

The Nature Mystic

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (May 2023)



The Kingfisher, Vincent van Gogh, 1886

I don't know why, but there have been more birds than usual round out house in France this year. The hills around are not very hospitable to birds, much of the original forest having been replaced by pine. The owners of the coalmines about ten miles away planted pines in the 1920s to provide pit-props and, like many an introduced species, they spread far wider and more vigorously than intended. The mines closed a long time ago, of course, but the pines remained. Deciduous forest is slowly regaining its birth-right, but surely not quickly enough to explain the sudden increase in the number of birds.

This increase may account for the paucity of cicadas this year, however. The cicadas are very few and almost retiring in the sound they make by comparison with their usual continual racket. Perhaps they have been decimated by avian predation. We used to sit on our terrace and wait for the cicadas to stop, which they did at almost the same hour, usually about half-past nine at night. The decline in the noise they made was more rapid than the setting of a tropical sun. We speculated idly over a drink as to how the cicadas knew exactly when to stop, and how they co-ordinated their decision. Did they have a system of communication between themselves? Cicadas, one assumes, are not very intelligent. Then someone gave us the explanation, and we felt as foolish as Dr Watson for not having thought of it ourselves. It is the temperature that determines their silence, a factor which we never even considered though it is obvious once pointed out. When the temperature drops below a certain point—round our house we measured it, and it seems to be about 26 degrees centigrade, or 79 degrees Fahrenheit—the apparatus that the insect uses to produce the sound loses its contractility.

Although we are normally surrounded by cicadas, we rarely see them. They are formidably good as camouflage on tree-trunks. They are the loudest insects known and it has been postulated that the noise they (the males) make not only attracts females but puts off would-be predators. These kinds of explanation always seem somewhat facile to me: if noise puts predators off, why have ants not evolved to make a similar noise? I suppose the answer would be that, if all insects made the same noise, in a sense none would make any, at least not to distinguish one type from another. In the same way, if all of us are guilty of something, none of us is.

I had never heard a cicada when I first heard *of* them. It was in a poem by La Fontaine, one of his fables, *La cigale et la fourmi*, the Cicada and the Ant, that I had to read in French at school. It was usually translated as the *Grasshopper and*

the Ant because there is only one species of cicada in Britain, it is confined to a very small area and the pitch of the sound it makes is so high that many people cannot hear it. But grasshoppers are common enough, and the moral of the story would apply to them just as well as to the cicada.

I must have been about thirteen or fourteen at the time and decided to translate the poem into English verse. Being given to pedantry, I insisted on using the word *cicada* in my translation, though I wouldn't have recognised one if there had been a plague of them. The first and last lines of my translation are inscribed indelibly on my mind:

*The cicada having sung
During the long summer's length,
When the North wind stung
Found herself bereft of strength.
She had not a worm,
And food was very scant,
'Famine!' so she cried
To her neighbour the ant.*

The concluding lines were even more maladroit. I made the ant say:

*'You sang? That did me advance.
Very well! Now you can dance!'*

This attempt at a translation helped me to the early realisation that I had no poetic talent whatever. I read somewhere that seventy per cent of children—at least in my time—had tried at some time to write poetry, and the only

other of my efforts in the direction of poetry, a few of whose lines I still remember, is *An Ode to a Dead Duck*, the unfortunate bird in question being one that I had seen in the local park and which seemed to me full of pathos (as well as maggots).

*Poor dead duck, you are forgotten.
Nay, and more, you are rotten.*

There may be worse lines somewhere in English poetry, but I rather doubt it.

Actually, when you come to think of it, one very rarely sees dead birds in the wild, considering how many of them there must be. What is the explanation? That most of them do not die a natural death but are caught and eaten (it is estimated that in Britain alone, 55 million birds are killed by cats)? Still, many others must die of disease or starvation, and a very few even of old age. Is it that the removal of carrion is so swift and efficient in nature that no sooner does a sparrow fall than its carcass is removed? The little bird that is twittering in one of the trees not far from where I write, where will it go when it dies?

The same, of course, goes for animals. It is said that in a city you are never further than a couple of yards, a few at most, from a rat, someone having calculated that in Paris there are four rats per person—the literal kind, I mean, not the metaphorical. Probably in New York it is even more. Moreover, rats live only one or two years. Yet when one considers what a smell a single dead rat makes, everywhere should surely smell of dead rats—but it doesn't, thank goodness. Or perhaps it does, and we just don't realise it. When I consider how sensitive I have become to the presence even of a single lighted cigarette in my vicinity, up to

several yards away, and when I consider also that when I was growing up more than half the population smoked, I am inclined to suppose that I must have spent my youth coughing and complaining of the awful smell that impregnated everything. But I have no such recollection; on the contrary, I noticed nothing.

But to return to the birds, which some say are but feathered dinosaurs. When this year I have sat reading under the beautiful lime tree, a thrush has always hopped on the grass nearby as if seeking my companionship, as if not at all shy or fearful. No doubt a hard-headed naturalist would say that a thrush is just a mechanism for turning worms into birdsong, but I cannot help investing this thrush with a desire to be friendly. It is curious also how the mere presence of the bird delights me: I can almost feel my blood pressure going down.

All day and night, the frogs in the nearby rivulet sing their love song, monotonous no doubt but still reassuring to the ear. When I approach the bank, the frogs jump from the bank into the water, with an unmistakable plopping sound: I know no plopping like it. The frogs are able entirely to evade my sight, except for a fraction of a second. They do not know that I love frogs—I find them beautiful—and would do nothing to harm them. They probably think I am a heron. (The call sound of my mobile telephone, incidentally, is a sound in imitation of the croaking of a frog. It tends to alarm people who find frogs disgusting.)

I think I could easily become a nature mystic. The sound of owls at night—the call and its answer—soothes me, not being a mouse or a small mammal. When I hear the cuckoo I experience a sense of joy, though I know it is a bad bird and its vocal repertoire is less even than that of a rap singer.

But of course there are aspects of nature that are less pleasing, for example the tiny ants that get everywhere and seem to have been waiting precisely for my arrival to appear.

Then there are tiny little flies at night, the pain of whose bite is completely disproportionate to their diminutive size. And as I write this on my terrace, I look down on the ground and see a terrible drama. A small reddish beetle is in the process of being eaten alive by red ants: I know it is alive because its antennae are still waving, and it is being consumed abdomen first.

In the helpless waving of its antennae, I cannot but see distress, as if the insect were a conscious being capable of experiencing pain more or less as I experience it. I feel almost anger at the ants, who seem cowardly to attack in such numbers. If they had any sense of chivalry, they would fight insect to insect, not as a mob. They reminded me of a gang of adolescents beating up the isolated member of a rival gang whom they had come across in the street.

Should I rescue the suffering beetle from its calvary? Should I put it out of its misery by killing it myself? A third of it already having been eaten, it was clearly beyond rehabilitation once rescued. It could not have resumed life as before, it would have been a severely handicapped beetle. I could also punish cruel and the heartless ants by simply treading on them. That would teach them a lesson that they would not easily forget, and if the news of their death got back to their nest, it might deter their fellows from doing the same. Such would be my justification for the death penalty applied to ants.

Of course, I let nature take its course. Ants can't help being ants: as a character says somewhere in Chekhov, 'A pig's a pig, you know. It's not called a pig for nothing.' And while I cannot prove it, it seems to be unlikely that a beetle suffers in the same way as a human being. Unless you believe in panpsychism, in which case it might be wrong to sit on a rock for fear of causing it to suffer from the pressure, a beetle cannot suffer the way that we suffer.

Why, then, are we disturbed or even appalled at a child's cruelty to insects, and seek to teach them better? That children have long enjoyed such cruelty is suggested by Gloucester's lines in *King Lear*:

*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods.
They kill us for their sport.*

If insects cannot suffer, and children enjoy their sport, then the sum total of pleasure in the world is reduced by preventing children from behaving thus. A utilitarian would have to argue, then, that it was wrong to stop children picking the legs and wings off flies unless he could show the long-term ill consequences of not stopping them. This could be done easily enough, at least theoretically. The argument would be that if you allowed children their cruelty, it would become a habit, a lasting disposition. As far as I know, however, there is no strictly empirical evidence comparing a *laissez-faire* approach to the question with an interventionist one, and it would be both a strange, lengthy and complicated experiment to perform. There are no *a priori* grounds for deciding one way or the other: it may be that the cruel phase in a child's development disappears spontaneously, or it might grow if left unchecked. Moreover, the effect might not be uniform in all children, indeed in all probability it would not be.

The fact is we have often to act as if there were a deontological prohibition of something even in the absence of empirical knowledge of practical effect of that prohibition. Surely we would find it odd if a parent did not try to prevent its child from torturing insects (as the child would suppose itself to be doing) on the grounds that insects do not suffer and it was impossible to know what the effect of not doing so

would be.

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