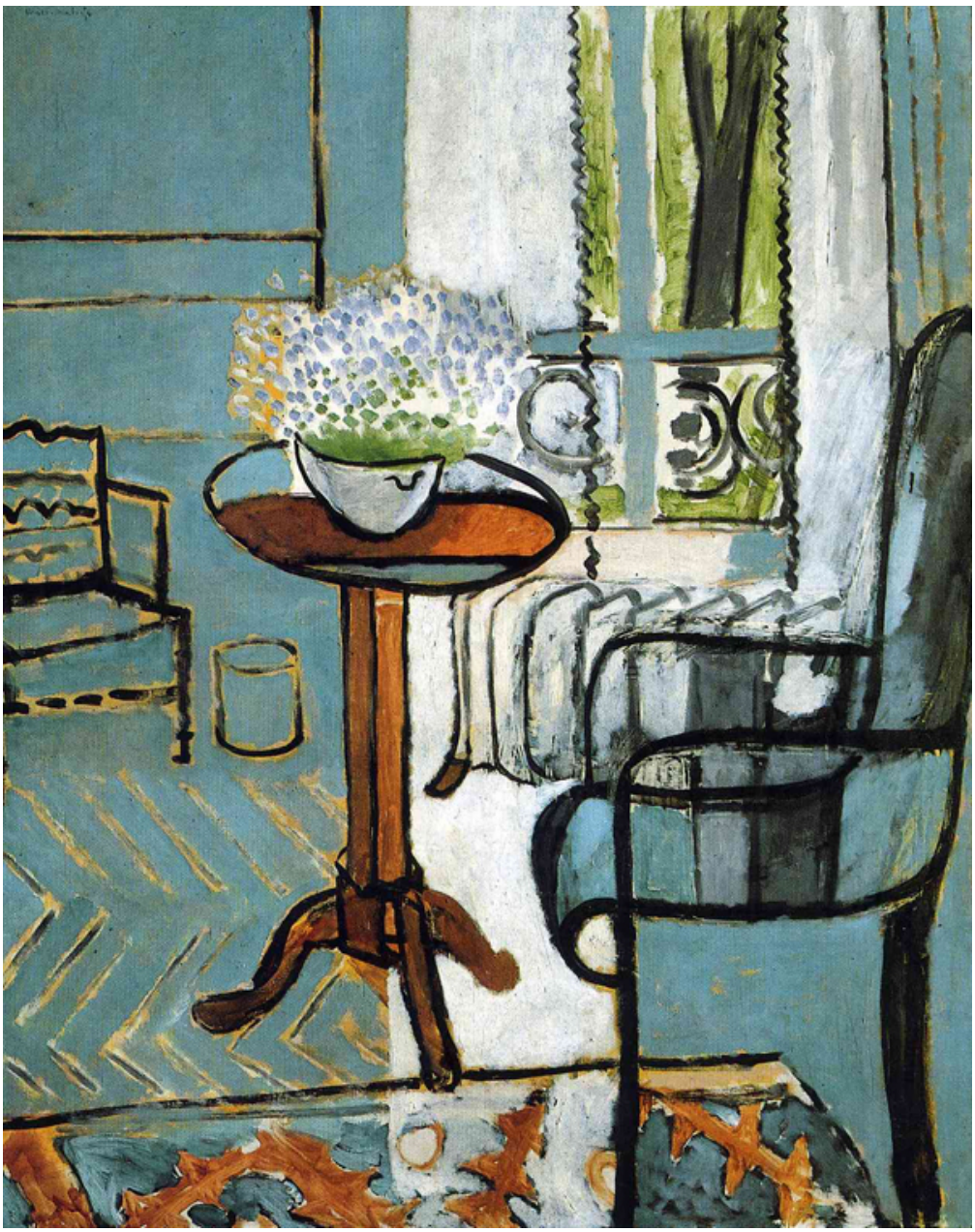
# Bats on Strings

**by** [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (December 2018)



*The Window*, Henri Matisse, 1916

**Nature is red in tooth** and claw, but there is still quite a lot to be said for her nonetheless. I am inclined to my present dithyramb in her praise by the sound of the cuckoo that is coming in at my window as I write this.

I find it difficult to explain quite why the sound should be so profoundly reassuring to me, acting as a kind of balm; one could hardly describe the call of the cuckoo as beautiful in itself, and I suppose a harsh critic might even call it monotonous. Perhaps it is its cultural and other associations that makes the cuckoo's call so pleasing, rather than the sound in itself. After all, the cuckoo is the subject of the first poem in every historical anthology of English poetry, going back to the fourteenth century. In this poem the cuckoo, the harbinger of summer, is said to sing loudly, though the word song does not aptly describe the sound, any more than it would aptly describe the sound, or noise, that the crow makes.

It is odd that the cuckoo's sound should soothe me so, for it is a sly, wicked, parasitic, ruthless, exploitative bird, in its small way the very acme of Nature's redness in tooth and claw. Knowing that it is the subject of a poem seven centuries old, it perhaps represents for me continuity and permanence, qualities that one appreciates more and more as one grows older. Permanence is a relative matter, of course, seven hundred years being not even in the blink of an eye in the universe's history; but compared with the life of a man, it is a veritable eternity. The knowledge that the cuckoo will return next spring, and will sound exactly the same as it does today, is profoundly reassuring.

The cuckoo's habitat, alas, is declining in Europe and there may come a time when the cuckoo is heard no more in much of the continent. As the aphorism painted on the sides of some buses in Nigeria has it, *No condition is permanent* (another such aphorism, a favourite of mine, is *Let them say*). But I am fortunate enough to live some of my time in an isolated part

of France, where there is as yet no threat to the habitat. Indeed, such is the depopulation of the French countryside that the wolves are returning. The ecologists are delighted, the sheep-famers furious. The return of the wolf is at first sight surprising, because the population of France, and therefore its density, is increasing: but it is becoming more concentrated in the big cities at the same time. Agriculture has become industrialised, the peasant is no more; the small towns that once served the local farmers have lost their *raison d'être*. No one ekes out a living any more from land that is only marginally productive and unsusceptible to mechanise agriculture. The deer and the boar multiply in the increasing areas of wasteland that are now returning to Nature; the wolves return to prey upon them.

**Read More in New English Review:**
**Driven to Despair: The Return of American Socialism**
**The Divine Maria Callas**
**Be Very Afraid, Or Not (Book Review, Terror of Existence)**

I haven't seen a wolf as yet, but they are not far away. Perhaps they are closing in: certainly there are enough wild boar locally to sustain them, that turn gardening into a Sisyphean task by churning up everything with their very powerful snouts as soon as we plant anything.

But it is the smaller manifestions of nature that delight me. The dry stone wall near my study has been used for nesting by some small birds—flycatchers, I suspect—and when I approach it, the chirping of nestlings, mistaking me for the parental bearers of their next meal, begins. Again this soothes me, though I cannot tell exactly why. I feel affection for the little birds that I cannot see; I wish them well.

I watch the lizards on the stone terrace, scurrying hither and thither, with no purpose that I can detect, but very busy in their own way. What is going on in their minds? Do they have minds? At this time of year they chase one another, I presume for sexual purposes or in defence of their territory. They can be quite aggressive: one, whom I thought of as a big bully, caught a smaller one in his mouth (I assume such aggression to have been male) and would not let it go. Was he trying to kill it, and if so why? They were locked, intertwined, in a struggle so serious, and which so preoccupied them, that they did not notice my presence, which normally (even the mere shadow of my presence) makes lizards on the terrace flee in all directions.

I could not help but invest the struggle with meaning, not only for me but for the participants themselves. The smaller lizard made intermittent but frantic and unavailing attempts to escape: it was suffering. Because I invested its struggle not only with meaning, but with moral meaning, according to which it was being picked on and bullied by the larger, I decided to intervene. I touched the now thoroughly interlaced lizards with the edge of the cover of the book I had with me, but still they took no notice of me: their tiny titanic struggle absorbed their attention completely.

Was this a lesson in perspective or not? As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, said Shakespeare: or rather, said Gloucester in *King Lear*. This may be true; but however looming a large danger may be, however imminent our extinction, we obsessively pursue our tiny affairs as if the future of the universe depended on their outcome. We are all Lilliputians, with a fate as large as Gulliver in the vicinity. No sense of proportion has ever prevented my irritation as some very small setback: a late train, a bad connection on my phone, a tomato

without taste obviously raised in artificial conditions.

Eventually I flicked the two lizards a little harder with my book, hard enough to part them. The smaller of them, now liberated from the jaws of the larger, shot off with the larger in hot pursuit. They took no interest whatever in what giant force had separated them: they were still utterly wrapped up mentally (if lizards can be said to have mentation) in their dispute, whatever it was. They disappeared over the side of a wall and I lost sight of them. I have no idea of the denouement of their set-to.

I moved on to the large *Pyracantha rogersiana* shrub nearby. At this time of the year (May) it attracts a huge number of beetles, some of them handsome, if you like beetles. I took out my local insect book, *Insectes de Méiterranée, Arachnides et Myriapodes*, by Gwenole Le Guellec, in order to identify them. By far the most numerous were *Cryptocephalus globicollis,* a substantial, fattish beetle of a dark green metallic hue that changes constantly with the angle of the light, becoming brown or golden. Even though it moves slowly, at least as it crawls over the flowers of the pyracantha, its sheen changes constantly: it is at its most beautiful when it is emerald green, but it is never that for long.

Is there not here a coleopteran metaphor for life, whose most beautiful moments are evanescent and instinct with regret (for the person who experiences them) that they cannot last? I think I would have liked the *Cryptocephalus globicollis* to shine at its most brilliant green all the time, from whichever angle one looked at it, but this is impossible, and on reflection—if I may be allowed an unintended pun—perhaps it is as well that it is so. Bliss cannot be other than short-lived.

To reach bliss you must know, if not misery, at least less ecstatic states of mind.

My desire to identify the beetles on the pyracanthus struck me as rather odd. Why should its name have mattered to me? The *Cryptocephalus globicollis* would have been as beautiful by any other name; and the ability to name it hardly constitutes an important accession to real knowledge. Yet we all know that when a doctor puts a name to a symptom or a disease, even if he cannot ameliorate or cure it, a relief of suffering usually ensues. Naming something give the illusion of knowledge, and perhaps is the precondition of knowledge. My real knowledge of *Cryptocephalus globicollis*, however, is that it inhabits the Mediterranean area and its hinterland, that it is to be seen particularly in May and June, and also that its larvae live in the ground having constructed a kind of shell for themselves. But even the latter information is not real knowledge, since I wouldn't recognise such a larva or its shell if I saw one (in this, my knowledge of the beetle resembles much of our knowledge, so-called). And when I think of the effort, care and time spent in close observation to discover these facts about the beetle, I marvel at my own species.

The short text of my little book on the insects of the Mediterranean begins, 'Insects and spiders generally seem to man a source of nuisance and disgust.' The same thought appears in Gilbert Waldbauer's lovely book, *What Good Are Bugs?* He says, '… many people are suspicious of almost all insects and, to the great detriment of our ecological conscience, look upon them, with only a few exception, as our natural enemies.' But our frequent disgust notwithstanding, 'their role is ecosystems is primordial' (Gwendle Le Guellac), and 'there is no doubt that without insects the world would be radically different and far less friendly to us humans,

assuming that we could survive at all’ (Gilbert Waldbauer). George Orwell once said that our civilisation was founded on coal, that is to say on the ugly reality of coal-mining; it would have been more true to say that it is founded upon the activity of insects.

For myself, I can only say that I find insects beautiful, even cockroaches if viewed in the right way, that is to say as individuals rather than as a kind of plague in the kitchen or elsewhere. They—insects—are exquisite in the perfection of their anatomy and the beauty of their physiology, and who can be left unmoved by the fact that nine hundred thousand species have been described, but that it is estimated that another nine million remain to be discovered? The intellectual task of discovering a new species must be considerable despite their number, for to recognise a species as new implies a knowledge of closely-related and closely-resembling species which must run into hundreds or thousands. It is rarely, I should imagine, that a new species of startling aspect, completely different from any other species, is discovered; again, I am forced to admire the diligence of my own species.

While on the subject of creatures that fly, I have to report than a bat has recently taken to trying to enter our bedroom after dark. It flies repeatedly into the window pane as if knocking on it to be allowed in. I don’t know whether it is the same bat every night, or what attracts it; but absurd though it might seem, I experience a slight frisson of fear when it does this.

My fear is a legacy of having watched too many Dracula films when I was young, when vampires, in the form of bats, tried to enter the bedrooms of maidens who were destined to become

victims and then vampires themselves. The maidens felt sorry for the bats that wanted so insistently to enter and opened the windows to them. Fatal mistake, proving the dangers of sentimental anthropomorphism!

The films were nonsense, of course, made on the cheap, and sometimes one could even catch a glimpse of the fine threads by which the model bats were made to flap their wings in the studio set. (The films were mainly made on a tight budget.) But for all that, they frightened me, though I laughed them off to my friends who accompanied me to them. Is it not a strange testimony to the power of the irrational that, fifty years later, a bat at a window should cause me a tremor of fear still.

---

**Theodore Dalrymple's** latest books are *The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd* (with Kenneth Francis) and @NERIconoclast

**Back to Home Page**