

Steven J. Meyers
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March 11, 1987

Thomas R. Pero, Editor
Trout Magazine
Post Office Box 6225
Bend, Oregon 97708

Dear Mr. Pero,

A preamble much like the one I am about to write must accompany the vast majority of letters you receive, but I feel compelled to write it anyway; more than acting simply as a justification for this letter, it serves also as a confession of sadness and regret. The sadness and regret are appropriate, I think, in the preamble to a letter which comes following my reading of the touchingly understated tribute to Vincent Marinaro which was written by Datus Proper for your last issue.

I have never written a letter to the editor.

Many times I have been moved to anger, or sympathy by something I have read, and subsequently composed such letters in my head, but they have never found their way onto paper or into print. My restraint was appropriate. There has never been anything which needed to be said which has not, subsequently, been said better by others. I've never regretted a decision not to write to an editor. Rather than appear to myself and others like the foolish old retired major in a British farce I once saw--a man who dashed off a letter to "The Times" every time he had a thought--I left the letters and the responses to others, and was glad to simply read what the others had written.

Mr. Proper's piece touches me more deeply than many others I have read, and this would seem odd because it appears to try very hard not to be an obituary, or a eulogizing of one of the great American contributors to the literature and lore of trouting. What moves me are currents which flow through the piece with a complexity as difficult to see as any the Letort might possess, and, I fear, they are much harder to deal with. Even Vincent Marinaro would find them difficult to resolve. No puddle cast will suffice here.

Part of my sadness and regret comes from never having told Mr. Marinaro how much his work has meant to me. I live and fish most of the time in a very remote area of Colorado. My trout are not the educated Brown trout of the Letort, neither are they often very hard to catch. There is an element in Marinaro's work, however, which transcends his very profound technical explorations, and to which I can easily

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 relate. His awareness and love of the unique elements of place fill his work with a wisdom and depth which is lacking in the vast majority of technical treatises with which we are now bombarded. He wrote of the appropriateness of the limestone stream, within the limestone country, bordered by limestone barns, and fished by limestone fisherman who posses limestone ethics. The same respect for the uniqueness of specific trout streams, and regions characterizes most of the truly great literature of the angling tradition. It lurks behind every word in the writings of the great British technicians (Halford, Skues, Sawyer) and the great North Americans as well. Who could imagine Hewitt without the Catskills? Charles Brooks without the Yellowstone country? Sid Gordon without Wisconsin? The same applies to the non-technicians. Robert Traver embodies the Upper Peninsula, Roderick Haig-Brown British Columbia and Vancouver Island.

There are exceptions. No one can doubt the greatness or significant technical contributions of a man like Ernest Schwiebert, for example, whose geographic range has been extraordinary. It seems to me, however, that his true greatness as a writer, and as a man, lies in his ability to perceive and then communicate the essential qualities of a place before he goes on to write about the technique of fishing. Indeed, his best work, as far as I'm concerned, has nothing to do with technique, it has to do with life and death, the cries of birds, and of man. So it was, for me at least, in the undercurrents of Marinaro's writing. What kind of love places a man at streamside, on the same stream, for so many years? What knowledge comes to a man who manifests this affection for place, and has the intelligence to look carefully? How can we measure the value of the gift he has left us by sharing these insights with us?

Like most fisherman, although I have home streams which I fish often and know, the desire to travel to other streams exists as well. I have made several trips to Central Pennsylvania, and I have fished the limestoners. Always, I felt as if Vincent Marinaro were looking over my shoulder. One day, after fishing, on my way back to Harrisburg where I was staying with my brother and his family, I stopped in Mechanicsburg because I knew it to be the home of Mr. Marinaro. I found his name in the phone book, and just stared at it. I wanted to visit him; to tell him how deeply moved I had been by his work. Fearful that I would violate his privacy, I chose not to visit. I chose not to call for the same reason. Finally, I failed to even write him a letter.

I have often wondered how many fisherman have gone to the Letort, the Yellow Breeches, fished, and at the end of the day passed through Mechanicsburg thinking they might visit Mr. Marinaro to tell him how large his influence on their lives had been, and, just as I, fearing that they would disturb his day, passed through without visiting, without calling. Is it possible that the extent of the gratitude and respect which he generated was never known to

him? When, later, I heard that he had died, I wished that I had at least written a letter.

I wish he had!
right

The fact that Datus Proper wrote the piece on Vincent Marinaro hit me particularly hard, and this, I fear must involve some personal idiosyncrasy. The one letter I came most close to writing to a fishing magazine came after a review of his book, What The Trout Said, appeared in one of the major fishing magazines. The reviewer said a great deal about the technical aspects of the book, chiding Mr. Proper for his lack of attention to the fishing of flies beneath the surface, and for perpetuating what he believed to be a terrible fallacy: that trout are not as selective in underwater feed as they are in surface fare. The technical critique was lengthy, but the real crux of the reviewer's dissatisfaction was expressed in his observation that Datus Proper had given too much credit and print to the British innovators, and not enough to the many, many great American angling authors. The fact that the reviewer himself was a well known American angling writer may, very well, have had something to do with his point of view.

I said earlier that my response to this article involved currents as complex as any on the Letort. That is true, and my long time feelings about Mr. Proper and the response he appears to have generated with his book is one of those currents. Yes, there are a few things I disagreed with when I read the book. I think that he does give the sunk fly short shrift (so have a lot of others--no one has given the Leisenring/Hidy tradition grief for neglecting the dry fly, we recognize their preferences and go from there). I think his desire to bring back the traditional Redditch hook sizing system is totally unnecessary. The same information, and a lot more, is available in the current rational, if unwieldy, system of gape sizes and Xtra long, Xtra short, Xtra fine, Xtra stout suffixes. This, however is a nitpicking which, if applied to any existing technical work, would obliterate the value of book. As I see it, the value of Mr. Proper's book is immeasurable, the writing entertaining as well as informative, and I wondered, until Trout began to carry his work, why the hell I hadn't seen more by him.

When the review appeared, my gut response was, "This reviewer is offended by Mr. Proper's love of fine wine, the world beyond the United States (even though he wrote lovingly about American waters as well) and his failure to rank the current slew of angling innovators with the British authorities who have been around for a while." My response stands.

The fear, among trout fisherman, and flyfisherman in particular, that their activity will lead to charges of snobbery and elitism is, sadly, persistent. Any writer who raises the possibility of lending credence to the charges with discussions of fine wine and exotic places becomes

something of a threat to our carefully cultivated, "just one of the guys" image. Now that Yuppies have been invented, the fear takes on new meaning. It is unfortunate that we seem to be always looking over our shoulders.

I believe my non-elitist credentials are valid. My father, who taught me to fish, who loved both the fly rod and the trout, had no more than a sixth grade education (he had to go to work driving a delivery wagon behind a team of horses to help support his family), and while he was the most intelligent and one of the most well read men I have ever known, he certainly was no snob. I am not a stock-broker, and I do not live in a mansion. I work for a living, I live in a small town, and I sometimes have trouble paying my bills. Should I apologize for loving the literature of angling, specifically that of fly fishing for salmon and trout? Should I feel funny, or embarrassed at finding, after many, many days on the stream that I get more pleasure from casting a fly than from casting a lure? Should I leap in horror from a magnificent book about designing trout flies because it also talks about exotic places and fine wine with freshly killed and cooked trout? Should I fear Datus Proper for writing about the British influence on fly design because it might make someone think that flyfisherman are a bunch of snobs (isn't it possible that it may take a few years to sort out just who, among the current crop of Americans, has really made a lasting contribution)? The fact of the matter is that most of us are just normal folks who love to fish, and people like Datus Proper help us fish better. They also help us live better. Like all of the really good angling authors, there is more to Mr. Proper's work than catching fish. His article about Vincent Marinaro reminded me of that. It also made me realize that some letters, left unwritten, leave unsaid some things that ought never be left that way. One of those things is gratitude.

I never will get to thank Vincent Marinaro. I fear he did not know that his work mattered a great deal to a great many people who live far away, and in isolated places. I don't intend to let that happen regarding my feelings about Datus Proper. Thank you Mr. Proper. I believe you write well, and knowledgeably. Your work is informed by a full life and a breadth of experience which is able to leave as much unsaid as said. It is my hope that you will be published widely in the future, and I commend Trout for carrying your work.

Steve Moyers
Silverton, Colorado

Datus C. Proper
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Mr. Steven J. Meyers
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Dear Steve,

Tom Pero passed your letter on to me and I'm just getting around to replying.

I gather that you haven't written a book yet, but you sure as hell read them carefully. I was impressed by your ability to untangle the currents. If you'd written more letters to the editors, I'd have welcomed them. Don't think we differ on anything except hook sizes, and no two people in the USA agree on those.

For all his shy ways, Vince was very accessible and would have been glad to meet you on the streams. In his last years -- after his wife died -- he even seemed a bit lonely. A number of us stopped in on him, though.

You make an excellent point about the importance of the sense of place. Tom obviously understands this, but some editors don't, and I find that I often have to be less specific than I like. Writing that is not about a place gets squishy.

You were right on when you noticed that at least one reviewer (and one editor) didn't like my use of all those moldy old British sources. I couldn't have done much else, of course, once I made it a point of crediting sources at all. The British did get to most of the mileposts before we were in the race.

Maybe we can go fishing one of these days. I'd enjoy it.

Yours,

Steven J. Meyers
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March 24, 1988

Dear Datus,

I'm not certain that you will remember me--it is my hope that letters of praise for your pieces in TROUT, and for WHAT THE TROUT SAID, have so flooded your desk that my name has slipped into oblivion. A very long time ago, I sent a letter to Tom Pero about your story on Vincent Marinaro. He was kind enough to send a copy to you, and you were kind enough to acknowledge it.

In your letter to me you said, "I gather that you haven't written a book yet..." Fact is, I had, but I'm not a fishing writer, and apparently you hadn't seen my first book, ON SEEING NATURE. At this point in time my publisher is sitting on my second book, LIME CREEK ODYSSEY; AN ODE TO PLACE (which does have a bit of fishing in it)--it is due out in the fall.

I have written to you because I have been asked to write a fishing book and I need some help.

The book is being produced by McQuiston and Daughter of Del Mar, California (you may have seen the series they did on the National Parks, or Tully Stroud's TROUT CHASER'S JOURNAL which was done by McQuiston for Chronicle Books). On the basis of initial conversations with Don McQuiston, I have thus far written about 17,000 words, mostly in the form of anecdotal recollections, largely humorous, but with an undercurrent indicating that there is something more serious going on here than simple recreation. Negotiations about the production of the book have been taking place between Don McQuiston, the packager, and a backer for several months (during that time I had been preparing a studiously non-instructional manuscript). The concept of the book has been altered somewhat in the course of those negotiations. At the present time there is a desire for me to caption a section of illustrations of regional flies. Although I am in possession of a decent basic library which will provide a good deal of information on the subject, I feel that I am in need of some quality information and advice if I am to do justice to the topic.

Regions, in this particular instance, are limited to the United States and Canada for trout--I don't think there is an intention to cover Britain, Europe, South America, New Zealand, or any of the other places where trout now live. I imagine there is an intention to limit the salmon regions

and flies to North America as well. Grayling flies may be included as well. It is my understanding that the publishers intend specific, well-known, American trout and salmon fishing regions to be covered. They are considering places like the Henry's Fork, Yellowstone, Steelhead country in B.C., etc. I would think that the selection of important regions, as well as the selection of significant regional flies is highly variable and quite subjective. At this time it appears to me that those with a voice regarding the selection of regions and flies will be Don McQuiston (the designer, co-publisher and book packager), the backer/co-publisher (as yet unknown to me), the illustrator (John Dawson of Haley Idaho), and myself (as author). I would like to bring as much information as possible to the selection process.

I have enormous respect for your opinion, having found much in your writing which has gone beyond your wonderful ability to entertain. Much of what you write moves me deeply. In addition, I have found a very sincere and informed respect for history. Finally, I sense a breadth of experience and knowledge which lies beneath everything you write. It is my hope that I might write, if not with your knowledge of trouting, than with the same degree of integrity; clearly, I cannot bring the requisite knowledge to the subject of regional flies. I would be very grateful for any advice you would have the time to give.

I would very much appreciate it if you would express your opinion regarding appropriate regions to include, and flies for those regions about which you have knowledge. Further, if you have suggestions about whom I might write to in specific regions, I would be very grateful if you would give me their names. Finally, knowing what you do about the book as I have described it (I hope it does not continue to change!), I would gladly receive any suggestions you might have. Frankly, I wonder about a possible difficulty in including such a section at all in a book which is primarily anecdotal, and I wonder how the hell you can write at all about salmon flies, for example, without writing about Scotland, Norway and Iceland. I'd appreciate your thoughts.

Previously I have written with great fondness and affection about the notions of place, respect for and wonder at nature. Trout fishing and angling with the artificial fly have figured prominently in some of that writing. Apparently something I had previously written suggested to Don McQuiston that I was the right person to do a book on Trout and Salmon. I would hate like hell to add one more worthless, rootless, fad-driven, uninformed book to the already swollen list of recent trout books. I know Don feels the same way. If you have the time, I would be very thankful for your advice and whatever information you are able to send.

You will notice that I have moved from Silverton to Durango. Your words about Vince's loneliness when his wife died hit home. We moved here about a year ago when my wife became ill with leukemia. There were no medical facilities in Silverton, and our physician thought it too dangerous for us to stay in the mountains. Karen died last fall, and I am lonely. But Durango has its consolations. The Animas River, which holds trout, flows a few hundred yards from my front door; the Dolores and San Juan Rivers are closer than they were before, and I am only a bit farther away from my beloved Lime Creek. The Black Canyon, and the wonderful Gunnison River, is an extra hour away, but well worth the trip. My canoes are paddled more than ever since I can carry them to the Animas. The tandem, however, seems a bit empty.

Someday, I hope we will fish together. If ever you plan a trip west, please come stay awhile. You will always have a room and my lousy coffee in Durango! The trouting is superb, and I would love an opportunity to speak with you.

Sincerely and gratefully,

Steve Meyer

April 9, 1988

Mr. Steven J. Meyers
3056 East Fourth Ave.
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Dear Steve,

Good to hear from you. Note that I've moved to where all the good little writers go when they die. It's a homecoming for me. Both my wife (thank goodness) and I are loving it, but I suppose editors wince when they see another Montana return address.

Now that I know you're writing too I'll try to get your book, which has a great title. I'm enjoying reading about nature more than most fishing these days.

I'd be glad to give you what suggestions I can but don't know enough about the book to suggest how the flies should be handled. They should, of course, be part of the whole rather than an add-on. My book started out with a "unity problem" and I had to throw out half of it. My concern at this point is that the focus of yours sounds broad. I would be attracted to a book on fishing in Lime Creek (though you wouldn't want to attract crowds); sounds a bit like Annie Dillard, who is a hero. Fishing in America has been done.

You'd want to consider whether to handle flies as human/artistic or natural/scientific. Seems silly but it was a blinding insight when I realized that people talking about "patterns" are talking about color -- if not always, so often that the exception proves the rule. Trout rarely care about color. Ergo, patterns are human/art. This is so obvious as to be invisible and so ingrained that readers often can't grasp my point.

A natural (and I hope honest) approach was the one I used in my article in the latest Trout about Shenandoah Park. You can read about hatches there, but the trout rarely notice. You can get by all season with one fly. I'm developing this in an article Field & Stream has just taken on flies for dark water. Am citing myself because, of course, I know my own stuff best.

The design approach helps me, at least, to bypass conventions and stay fairly simple. You need one kind of fly for float-fishing, another for little freestone streams, and another (or many) for matching hatches. I'm using the same designs in Montana as in Penna, so the regional angle doesn't help much.

This is probably not responsive to your concerns but I hope it helps a little. Come fishing up here some time.

Steven J. Meyers
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May 2, 1988

Dear Datus,

Thank you for answering my letter and my questions so quickly. Yesterday I returned after two weeks in Denver (it was a hard time to leave, the Dolores River was beginning to fish quite well when I left) and found your letter waiting when I got home.

I have been told that one of life's more subtle but nonetheless real rudenesses, is to write too often and too soon. The recipient of the too soon letter is obligated either to write again, or to wait and bear the burden of guilt. I am writing to you so quickly not to generate a response (although I greatly enjoy and appreciate your letters), but to send you a copy of my first book so that you won't have to buy one. I figure I owe you!

While I've got you on the line...a few comments:

I am firmly in your camp about the distinction between design and pattern; further, my experience corroborates yours that pattern most often means color, and that color doesn't matter very much, very often.

Perhaps that is why my publisher's request to do a section on regional patterns threw me for such a loop. There are other issues I would prefer to tackle. Your letter has encouraged me to address these issues in my preface to the section. Unfortunately, it will be an add on unless I am able to convince them otherwise (which is doubtful).

Your suggestion that I consider examining flies in terms of their human/artistic component (and in this way get a handle on the subject of pattern) is a wonderful one. Quite frankly, I feel more qualified when writing about this component than with the other major component--the family of natural/scientific elements. Imitation, behavior of the fly on the water, durability, fishability, etc., are issues of design, all of which you have already addressed (to my mind at least) thoroughly, and well. My background and my temperamental attractions are in the fine arts and aesthetics, and perhaps this is where I should place my emphasis.

The fact that one can do well most places with very few flies, that true selectivity is rare, that even in the midst of a hatch of massive proportions fish will readily take a well presented fly of another sort (I am always reminded of Ken Miyata's piece on "Anting the Hatch", which appeared a number of years ago in Flyfisherman--I'm sorry he's gone;

his was a wonderfully honest and sincere voice), are truths that all fisherman must affirm. It is also true that major changes in flies (and in the success of flies) have historically involved major changes in fly design, and not minor changes in pattern. A Catskill dry is a luminous fly that rides high (until it gets wet!), no matter the colors. A deer hair beetle is an opaque, low riding bobber and its color is totally immaterial. A San Juan Worm, a roe fly, are fished like bait (and are about as much fun). These flies are all quite different. There's really not much to choose between a Cahill and a Hendrickson.

I think that for most of us semantics are a bore. This is unfortunate, because words are often an important indication of what we really know (and don't know). Until the difference between design and pattern is widely recognized and truly understood, you will continue to be something of a voice crying in the wilderness. Don't despair--the wilderness is a pretty nice place to be. You've got some damn good company there. Skues was drummed out of the Corps! You've got all that wonderful water in Montana, I know you fish it well, and they can't revoke your membership!

Thanks again for your help.

Steve