

Bloodrush

On Unmodern Happiness

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An extract

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Introduction

I was a philosophy student, not quite twenty and still living at home, when I descended the cellar stairs in my parents' house.

I've forgotten exactly what I was looking for. But what I experienced, I never forgot. It would change my life and my attitudes. One day I would start a book with it.

There, down in the basement, hung a dead animal. Upside down. Its head facing down and its back legs pointed up. Without fur or innards, both back paws pierced by a meat hook attached to a water pipe. A strapping hare. That dead animal had been hanging there for a few days, ageing, as they say, in preparation for the family's Christmas dinner. I wasn't acquainted with this fellow. I'd seen my share of skinned hares. In this very basement. I knew the sour scent and almost purple color of the marinade—a mixture of wine, vinegar, onion and clove—in which the cuts of meat lay for several days to steep. I recalled the smell of the hare's firm legs as they were sautéed in butter before being placed in the strained marinade to simmer, as well as the ritual of passing the pressed liver through a sieve, to thicken the simmering juices into gravy. The curious addition of fondant chocolate, too, was familiar, to sweeten and darken the sauce. A naked hare—this I knew. But what blindsided me was not the hare itself, but the blood that dripped ever so slowly out of its mouth into a white dish. A newspaper had been placed under the dish to keep the blood spatters to a respectable minimum.

How did this blood affect me? The most surprising part was that I felt absolutely no fear, revulsion or disgust. On the contrary. I had the urge to touch the blood. To swirl my finger in the dish. Bring the blood to my face or mouth, and to taste it. I wanted to smell, feel and savor the blood. Like a prehistoric cave painter, I wanted to draw with my bloodied fingers on the whitewashed cellar walls. I was aroused, and I experienced a rush. But above all I felt a profound fascination for this bodily fluid that dribbled out of the hare's throat and formed a red puddle in the dish. Suddenly I understood blood's enormous appeal throughout history. Blood is the focal point of countless rituals, from heathen sacrifices to the Christian mass, in which the priest drinks Jesus' blood—even though it's just wine, of course. Blood is essential to the hunt of wild animals and the slaughter of tame ones. Take away the bloodletting, and you put paid to the hunting and raising of animals and the consumption of meat. Blood is spilled in war and other acts of violence. Blood calls for vengeance, and vengeance calls for blood. All of a sudden I realized that these things were meaningless without blood. Blood gave them their emotional charge and deeper significance. The bloodrush I myself felt on the cellar stairs explained at once why people get caught up in religion, hunting, violence, sports or gastronomy. Blood gives us a rush, intoxicates us, so we seek it out and we crave more. It pleases us. The deeper meaning of blood was revealed to me. This was, to borrow from the eponymous cellar story by the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, my *Aleph*, my mystical cellar experience—where profound insight came not from a crystal ball that offered a window onto the entire universe, but from a skinned hare whose blood trickled out of its mouth as if from a leaky faucet.

Blood had a remarkable effect on me, both emotionally and intellectually. It bemused me, and at the same time granted me insight into matters I did not previously grasp. It shed light on the darker side of human nature. On our more irrational temperament. But I was by no means the one to experience a bloodrush: blood also had an effect on others. Later I learned that the number of artists fascinated by blood and who work with blood is beyond calculation. Most akin to my cellar experience was perhaps the German artist Joseph Beuys, who drew with dried hare's blood, used dead hares in his performances and always carried a plastic vial of hare's blood in his pocket. If I were to consider myself more artist than philosopher, I would have undoubtedly done the same. Scientists too attest to this blood effect. More than fifteen years after my own bloodrush, I read a report by the Swiss criminologist Rodolphe Archibald Reiss, one of the founders of forensic science, about atrocities committed by Austro-Hungarian soldiers in a Serbian village at the outbreak of World War I. In that report I read the following excerpt:

... at the sight of blood, a phenomenon occurred which I have been able to observe on countless occasions: man is transformed into a bloodthirsty beast. These troops were seized by a veritable burst of collective sadism.

As for this phenomenon called *bloodlust*—a bloodrush that spills over into aggression, cruelty and destruction—I have by now read many accounts, but Reiss's was the first. It then became clear to me that a bloodrush is not something specific to a certain period or place, let alone a basement in Belgium. Those accounts span millennia, from the ancients to modern times, from southernmost Greece to northern Germany, if we limit ourselves to Europe. Anecdotes about the power of blood-contact surface everywhere and in every era. It likewise became clear to me that bloodlust is not a phenomenon specific to wartime. I have heard stories of the exhilarating effect of blood during hunting parties, in abattoirs, during participation in—and even while simply watching—sports such as boxing and martial arts, and during mass demonstrations gone awry. In conflicts, bloodrush turns into bloodlust, causing those who come in contact with it to lose their senses. Blood arouses them so acutely that they become savage animals who revel in excessive violence and bloodletting, and crave yet more. The literal parallel with animals, by the way, is intentional. Bloodlust is by no means a human privilege. There are anecdotes aplenty of bloodlust among horses, cattle, dogs, leopards, chimpanzees, sharks, wolves, bears, elephants and even iguanas. Once the animal has tasted the blood of a human or another beast, they ache for more and will attack to get it. Animals, like us, are not indifferent to blood. It excites them and makes them aggressive.

(...)

This book aims to explain the source of bloodrush and bloodlust. Are they genuine phenomena or are they fantasy? If they are real, how does one explain them? If, on the other hand, they're imaginary, where do they come from? Natural scientists are primarily interested in whether or not bloodlust genuinely exists and has a physical basis, e.g. chemical substances in blood. A fascinating question, but too limited to fathom the phenomenon fully. For all we know, our imagination is sufficient to become aroused by blood, with or without those chemical substances. The explanations I offer in this book are broader than a purely scientific one (although I do discuss the scientific aspect). They still hold water even if we determine that there's nothing in blood capable of bringing on a rush (and I don't say this is so). Even if bloodrush turns out to be a figment of the imagination, then it's still interesting to ask why we so gladly subscribe to it.

(...)

This book offers three explanations, divided into three sections and ten chapters. Working chronologically, I begin with the most ancient one: the *supernatural* explanation ('blood magic'). Here, blood is a fluid with magical properties, and serves as the bridge to the supernatural world. This is a world awash with gods, spirits, demons and the deceased. It is a cosmos of superpowers with an inexplicable yet direct and tangible influence on human actions. Blood rituals allow one to indulge this potent upper world; they are a means of warding off calamity to oneself, or bringing it upon another. Blood magic also has its hazards. The dialogue between the earthly world and the supernatural world is unpredictable: instead of protection, healing,

prophecy or anything else one tries to procure via blood magic, these rituals can result in madness. Blood-loving spirits, once called upon, can cause the petitioner to lose his mind. Blood becomes an obsession. Your demons demand more and more of it, for ever-shrinking returns. In the supernatural explanation, a bloodrush has nothing animalistic or bestial about it, nor is it spiritual or uplifting. Blood does not connect one to his lower animal instincts, but with the powerful realm of immortal spirits and occult life forces.

This supernatural explanation offers insight into origins of bloodlust. It explains blood's special significance, and why contact with blood can be so exciting, even to the point of driving one insane. I do not ask the modern reader himself to believe in magic. I don't, nor do I think it is necessary to do so. This explanation is still credible even if, for most of us, it is implausible. The point is that *once*, enough people did believe it. For them, magic was the rationale behind bloodlust. And yet the belief in blood magic is tenacious, even in modern times. Not only in the waning cult of the superstitious, but even in medical science. The fundamental belief that blood is an extraordinary fluid whose secrets will never be fully unraveled, remained long in vogue. Even now, blood has by no means been completely undone of its mystique, all the more so with those who do not altogether embrace modernity. But this moment is approaching. As soon as the first droplets of laboratory-engineered blood flow through our veins, it will be clear that blood contains no more mysteries than, say, urine. But we're not there yet.

The second explanation is the *animalistic* or *natural* explanation, 'bloodlust', which perhaps most appeals to scientists. Bloodlust is a remnant of, or a regression to, a primitive and animalistic state where man the predator possessed an aggressive instinct—a hunting or killing instinct—which enabled him to either capture prey or quash enemies within his own species. Bloodlust is a prehistoric vestige of violent times and untamed terrain. The pleasure associated with blood contact causes one to experience gratification from that aggression. Sadism abets survival. Just as sexual pleasure spurs us to procreate, bloodlust encourages us to attack obstinate animals and fellow humans. Actions we would not undertake voluntarily, out of an aversion to blood or fear of injury or death, is facilitated by the flush of bloodlust, the pleasure in violence. This, in a nutshell, is the crux of the animalist explanation. This account draws on factual observations which can be tested empirically. There are no magical elements involved. Should the scientific approach provide insufficient support for this explanation, it can still offer a suitable clarification for the *belief* in bloodlust. An erroneous explanation can still be a useful one, provided it was once common belief. In Part 2 of this book I will discuss that which scientific research has revealed about bloodlust. Can we smell blood? Do we become aroused and aggressive by contact with blood? What is the effect of the color red on our behavior? How does this apply to animals?

The final explanation for bloodlust is the *horror aesthetic* ('cinematic blood'). This explanation has no need for, and therefore does not go into, whether bloodlust is brought about by natural or supernatural causes (although neither would surprise it). Mental grounds are sufficient. A certain outlook or psychological mechanism brings one into this state. The horror aesthetic offers insight into the details of this mechanism. Here, bloodrush draws on the dynamic of revulsion and attraction—in aesthetics called 'the sublime' and historically linked to Romanticism. Blood, being a fluid that evokes fear and disgust, produces revulsion. In this last section of this book I discuss people who faint at the sight of blood, who suffer from a hemophobia and cannot identify with the pleasure of blood contact. But all that is dirty and frightening, can also—for those who can stomach it, and maintain a suitable distance—have a certain appeal. Think of the delight of a horror film. Trembling with fear can also do you good. Blood and bloodlust—take vampires, for example—can be satisfyingly terrified. It is not clear what is behind this paradoxical attraction. Disparate theories abound. One such theory, which I personally find appealing (without necessarily adhering to it as a general tenet), is that the excitement comes from a deeper insight: as disgusting and terrifying blood is, contact with it strikes a deep-seated chord. Blood contact confirms a belief that gives intense pleasure. What philosophical belief that is, is no longer all that surprising. As a student I already suspected that my misgivings about modernity had something to do with that rush. Apparently I was open for the aesthetic of the sublime and the sensibilities of Romanticism. The dread and disgust that un-modern blood evoked called the modernist ideal of control and makeability into question. In those days I happily doubted the strength of the Enlightenment and the power of modernity. The contrast between the tidy basement and blood dripping out of a wild animal sparked that dynamic of the sublime. The horror aesthetic explanation ties all these elements together.

The core of this explanation is that it is not blood itself that gives us a rush, but rather our notions about blood. Believing that blood possesses something that eludes modernity can arouse us into a state of ecstasy.

In search of the significance of bloodlust

My primary aim is to explain the source of bloodlust, based on the three explanations and all manner of anecdotes which serve to illustrate them. This is my first task. But the theme is too personal to limit myself to just that. I am not only curious as to where this blood experience comes from, I also want to know what that experience signified or implied. Did that pleasure have any basis? Did anything in fact justified that arousal? This is my philosophical task. This book returns at regular intervals to that experience, in order to address the question of significance.

I would rather not answer this in the introduction. Nor will the reader will find it in a separate chapter. It does, however, closely parallel the explanations. For although significance and explanation do not necessarily correspond, they are related in two ways. Firstly, each explanation elucidates that significance or implication. The three explanations outline three forms of philosophical pleasure. The *supernatural* explanation regards contact with the immaterial world as the ultimate happiness. Blood is the point of contact with the spiritual cosmos, and communication with that higher world brings on a bloodrush. The *natural* explanation finds bliss in leaving our civilized world behind and entering a primitive past. While it doesn't deny that there is only a material reality, it holds that blood forms a bond between the present and the distant past, providing a trans-historical experience. Bloodlust is a wild vestige that no civilization, no matter how sophisticated, can tame. In the *horror aesthetic* explanation, lastly, one experiences pleasure in the terrifying. This paradoxical satisfaction stems from the philosophical belief that makeability and control—the banderoles of the Enlightenment—are exaggerated illusions. Dark forces are always more potent than enlightened ideals. From the right distance, blood can produce a sublime experience. Bloodrush pleases us in giving the lie to the Enlightenment.

Secondly, those three implications share the strengths and weaknesses of the three explanations. While the explanations might explain bloodlust, their argument rests on premises which are either strong and weak. Criticism or acceptance of those arguments means criticism or acceptance of the significance as well. If it turns out that blood still confounds us, then this can justify the magical implications of blood. Or if blood indeed contains chemical substances which arouse us, then this differs from bloodlust as an Romantic illusion. But we can also accept a Romantic fantasy, as long as it does not lead to unacceptable moral consequences. In short: each explanation contains arguments that are crucial for the philosophical justification of my experience. I will put those arguments to the test. If they fail, then the conclusions will be obvious. This pleasure is unfounded, and one cannot defend the notion of a deeper significance. My ambivalence in regard to modernity also plays a fundamental role. What sort of pleasure does modernity allow? Which pleasures must we let go? Isn't bloodrush a sensation from a hopelessly obsolete world? Is there a future for this un-modern pleasure in our day and age? This is in fact the essential question this book poses.

I have put certain constraints on my study of the material. Bloodlust, not blood itself, was my point of departure. I do not claim to offer a history of the philosophy of blood: the enormous body of literature on this topic made such a discussion impossible. One can only write histories of specific blood themes, many of which do not touch on superstition. I do not comment on the role of blood in virginity and circumcision, nor on blood defilement (incest) or familial blood lines, flagellation or doping. But I do address many other themes—vampires, blood transfusion, sacrifices, leeching and blood medicines—and I also give an overview of the philosophy of blood throughout history. This makes this book a kind of history of blood after all, although I encounter those themes via my own focus on bloodrush and bloodlust. These themes link all the others together.

Additionally, I have limited myself to the European continent and European cultural history, with the exception of brief forays into the Jews and Christians in the Levant, to Japan and the ancient Egyptians. But the reader will not find New World, African or Islamic references here. No Aztec human sacrifices, nothing about the Islamic *hijama* ritual—a religious variant of leeching—and no mention of the animal sacrifices still practiced today in Cuba, Nepal and India. As fascinating as these are, they fall outside the realm of my study. My approach is inevitably Western and European, but that was always my intention. This book is a reflection on the role of blood in our culture. Where does the fascination come from, and what remains of it in our rapidly changing world?

Contents

Introduction

Part 1—Blood Magic

- 1 Blood mist
- 2 Sacrificial blood
- 3 Bad blood
- 4 Red urine

Part 2—Bloodlust

- 5 Hemothymia
- 6 Wild origins
- 7 Signal substances

Part 3—Cinematic blood

- 8 Horror blood
- 9 Sublime blood
- 10 Bloodless

Conclusion

Notes

Bibliography

Index