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Performing the rural through game-angling

Introduction

‘It is through the relationship between an array of characters playing out particular roles, and the spaces in which they perform, that ruralities are routinely produced’ (Edensor, 2006: 484)

This quotation captures neatly how rurality is a negotiated, relational thing which is brought to life in what we would consider to be the countryside by particular actors acting consistently and cooperatively in particular ways. Game-anglers produce their rurality in this way, and this chapter focuses on how they, as a distinct cooperative of rural actors, have produced and continue to reproduce rural Britain in ways that are consistent with the scripts, social relations and embodied practices that have underpinned their sport since Victorian times. Moreover, examining how a seemingly innocuous activity that is game-angling combines the visceral and the social reveals much about society/nature interactions; and using a performative approach provides a useful way of understanding how social and natural forces can work together to produce an extremely popular participant sport that upholds and produces a negotiated sense and sensing of the rural.

Performance, as it is used here, is a dramaturgical metaphor that has gained much currency in the social sciences in recent years. Broadly, performance is deployed as a means of analysing human actions that are difficult or even impossible to fully apprehend through social constructionist approaches, which rely on textual and discursive representational analyses. That is not to suggest that social constructionism is wide of its intended targets in this regard but it is to say that ‘performativity’, as Thrift (2003) calls it, is more concerned with thinking about the ways in which personal agency and social structures interact in an embodied as well as a discursive way. Social constructionist approaches emphasise how discourse represents and prefigures the reality of peoples relationship with the structures, spaces and environments within which they are located. However, such relationships are not only practices co-produced and reproduced through discourse but are also corporeal experiences that can be visceral, emotional, apparently illogical and subjective, wondrous, prosaic and seemingly pointless in ways that are not

simply matters of social construction. Understanding these relations as performed encounters can help bridge the gap between analysing discourses that represent and prefigure how people collectively engage and construct their worlds and the embodied materiality of how people act and live their everyday lives.

As Wood (2010: 34) tells us, studying rurality in this way is about showing ‘how discourses of rurality are enacted and routinized with material effects, and showing how practices and performances of rural actors in material settings contribute to the production and reproduction of discourses of rurality’. Thus the rural is something we produce through our thoughts, communications and actions, both planned and spontaneous, in and on rural space (also see Marvin, 2003). Through telling what we do in rural spaces, especially in any consistent way, the triad of thought, action and place comes together to produce routinized, consistent, and therefore cooperated, rural performances. Such performances can vary depending who is doing the acting and scripting, why, and upon which rural stage the performance is set. Therefore, as Edensor (2006: 486) tells us, ‘different rural performances are enacted on different stages by different actors: at village greens, farm-life centres, heritage attractions, grouse moors, mountains, long distance footpaths and farmyards and in rural spaces identified as “wilderness”’. In this case, the rural stages are rivers and streams that hold game fish such as trout and salmon, and the collective actors are game-anglers who fish for them as a sport and leisure pursuit.

It may be questioned: why choose one branch of freshwater angling instead of angling (and anglers) per se? However, angling is not a single activity but a set of activities that are performed differently on different stages – e.g. rivers, lakes, ponds, canals and the sea etc. – using different techniques and premised on differing sporting codes. Therefore, different angling codes produce varying ruralities, and as such it is not appropriate to lump all angling, and anglers, together in a singular analysis. That said, in terms of the embodiment of angling there seem to be elements shared across different branches of the sport and this will be touched upon later. At first, though, the chapter is based on a social constructionist analysis of some key moments and representations in the history of game-angling, focusing particularly on significant discursive practices that are, and have been, key to the development and maintenance of its sporting codes. Then the chapter moves toward considering how game-angling, and angling per se, is embodied. In this regard, it considers how angling taps into certain human impulses that are primeval, and, for many, even spiritual. The chapter is not, and cannot, be an

exhaustive insight into the performed rurality of game-angling, however it does offer something of a window through which the performance can be gazed and studied.

British game-angling as social construction

Almost 10% (4.1 million) of all people over the age of 12 in England and Wales went fishing in 2006, and 20% (8.3 million) went freshwater fishing in the preceding 10 years. Indeed, freshwater angling accounts for 80% of all angling in the UK (Environment Agency, 2008). Men dominate the sport, though the number of women taking up angling is growing (Mordue, 2009). In general, angling requires a good degree of skill, practice and knowledge before the angler can become successful on any consistent basis. The demand for angling knowledge means that there is a wealth of literature instructing practitioners on how to perform their branch of the sport skilfully and, as important, appropriately. This is particularly the case with game-angling because it has a literature that is replete with instruction and doctrine on what the sport is about and which repeatedly celebrates its history and the rural spaces where it is ideally practiced. Thus to understand the importance and impact of such writing one needs to understand how it tells of a history and geography that authenticates game-angling's sporting codes and produces the rural stages upon which those codes are performed most appropriately.

Up until the 19th century angling was a fairly catholic sport within which all fish and fishing methods were considered relatively equal. The Victorians changed this by delineating angling along the strict lines we have today, that broadly speaking consist of game-angling and coarse angling, with the latter about catching freshwater fish other than salmonids, mostly by bait fishing. This delineation was, and still is in a symbolic sense at least, fundamentally social in that game-angling became highbrow and coarse angling was to be practiced largely by the lower echelons of society in the rivers, streams, canals and lakes that the Victorian gentleman angler had little value for (see Mordue 2009). By association, fish species such as chub, bream and roach became caste as being more lowly than trout and salmon, and the sport of catching them was labelled as 'coarse' by the 'gentlemen' classes to reflect its, and its practitioners, inferior status in relation to game-angling and its practitioners (see Lowerson, 1993). The concomitant to this is that the southern English chalkstreams and the salmon rivers of Scotland, where prime trout and salmon fishing could be had, were dominated by wealthy gentlemen [sic] who used social, cultural and economic capital to build boundaries that were, and still are in large part today, impenetrable to the masses. In economic terms, the best rivers were

controlled by landed interests, and only the upper reaches of society were able to access such waters either through personal ownership or membership of elite syndicates and game-angling clubs. One notable club is the Flyfishers Club, which was established as a gentlemen's club in London in 1884, about which in 1894 Basil Field, the first club president, wrote in its 'Fortnightly Review':

'The Club owes its origin to a widespread feeling that there is something in fishing beyond the mere catching of fish, or, as the legend of the Club book-plate tersely puts it, "Piscator non solum piscatur." ... It consists of over three hundred members, British and foreign, representing the House of Lords, the House of Commons, Art, Science, Literature, Medicine, Diplomacy, the Church, the Army, the Navy, the Bench, the Bar and the legal profession in general, Manufacture, Commerce, and Trade, wholesale and retail.

Field also recounts the Club's original prospectus saying that it is primarily a social club which aims:

To bring together gentlemen devoted to fly-fishing generally.

To afford a ready means of communication between those interested in this delightful art.

To provide in the reading-room, in addition to all the usual newspapers, periodicals, catalogues, and books, foreign as well as English, having reference to fishing, particularly to fly-fishing so as to render the club a means of obtaining knowledge about new fishing places and vacancies for rods, and making it a general medium of information on all points relating to the art.

These passages are extremely telling in that they indicate how the membership was in a position to create a systematic focal point for the production and reproduction flyfishing, and in so doing prescribing and canonising its codes, culture and the spaces where it could be best practiced. Flyfishing was thus elevated to an art and a science that could only be accessed in any authentic sense by those with the economic and cultural capital to do so. Specifically, this was about affording the specialist equipment needed, gaining access to the best streams, and being schooled in the art and science needed to master flyfishing's protocols, whilst appreciating its mysteries. Given this didactic element, writing about game-angling exploded in Victorian times, and its most famous pioneers

were dedicated flyfishermen who had the sporting and social capacity to author, and authorise, what flyfishing was and how it should be practiced. Men such as F.M. Halford, G.E.M. Skues, and G. S. Marryatt rose to the top of the sport during this period through their ability to spend inordinate hours on southern England's chalkstreams practicing and experimenting, and then publishing their considerations in what are now seminal texts on flyfishing. The scholarly tone of such writings is evident in much game-angling writing today, as are the relative merits of these pioneers discussed, dissected and debated still. For example, on Halford and his approach, Lapsley (2003: 29) writes

Clearly he saw himself as a researcher, studying trout and their diets. He spent countless hours analysing the contents of trouts' stomachs and examining natural flies in minute detail.

Though not too impressed by Halford's dogmatism as a 'dry fly only' man, Lapsley (2003: 29) lauds some of Halford's contemporaries for their greater scientific pragmatism. For example, on Marryatt he says:

Rated by many as the greatest fly-fisher in England, Marryatt was a gifted entomologist and a great observer of nature with a remarkable capacity for thinking himself into the fishes' minds. He was pragmatic, experimental and innovative.

On Skues, Lapsley (2003: 30-31) describes him as 'A Winchester scholar' who 'was a superb fly-fisher – observant, analytical, adaptable and inventive'.

Knowing game-angling and its rurality however, as the Flyfishers club's founding principles dictate, is not simply about learning the technicalities of catching game-fish on fly but understanding that there is much more to game-angling, something mysterious and magical as well as artful and scientific. Even the very earliest books on angling conveyed such sentiments to their readers, seeing it as an holistic pastime that allowed retreat from the toiles of everyday life whereupon the angler enters into communion with nature's wonders, and thus with God himself [sic]. Izaak Walton's seminal 'Compleat Angler: Or, the Contemplative Man's Recreation' (1653) describes angling in this way and also angling not as an individualistic pursuit as is so often the case in game-angling but a one that should be enjoyed in the company of fellow anglers in their collective

escape from urban life (Franklin, 2001). However, the predilection to contrast sublime rurality with profane urbanity in certain angling quarters holds as true today as it ever did, most particularly in game-angling quarters (see Paxman, 1995; Washabaugh and Washabaugh, 2000).

A notable modern tale that is shot through with this rural/urban dichotomy, and which has been popularised way beyond game-angling circles, is Norman McLean's fiction, *A River Runs Through It*. Published in 1976, the book tells the story of a pastor's and his two sons' love of flyfishing in the pristine trout streams of Montana. Though the setting here is not Britain, the flyfishing lore and codes espoused are those borne in Britain and transported to this US setting (see Mordue 2009). That the tale and the values and aesthetics therein touched an Anglo-American cultural nerve is further evidenced by the fact that it was turned into a motion picture in 1992 which became a box office hit and also an Oscar winner. Indeed, Bratzel (2006) tells us that *A River Runs Through It* stimulated a fresh demand for flyfishing all over the United States.

The first line of the book sets the scene and the tone by saying: 'In our family there was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing' and that 'all first-class fishermen on the sea of Galilea were fly-fishermen and that John, the favourite, was a dry-fly fisherman' (1976, p.1). The favourite son in the book is Paul who personifies both the ills of modern urbanism and the beauty and holiness of pristine rurality. Paul is an outstanding flyfisher who finds peace when he is on the water but who also has a dark side in that he is addicted to gambling and is something of a womaniser in his everyday urban life. As Hesford (1980: 38) puts it: 'Within his art, he disciplines himself, lives by the rhythm preached by his father, makes himself worthy of grace', but away from the waters he 'entangled himself in affairs and in gambling debts'. Thus the war between good and evil is fought between the rural and the urban and Paul is in the unfortunate position of embodying and performing both depending on what he is doing and where he is.

As alluded to, such rural purism is strong in game-angling writing, and seems to be stronger the more upmarket the outlet for that writing. For example, the most widely read game-angling periodical in Britain, *Trout and Salmon* magazine, has an upmarket positionality but is carefully crafted in that it is chock full of articles and features that entice its readership with a mix of didacticism and lyrical reverence for the codes, history and geographies of its sport. The more upmarket, *The Field* magazine, which is the oldest field sports periodical in the world, wastes little time on instruction, rather it is a

publication for the already initiated in things rural, and when it features articles on game-angling it does so with a certain expectation of knowing on behalf of the reader.

Instruction and tactics are certainly off the discursive agenda. For instance, in a piece entitled 'Arcadian Chalkstreams' (The Field, May 2012, pp. 38-41), Charles Rangley-Wilson paints a verbal picture of what it is like to flyfish on such hallowed waters, and that the idyllic chalkstream

has the stream turning easy curves through wild meadow of orchids and sedge, withy beds weeping springs. Barn owls hover over the drier ground. Snipe shimmy away from damp, cattle-poached pools. The water flows brimful with the meadow and the margin between them blurred... From where I stand on the rickety bridge that crosses the stream, I can see under the tussock on the far bank a brown trout rising every once in while... In a minute I'll slide into the water and try to catch him. (Rangley-Wilson, 2012, pp. 39-40; in Mordue, 2013 pp. 109)

This picture of trout fishing perfection is a carefully *assembling* of natural things, yet it places them within a highly aestheticized, very human-centred stage. In a wave of patriotism, even English superiority, Rangley-Wilson goes on to suggest that there are many such scenes existing in reality in England. This, of course, *places* rural England as the spiritual as well as the geographical homeland of this ideal vision. On this, however, it is important to remember that as the Victorians were cultivating the 'art' of game angling and constructing its rural stage, massive industrial developments were under foot in Britain that created a landscape which contrasted vividly with the Arcadian rurality depicted above. One significant development not only impacted greatly in driving forward Britain's industrial growth but also expanded the capability of how and where the Victorian angler could pursue his [sic] sport, and that was rail transportation.

By the end of the nineteenth century rail transportation in Britain was established well enough to knit together a national network that drew the chalkstreams of Southern England within daily commute of the capital, London (Mort, 1998). Train transportation also brought further flung game-angling destinations closer to Londons' elite, as Berry (2011, p 78) describes:

If one journey typified the travels of adventurous Victorians, it was the grand tour of Scotland. These were... extended excursions for the moneyed gentleman

hunter. Shotguns, servants and rod boxes with Pall Mall addresses would be loaded on to the north-bound trains, with stags and salmon waiting dutifully at the end of the line... The Grand Tour was as much a part of a wealthy gentleman's life as his London club, his alma mater or his mistress.

While rail transportation was expansive for the leisured Victorian gentleman, it also carried a threat in that as it expanded and became more accessible to the masses they too were becoming more mobile than before. Thus the ability to travel deeper into rural Britain was not enough for the gentleman game-angler to preserve their sport and the rurality of Arcadian exclusivity upon which it was staged. Other restrictions needed to be deployed. These came in a complex assembling of spatial regulation in terms of ownership and regulation of the best game-angling rivers and streams, the social makeup of flyfishing club membership, the mystification of discourses about game-angling practice as something of a science and an art for those 'in the know'. Taken together, such tactics proved very effective at locking the unworthy out of the discourses and the knowledge that made game-angling as a sporting code as they also ensured the preservation of the most treasured game-angling rural spaces for the initiated and the invited.

Today, market forces have to some extent expanded the tight exclusivity of game-angling. For example, the massive development of the transportation and communications infrastructure over the last century has helped to democratise travel further, providing more varied opportunities for those wanting to catch game-fish at home and abroad; game-angling equipment is now mass produced to the extent that many can afford good quality tackle; there is also a proliferation of fishing books, magazines and latterly TV, video, DVD and internet media, making game-angling knowledge more available and accessible; there are many purpose built game-fisheries in Britain available on a day ticket basis; and the reclamation of many of Britain's rivers damaged and polluted by the industrial practices of the 19th and 20th centuries has provided further game-angling opportunities. Although it is true that these developments have expanded game-angling to make it more accessible, they have also diverted the masses away from the elite spaces and ruralities of game-angling which are as unavailable as ever. For example, the best chalkstream waters on rivers such as the rivers Test, Itchen and Kennet in Southern England where Halford et al fashioned their sport, remain highly restricted. Access to such waters tends to be subject to one or more

of the following: being prohibitively expensive, available through a closed club membership basis only, and available only through the invitation of riparian owners.

British game-angling as embodied practice

That game-angling is socially constructed in the ways discussed above is clear. However, the raw appeal of game-angling, as with all angling, cannot be explained so readily by social constructionist accounts because angling is quite a universal practice in that its appeal cuts across class and cultural lines as well as prescribed spatial and temporal barriers. We need to ask then, what is the nature of this appeal, and why do people go fishing when for all practical purposes they do not need to?

This is where it is important to consider the physicality and embodied nature of angling practice, and think about how it is performed in a non-representational way. Franklin (2001), for one, argues that angling, alongside hunting, is a much more profound form of leisure - and tourism - than any other because it demands such physical closeness to nature where instinctive as well as intellectual and emotional responses are brought to bear in its doing. Indeed, angling can mean not only catching wild fish but killing them and eating them, suggesting that angling appeals to our 'killer ape' instincts. On this Bauer and Herr (2004) assert that both fishing and hunting are elemental behaviours ingrained in our genes through millions of years of evolution. While it is difficult to deny the elemental nature of angling in this way, what we are concerned with here is, as Franklin (2001: 67) argues, exploring the way nature is 'objectified or triangulated through the senses'. In this, the angler needs to engage the quarry and its natural habitat through physical sensation, touch, feel and instinct otherwise there is no chance of success or enjoyment. Without these angling is pointless. In more technical language, angling requires greater kinaesthetic, somesthetic and proprioceptive sensual engagement than other rural activities because the angler has to enter the wild, watery world of the quarry on their terms in order to catch them.

Taking inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari's (1998) rhizomatic ontology on 'becoming-animal', Bear and Eden (2011) argue that entering the world of fish requires breaking through the water's surface, both physically and mentally, in an endeavour to 'become-fish'. This is not literal but relational in that angling is a transformative process whereby anglers alter their usual orientations and dispositions in the airy spaces of society and attempt to 'think like fish' as they try to understand how fish go about their own lived spaces below the water's surface – a perfected skill which, for Lapsley (2003), made

G.S. Marryatt the greatest flyfisher of his time. In this anglers deploy 'watercraft' (Eden and Bear 2011), which is about reading a river's surface in order to interpret and 'see' what is going on underneath. Angling becoming, then, is a simultaneous and instantaneous deployment of watercraft and acquired knowledge of particular fish species and their habitats, in a synchronised unfolding of the self into the temporal and spatial rhythms of fish in a given location at a particular time of day and season. How well the angler does this determines success. This does not, of course, mean that the very best anglers actually become-fish or actually think like a fish, but the more the angler is able to reach into the watery world of fish in this performative and relational sense the more he/she 'becomes imperceptible' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1998) in that world and the better an affective and effective human-fish encounter is achieved to maximises the likelihood of success.

This indicates how the intimate physicality of angling is not only elemental, and intellectually purposive, but also deeply felt and impassioned. What is more, a passion for angling is something of a recurrent theme in the angling literature as being a core motivation for those who fish for leisure and pleasure. In the game-angling literature stories of passionate encounters are often told where, for example, a catch of a lifetime has been had in some idyllic place or where overcoming particularly difficult natural circumstances resulted in success. Such narratives appear frequently because, as tropes, they speak to the wonderment, excitement and sheer exhilaration so many game-anglers experience when fishing, and indeed hope to experience when preparing for a fishing trip. Moreover, the passion for angling is most realised at the moment a fish is caught. On catching a trout on fly Preston-Whyte (2008, p. 53), says:

At the moment of the strike, and while the fish is being fought, the fisher passes from a state of patient expectation to excited activity. Deeply buried primeval urges surface that glory in the lust for the hunt. Time comes to a standstill. The fisher inhabits a liminal space between the moments before the fish takes the hook until after its successful capture...

He goes on to say that the passionate involvement in game-angling, in particular fly-fishing, stems from

interweaving the sense of abandonment to an external force at the moment the fish strikes and during the fight for its life, with the delight and satisfaction afforded by casting virtuosity, hunting skills, and local environmental fish lore (Preston-Whyte, 2008, p. 53).

The moment of the catch is, therefore, both one of self abandonment and universal connectedness in which the surfaced 'primeval urges' of the angler are electrified and unified with the natural world, but that unification has to be prepared for and anticipated in the social world from which the angler comes.

Talk of a passion for angling is also writ large in coarse angling even though its literature, by and large, tends to be much more pragmatic and much less lyrical than so much writing on game-angling. One noteworthy attempt to relay this universal passion, and thus worth discussing here, is the BBC's seminal TV series entitled 'A Passion for Angling' (1993). The series crosses all freshwater angling divides, from coarse to game, and engages in certain evocative as well as provocative discourses on each. A book was also published from the series, and below is a review of the book written for Amazon.com that attempts to articulate the popular appeal - and given that the review is authored by a member of the public, it does so with an authority that only an 'ordinary' voice can command:

The book, and the film series, sets out to capture the very essence of fishing. That almost intangible thing that draws grown men [sic] to the river bank, in the manner and wonder of a small boy, every weekend. That undefineable, certain something that we as anglers all know, but can never put our fingers on. The book does not elucidate what this something is, to do so would be to destroy the magic, but it does show the beauty and wonder remains for years and years. Ephemeral, and elusive like many of the quarry species, but real and vibrant nonetheless.

If you are an angler, or you require to develop an understanding of a husband, boyfriend, or brother that fishes you could do worse than read this book. The answer is not there, but it will give you a measure of understanding as to what drives them. Maybe, the only way to really understand is to grip the rod yourself and follow the dream. To adopt and embrace the Passion for Angling. (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/> 2011)

This quotation proclaims that anglers are driven by something beyond explanation, and exclaims that while the book can give ‘a measure of understanding’, true understanding comes only from doing. By doing, we engage our bodies, minds and spirits in an act of angling becoming that is both real and magic. This sits well with an embodied perspective, as it does with the writings of Walton and others who emphasise the combined spiritual and physical union with nature that angling affords. Furthermore, the necessity of doing indicates how each angling trip is a necessary upward step in angling mobility. With every expedition a small ‘rite of passage’ is performed where immersion in nature coupled to real angling experience and learning come together to advance individual practice, and with that comes greater capacity to influence other anglers (cf. Stebbins, 2007; Hannam and Knox, 2010). Indeed, as already alluded to, through embodied practice and the telling of its codes the natural and social laws of angling are enmeshed in ways that may seem inseparable and are with the angler every time he or she is lost to their own passionate, elemental and natural encounter as their angling body stands on the cusp of society and nature in its attempt to catch a fish.

The rurality of game-angling

As this article demonstrates, the performance of rurality in game-angling is at once social and natural. It has a particular history, and a particular geographical disposition that favours the ruralities of the chalkstreams of southern England and the wild salmon rivers of Scotland. Furthermore, while not all of game-angling’s practitioners will be middle and upper class, especially now that market forces have expanded the accessibility of game-angling, its mores and codes are those of its upper class pioneers and current day practitioners who dominate the sport and who play leading roles in visioning and constructing what the rurality of game-angling is all about. There is, therefore, no singular angling community or rurality but varying angling interests and groupings that have divided over time and space, and which have come to differ in the way they cooperate internally and exercise power, cooperatively or otherwise, to protect and promote varied angling interests.

Nonetheless, regardless of these historical, geographical and social factors, game-angling, as with all other angling, touches the humanness of the individual angler in deeply fundamental ways that are neither edited nor altered by social factors. In this way, all anglers are connected. Elemental forces are hard wired into the way anglers pursue

their sport with passion and gusto and are surfaced at their most intense when a fish is caught and is fighting for its life. Therefore, the rurality of game-angling is both socially constructed and deeply embodied. It is highly choreographed and organised on the one hand but on the other it is instinctively felt in ways which are beyond description and representation here other than to say it is about connecting and relating with nature through physically entering the idealised rural worlds of the game-angler and the watery worlds of game-fish. Moreover, it is about hunting down, capturing and sometimes killing the wild quarry that resides therein, but, and most importantly, doing so within the sporting codes set down since Victorian times. Therefore, what Edensor (2006: 491) says on rural performances more generally holds true for the rurality of game-angling:

In the countryside, as elsewhere, distinct structures of feeling are wrought through a feel for the tasks at hand and for the environment in which they are performed, as repetitive interaction with tools, space, humans and other animals is carried out.

To fully know the rurality of game-angling, then, is to learn its lore, repeatedly take up the fly rod and line and cast to the rivers and streams that sustain wild stocks of game-fish, and, in bringing a game-fish from the watery world of the river to the airy world of the angler, let oneself be caught.

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