a bush decorated with ribbons or flowers, as symbols of both nature and menstruation. As the centrepiece of a ritual aiming at ensuring both the fertility of newly-wed couples and the return of harvest, the wren was the animal counterpart as well as substitute of the supreme king, who represented mankind at the centre of the wheel of the year. As such, he used to have to be put to death as a sacrifice to nature in order for the wheel of the year to turn, for nature to be able to feed his people in turn. December 26<sup>th</sup> was a favourite day for the Irish to spill animal blood in order to feed nature and ensure abundance for the following year, and apart from the wren, the cock, at cock-throwing, the bull, at bull-baiting, and the hare, with dogs, were also called on to pay the debt to nature. Sylvie Muller explains that this is because as with the supreme king, whose blood feeds nature, both the wren and the hare are androgynous creatures, as suggested by those traditions that have her lay eggs at Easter time or by some medieval popular beliefs. Indeed, the hare is very similar to snakes, that emerge from the sex of women, take hold of their bodies and dry up their breast. This is because snakes are known to steal milk from cows, in popular belief as well as in actual life, like hares. As such, they are symbolic representations of menstruation, and are thought to prevent conception and lactation, that is spread sterility. This is the reason why it is necessary that they have been sent underground in order to feed earth with their own blood before the end of winter.

Indeed, in order for winter to turn into summer and for blood to turn into milk, so that nature can give fruit and women can give life, it is necessary that menstrual animals should have been killed for blood to turn into milk. This is what a farmer whose greyhounds had killed a hare that had been sucking milk from his cows can bear witness to, as on coming back to his farm, the churn was full of long-awaited milk. This is very clear in Irish mythology as well, in which a snake sucking milk from a cow is killed by Finn so that it is made to impregnate earth with its own blood.

However, if not fantastical, the sexual or libidinal explanation worked out above may still appear to be phantasmagorical. However, whereas Finn's killing of snakes is merely symbolical, as it is necessary for the snake to reappear in winter for life to be reborn, in Christian mythology, Saint Patrick kicks them out of Ireland for good. This bears witness to some change in our relationship with nature, and signals that the spilling of blood is no longer taken to be the central natural phenomenon accounting for the turning of the wheel of the year. This is because man has eventually taken control over nature through agriculture and breeding, and as from the time man has been playing the main part in the (natural) reproduction of vegetation, gathering the fruit and planting them back himself with his own tools, he has thought of himself as playing the central role in the (female) reproduction of human life.

The part played by sperm has not always been considered as central, and man has come to occupy the central position in the reproduction of life for symbolical rather than physiological reasons. The development of stories casting a wren and a mouse joining forces and fighting for survival illustrates this changeover.

- In the earliest versions, food in the form of blood belongs to the mouse, who stores it at the bottom of her (uterine) whole and out of which she feeds the wren (baby child). When the wren has come of age and tries to slip away, the mouse gets her own back by declaring a war that leaves all birds dead (so that life can be reproduced thanks to their blood).

- In the intermediate versions, food in the form of blood and seed belongs to both the mouse and the wren, who store it together for the winter. But the (uterine) stomach of the mouse eats out everything at the end of autumn (making it possible, there again, for life to be reborn).

- Finally, in the ultimate versions, grain, that is food in the form of seed only, belongs to a farmer who sets the wren the task of threshing it. But the (uterine) stomach of the mouse steals it and eats it out the moment it springs from the (phallic) flail.

A representative of both human and vegetal life that circulates through death and blood in the earliest versions, the wren turns into a representative of exclusively human life that stores food, stopping the circulation of vegetal life, to a representative of male sexual life, ensuring the circulation of vegetal life thanks to agriculture. Indeed with a changeover from an economy based on hunting and gathering to an economy based on breeding and agriculture, the natural part played by death and blood in the reproduction of life is replaced by the cultural part played by (sexual) life and (male) precious seed. Therefore, the eating of the seed by the (uterine) whole of the mouse can take on a sexual meaning, just as the biting of a hare by a greyhound, even though it is difficult to make out the male from the female.

In agriculture, man penetrates the underground world, appropriates it (in the winter) in order to lay his seed. Now, due to the fact that women are taken to reproduce life on the same pattern as nature, they, too, came to be perceived as giving birth thanks to man and his precious seed. Indeed, the sexual penetration of women by men is the metaphorical counterpart of human intervention in the life cycle of nature, and there comes the time when the penis, a natural tool, just like the cultural tools thanks to which man subdued nature, is the ultimate symbol of the power of human beings over nature, as well as of man over woman.

Women are only half-human indeed, and just like those sirens who shed their fish skin whenever their menses have been domesticated, the lower half of their body turns periodically wild. Indeed as opposed to blood used for gestation, menstrual blood is a natural phenomenon that man wields no control on. Therefore, when man thinks of himself as procreator of life, menstruation is taken as failure to overpower nature. So much so that women who have not been civilized by sperm do not become humans, they are natural, a potential danger to man, whereas women whose body was ploughed and sown by man will bear fruit in the summer. They are cultural. The ultimate development of the relationship is reached when it is no longer the bleeding triggered by nature which is the primal source of life, but that triggered by the deflowering and fertilizing blows of men to women, as shown by the ultimate version of the wren-farmer's fight for survival, who eventually contrives to give back neither blood nor seed, beating the earth instead in order to take back the seed he gave it and have it deliver.<sup>7</sup>

As a conclusion, it seems as though man had rethought his own reproduction, and consequently the relationship between the genders, using his relationship with nature as a model. With the advent of agriculture, earth came to be perceived as a wife that men have to plough and sow rather than as a nourishing mother. Just as nature, on account of their symbolical and functional equivalence, women came to be made both metaphorically and culturally subservient to men. Indeed, from then on women could be taken to reproduce life passively, thanks to the intervention of man, whose semen they devour. The ultimate stage in this patriarchal shift is when the fertilizing rape of virgins can be considered a humanitarian work necessary for life to be reborn. When all has been said, whether coursing greyhound fits into a civilizing or de-civilizing process actually depends on whether one accepts such stories as historical evidence, suggesting, here, that there may be some alternative to the Freudian interpretation of the development of the human mind, that there may have been a time when power did not concentrate in the phallus and when the genders had a more harmonious way of interacting.

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<sup>1</sup>Muller, Sylvie: *Le roitelet : vie et mort dans le rituel et les contes irlandais*. Nice, France 1993.

<sup>2</sup>For a more detailed demonstration than that which present space allows, see Daniel, Laurent: "The Birth of Coursing", in: Szikora, Nagy, Bandy, Pfister & Terret (eds.): *Proceedings of the 6th Congress of ISHPES, Budapest, 14-19 July 1999*. Budapest 2002, 282-9.

<sup>3</sup>For a more detailed explanation than that which present space allows, see Daniel, Laurent: "Une psychosociolinguistique du lévrier et de son sport", in: CAPANI & MARCHIONI (eds.): *Proceedings of the 4th Congress of the History of Sport in Europe*. Florence 1999, 85-93.

<sup>4</sup>Pattinson, John: "Lurchers", in: Grant-Rennick, Richard (ed.): *Coursing: the pursuit of game with gazehounds*. Saul, Gloucestershire 1977, 185-98, p.192.

<sup>5</sup>Sarré, Jean-Paul: "Sauvage analyse", in 34 *Critique* 375-6, (1978), 875-80, p.875.

<sup>6</sup>Elias, Norbert: "Introduction", in Elias & Dunning (eds.), *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. Oxford 1986, 19-62, p.58.

<sup>7</sup>Whereas in the original ideology man paid his debt towards nature with his own death and his debt towards the woman who gave him birth with the game he hunted, which feeds her womb and participates in menstruation, in today's dominant ideology he pays his debt to the woman who gave him birth by (sexually) penetrating the younger girl to whom she has passed on her ability to give birth. However, as death is a return into the womb of mother earth, the payment of the debt remains a kind of death given by woman. Therefore, as it had mainly been a matter of avoiding death thanks to sex, the problem is one of trying to make do without sex in order not to die.