

The Nature of Fencing

by John M. Watanabe

Romantic intellectualism--what else can fencing be called? The intense concentration, the precise control, the flash of inspired creativity--fencing demands all these acts of intellection, intellection in the true sense of the word: the exercise of the power of knowing. Fencing has its background in the Old World aristocratic tradition: the white uniform, the sword, the duel of honor. But the overly romantic dreams of an aspiring D'Artagnon or Cyrano de Bergerac have no place in modern fencing, and indeed, few serious fencers entertain such fantasies.

You stand in the center of a strip six feet wide and some fifty feet long, dressed from head to foot in a white uniform. Your gloved hand holds the foil lightly between the fingertips and the heel of the palm, and under your other arm you hold a steel mesh mask--your protection from an ill-aimed thrust to the face or eyes. Your adversary stands across from you, similarly attired. You salute each other, a simple raising of the foil vertically in front of the face which concludes with a swift downsweep of the blade to the right. You then put on your mask and step into the guard position, knees flexed, body upright, the unarmed hand raised above the shoulder.

You move with the two-tempo beat of the advance and the retreat, engaging your opponent's blade, beating lightly on it, testing his or her defenses, and waiting. An opening presents itself and you react instinctively--there is no time for thought or plan, you know what to do and you do it instantaneously. If the attack is properly timed and executed, your blade bends on your opponent's chest while his or her own blade is flailing in ineffectual attempts to stem your irresistible attack. But your slightest hesitation or misjudgment seals your own doom in the class of a parried attack which is followed by your opponent's immediate and equally unstoppable counterattack.

Such is fencing at its best.

Fencing is a vastly simplified reflection of the larger world, and through this simplification your sense of perception and knowledge and the way you interact with other human beings can be clarified. Fencing is a world of actions uncluttered by spoken words; communication is through action, and action is knowledge. Words can be used to express "knowing what" fencing is, but they are utterly useless in "knowing how" to go about fencing. Fencing knowledge, like all knowledge, is active creativity--a creativity which can only be experienced, not taught.

While fencing is in one sense a physical skill with mechanical aspects which must be learned, it is basically a creative process. The mastery of fencing's mechanical techniques, such as how to move, how to parry, how to attack, results by no means in the mastery of the sport itself. A technically perfect fencer with no imagination or creativity in his or her game is a fencer without soul. The knowledge of this fencer is the knowledge of the taker--the calculating perfectionism of a low-risk opportunist.

Conversely, the insensitive fencer who disregards all technique--who is all creativity--is another kind of taker, enclosed in a private ego-centered world of self-assertive independence. He or she needs nothing but the freedom to satisfy his or her own wants and desires. Both of these fencers--the technical perfectionist and the assertive individualist--are unwilling to change or give up and old part of themselves in order to gain something new. Neither can understand that the acquisition of knowledge is a risk of one's own self-esteem.

True fencers recognize this element of risk and accept the fact that they can never excel in fencing until they gain control of their desire to possess every bit of fencing knowledge. Fencing at its best is a state of mind based on--but not limited by--certain fundamental techniques. There is no room for desire or possessiveness. Indeed, true fencers realize that one can never know a parry or an attack in or by itself. Knowledge comes only at the instant of execution--with the feeling of discovery that comes with the conviction of instantaneous comprehension through experience. Knowledge as action is creative, not mechanical; it is adaptive, not specific.

A large part of fencing skill involves perception--perception of not only one's own actions and reactions, but of these same processes in the opponent. True fencing can take place only when a fencer acts with, rather than reacts to, the adversary. Thus, fencing demands an empathy with one's opponent--not so much the entering into the other's experience as the realization that the other

experience exists.

There is no judgment involved in a fencing bout. The creativity, the pouring out of a fencer's skill does not demand--indeed, it is destroyed by--critical judgment. You cannot judge an opponent and fence him or her at the same time. There can only be an attitude of acritical perception or empathy in the true fencer. This empathy cannot be asserted, it can only be experienced. The moment you try to perceive your opponent's next action, you become a reactor--or at best a calculating planner. Then creativity disappears, and your own preconceptions effectively block out any true awareness of your opponent. Fencing becomes a mechanical guessing game, a critical judgment of everyone's ability but your own.

Stereotype, preconception, and desire have no place in the truly skillful fencer. Fencing skill is the epitome of willing without being willful, of experiencing knowledge without asserting it. It is only when you can perceive acritically--listening and seeing without that inner dialogue and judgment which has become such an integral part of our interaction with other people--that fencing truly becomes knowledge as action. Only then can you make the total commitment which real learning demands. There is no concern for perfectionism or evaluation, only the appreciation of experience--the split-second elation of "yes, that's it!" which comes with the right action.

The fencing master can lead you, the student, only so far. Once the master has demonstrated the basic techniques, it is up to you to give these techniques the life and creativity necessary for skillful fencing. The master serves as your example of a higher level of knowledge--of an awareness beyond your own experience. Only through the perception and attempted understanding of this higher awareness do you gradually learn and grow. The master cannot eliminate the risk, the discouragement, or the frustration of the change which new knowledge come. His is the authoritative voice of balanced praise and criticism which you cannot supply from within yourself.

You must possess confidence in your own ability, tempered with the realization that knowledge does not fall magically from the hand of your teacher. True learning is a difficult process, a total commitment to the discovery of new and unexpected insights and experiences. It is an acritical look deep into the self--the revelation of something so right it seems you knew it all along. Only the combination of this commitment on the part of the student and the authoritative--yet not authoritarian--voice of the master can create the knowledgeable, skillful fencer.

Sensitivity and balance must always be maintained. To strive toward anything else is to learn nothing at all. Self-confidence must be balanced with humility, for only with humility may one still the inner dialogue--the constant desire of self-assertion--and open the way for true learning.

Fencing is the epitome of serious playfulness. When you don your fencing mask, you enter a realm entirely separate from the larger world. The intensity of concentration, the creativity, the pouring out of yourself experienced in a fencing bout resembles the seriousness of a child at play. Playing is an attitude, not an activity; it is a freedom and creativity that comes from the courage of complete commitment. There is no calculation in play, only a richness of experience.

One needs no justification for a love of fencing; one does it because it is enjoyable. This is not to say that it is always pleasant. It is not. Often it is discouraging, frustrating, or just plain exhausting. But there are also moments of total commitment, vivid perception, and very rarely, the exhilaration of true knowledge in the proper execution of an attack or a parry. The real joy of fencing is not mastery--master of a skill, a mastery of an opponent, or even mastery of oneself--but it is of the elation of knowledge as action, of a skill which has only a transient reality in the moment, speed, timing, and accuracy of an extremely simple--but infinitely difficult--action.