

Amateur Attractions: Insects, Instinct, Descriptive Love



The genus name given to processionary caterpillars, *Thaumetopoea*, is derived from the Greek *thaumatōeis*—meaning wonderful, marvelous, strange—and *poiōō*—meaning to make, to produce, to write poetry, to write as a poet. And so the processionary caterpillar, as the author of her own lines, might be considered a poet: the line of caterpillars as a line of verse, wriggling toward some pine needles. Of course, the caterpillar is not a medium-bound creature. She'll soon change into a butterfly—in other words, into a painter.

Appropriate that the caterpillar's literary offerings are minimal and concrete, insofar as insects are imagined as beings in a kind of extreme proximity to their material environments—which is to say they are forms of life that edge against the inanimate. And edging does seem to be having a moment, doesn't it? The term Anthropocene was popularized in the year 2000, the same year as the publication of *Extended Massive Orgasm*, the first book wholly devoted to that practice.

But if the caterpillar is a poet, where does that leave the entomologist? She looks now a bit less of a scientist than a literary critic. Unfortunately, comparative literature rarely includes nonhuman literature, but this departmental ungroundedness is felicitous for Jean-Henri Fabre, the great 19th-century observer of insects and champion of instinct. Fabre's biography is often cast in a mythic light: born to peasants in southern France, he rises on the hot air of autodidacticism to a schoolteacher position from which, after several decades, he is fired for admitting women to his plant physiology classes. Bailed out of ruin by his friend John Stuart Mill, at age 50 he manages to purchase an unfarmable plot of land on which he writes the ten-volume set of insect observations for which he is known today. In his final years, he is lionized: his books begin to sell, a statue is erected in the town square, he is visited by the president of France and is nominated for a Nobel Prize. Victor Hugo describes Fabre as "the insects' Homer," an epithet that neatly sums up this mythologization.

But to be the insects' Homer is to write not just *of* but also *to* and *for* the insects. And indeed, it is to these first readers that Fabre appeals when he justifies his style: "Come here, one and all of you—you, the sting-bearers, and you, the wing-cased armor-clads—take up my defense and bear witness in my favour. Tell of the intimate terms on which I live with you, of the patience with which I observe you, of the care with which I record your actions. [...] And then, my dear insects, if you cannot convince those good people, because you do not carry the weight of tedium, I, in my turn, will say to them: 'You rip up the animal and I study it alive; you turn it into an object of horror and pity, whereas I cause it to be

loved; you labour in a torture-chamber and dissecting-room, I make my observations under the blue sky to the song of the Cicadas.'"¹

To write in order *to cause one's objects to be loved*. Not to be better understood or better represented, but to be loved. While Fabre's tone is generally more tender than lurid, his extended musings on silken caterpillar nests, wasp larvae, and dung beetles share a descriptive excess with erotic fiction, that other form of literature that instructs its readers in the ways of love. So Fabre is celebrated as a literary hero rather than a scientific one—safer to read this incitation to love as a stylistic extravagance than a real call for arthropodean love. I am not trying to suggest that scientists are not in love; of course they are. But Fabre is so upfront about his sensual orientation to his studies that I feel more permitted to push into this love, to read him for his erotics as well as his poetics. And I guess I have already done that in a way, having read him almost exclusively in the bedroom. Maybe the larger point is that something is erotic not for its content but for where it is seen. What else is the incognito window for than to render whatever follows erotic? Though we never really get to clear the cache of our psychic history, do we. Love always involves an over-estimation of its object, Freud reminds us—which doesn't have to be heard cynically: how nice to be generous in our estimations! And with this overestimation, "the loved object enjoys a certain amount of freedom from criticism."² So it is that writing like Fabre's, motivated by love, cannot be taken seriously: it lacks criticality. In its stead, purely or merely descriptive writing.

Description is often contrasted with narrative, most famously perhaps in Georg Lukács's 1936 essay in which he derides description as bourgeois superficiality.³ Even in more generous critical evaluations, description is understood as merely functional—a needed smoke break outside the buzz of narrative action. But is it possible that this dynamic is backwards? Though I might like to stay on the edge for a while, eventually I do want to come down. In other words, I lie in the hammock not so I can work harder afterward but because I like to be lulled.

Nothing happens in a description, which means that, in describing, I come closer to being nothing, or to seeming like nothing. Writing on Caravaggio, the seventeenth century art critic Giovanni Pietro Bellori acknowledged the painter's descriptive powers—but that's not praise: this descriptiveness produces a work that is "truly without action."⁴ Brrr. "The mind is refrigerated by interruption," writes Samuel Johnson, reflecting on descriptive pauses in narrative.⁵ As children, a friend and I froze grasshoppers and then revived them. Around the same time, I caught

grasshoppers to feed to a pet lizard. As I ferried the insects across the field, the grasshoppers shit into their palmed enclosure. I have a strong aversion to all of this now—and did then, too—which I think is not based on a sense of tenderness for the life of the insects, though I definitely get no pleasure from their death, as I think my friend might have gotten, but is instead colored by a feeling of shame. Do I identify with the grasshoppers? Maybe. Would I like to refrigerate my mind? Definitely. But in any case, there's some sexual shade to the whole dynamic that I still find uncomfortable. In other words, exciting.

The American psychoanalyst Harold Searles relates a story about one of his patients: "Oftentimes she plucked at her scalp, and in so doing spoke, on one occasion, about bugs; this, together with her speaking of herself on another occasion as being "bugs," suggested that she experienced her psychosis as a matter of, quite literally, having bugs in her head, and her scalp plucking seemed an effort to, as it were, get the crazy ideas out."⁶ The bug here sounds like the surveillant kind—the bug involved in the bugging of a room—but also the wriggling kind: the bug as a particularly incessant form of thought, the ear worm. The bug that besets us is at once too still and too motile. According to the US Department of Commerce, "A bug is a device placed in an office, home, hotel room, or other area to monitor conversations (or other communications) and transmit them out of that area [...]."⁷ The hotel bug is unmoving and so it is descriptive: it is imitative of its surroundings. And while the Department of Commerce doesn't provide species or genus level identification for these dangerous bugs, this is a recognizable enough function in other species: the perceived predominance of mimicry in insects indeed seems to be one of the basic touchstones of human fascination with insects.

But on the other hand, the bug is exactly that which is *not* unmoving: the burrowing and incessant ear worm. "The poetry of earth is ceasing never," writes Keats about the song of grasshoppers. Outside the city, under a blue sky, I weed around a row of pea shoots and along the way disturb hundreds of centipedes that clutch and curl out of the pockets my fingers press into the soil. "They are almost gross," I say. My co-weeder agrees. "Or they would be if they were inside," she offers. Inside a house I think she means, but also inside a head; yes, gross there, too. I transport insects I find in my home to the outside. I don't want to kill them; I just want to get them out, like Searles's patient scratching her head.

In all this, the fantasy of bugs pulls both ways: on one side, the bug as an imitative, descriptive, and hence frozen creature; on the other, the bug as an emblem of ceaseless motion and energy.

Of course, to slow down, to become refrigerated, does not mean to become passive. Description is slow, or else it is slowing, maybe; but not inert. "Description should not be confused with definition," writes the poet Lyn Hejinian, "it is not definitive but transformative."⁸ Fabre writes, he says, in order to cause his insects to be loved—which is certainly not a passive program! Two decades after Fabre's death, the eclectic theorist Roger Caillois argued in a short essay that insect mimicry should be seen not as a defensive strategy but as a "dangerous luxury," not a withdrawal from the world but, on the contrary, an extension into it.⁹ Caillois laid out a spread of empirical evidence for his claim—for instance, the regular presence of mimicking species in the digestive tracts of predators (who, after all, hunt by scent as much as sight), the occurrence of poisonous species mimicking non-poisonous species and of caterpillars who look so much like leaves that they regularly bite into each other—but the overall sense of Caillois's argument rides more on a psychic than a biological current: in Caillois's eyes, mimicry is evidence of a basic drive to return to an inanimate state, an "instinct of letting go." This line of thought is a little deathly, though, so I'll pull back to description, which now looks less passive—description, like mimicry, not as an idle recording of the world but an extension into it. Or, framed more subtly, taking something in always also entails a transformation of that thing. Or, in other words, by describing the thing we might cause it to be loved.

What is the nature of descriptive love? For Fabre, it is a bit hard to make out. Despite his tenderness and patience, he assumes a position of mastery in regard to insects. He is all too familiar, he writes, "with the abysmal stupidity of insects," with "the lack of any gleam of intelligence in their benighted minds." As a whole, his experiments are designed to test, and then confirm, his faith in the fixity of instinct. So this love is not a post-human variety that sweats for undermined boundaries. But neither is its pleasure based in the mastery itself. That insects might suffer by Fabre's designs is not a thinkable thought in his strong theory of instinct. He does love his insects, but it is their instinct he loves them for.

I am wanting to write about the appeal of instinct, about its affordances in fantasy, but the wording is a bit tricky—I can't say what the idea of instinct *represents* because its appeal is partly in its being non-representational. Instinct offers a way of being in the world that is not about thinking. Fabre writes of the *glimmer* of reason and the *abyss* of stupidity—instinct, then, is dark, but it isn't clear that this light of intelligence is worth entering. Or, in other words, it's far from clear that insects are any worse off for their instinctual predetermination. The insect's body, it is

imagined, is perfectly adapted to its activity in the world—so perfectly primed that there is little distinction between the insect and its environment. The fantasy is thus in part about proximity, which, taken to its limit, flips into coincidence, into a fantasy of becoming one's environment. Or, more simply, the fantasy of mimicry.¹⁰

Several decades after his first essay on the subject, Caillois circled back to mimicry in a book-length study in which he put a bit more pressure on his claim that mimicry is not defensive but a luxury. If this is so, he argued, we can see in insect mimicry evidence of "an autonomous aesthetic force in the world of biology in general."¹¹ Butterflies are "introverted painters," he wrote.¹² Or, in other words, my description of the caterpillar, if written beautifully, is driven by the same force that organizes the stripes and spots on the caterpillar's back. This sounds a bit romantic, and maybe it is, but this luxury isn't innocent. "Such a pretty caterpillar!" I point out as we weed the rows of carrots. "Yes, but destructive," says my co-weeder. "A tomato horn worm," he explains as he crushes it.

Of course, butterfly painting differs from human painting. Still, there's a seeming dissonance between aesthetics and instinct—if the butterfly is a painter and the caterpillar a poet, doesn't that imply a sort of selectivity that would be proscribed by instinct? Maybe, but not so much if aesthetic activity—painting, describing, playing, wriggling—is imagined as a compulsion or drive rather than an exercise of free choice. Which is not to say it's necessarily functional or adaptive. And neither is it to say that fixity is a trap. Or, if it is a trap, it is one that I'd like to be trapped in. One of those clever and beautiful traps which entomologists so often describe.

I keep turning back to the word *environment*. I want to edge against my environment, too. But what is this environment made up of? Hopefully, it is made up of my friends. I want to be close to my friends. Fragments of a manuscript found in an anthill are recorded in a 1974 story by Ursula Le Guin.¹³ Commenting on the difficulty of translation presented by those texts, which the story frames as messages, their human discoverer notes that "No known dialect of Ant employs any verbal person except the third person singular and plural and the first person plural." Did Jean-Henri Fabre want to become an insect? Perhaps, but only as a means to be with these friends. Of course, friend is not an innocent category, either. After we finish weeding the carrots, the friend who runs the farm informs us that the caterpillar I had found beautiful and that my co-weeder had crushed was, in fact, not a hornworm but a monarch caterpillar, one of those insects marked most unambiguously as a friend.

One of Fabre's most infamous studies is of processional caterpillars. After carefully forming the procession into a loop, he watches for a full week as the caterpillars complete orbit after orbit around the rim of a flowerpot before finally breaking off. He reads and records their repetition, as unable to bring himself out of the loop as they are. It's a good poem, continually returning to its beginning but never quite the same. Security and seduction at once. "The liberating accident," Fabre calls it when the loop finally does break. An accident, or, said differently, that which we wish wouldn't happen. If only we could stay in the beautiful loop forever, free of thought and free of any fantasy but this one of good friends and pleasing form.

Review

By David L. Hays

“Begin by describing,” my undergraduate advisor, Mirka Beneš, counseled when I wondered how to start a research project. “In describing, you discover what you don’t know, and the issues become apparent.” Describing was also a way of getting close to the matter at hand in order to test my interest in it. But finding a topic for the project came about in a very different way. Mirka arrived at our meeting with a huge stack of books, each richly illustrated. As I turned pages one by one, she offered remarks about what we saw. We kept up this rhythm for over an hour. Then, suddenly, lingering curiosity about an unusual image caused me to turn a page back. I had many questions, which I spoke aloud, and Mirka declared, “I think you’ve found it.”

Reading Smart’s essay, “Amateur Attractions,” brings me back to that moment, now several decades ago, when an impulse to go back and consider something more closely led me to work I loved and still love. Perhaps I shouldn’t admit to that sort of attachment. As Smart observes, citing Freud, “Love always involves an over-estimation of its object [...]. And with this overestimation, ‘the loved object enjoys a certain amount of freedom from criticism.’” But didn’t I go about it in the scholarly way, discovering source documents, comparing secondary sources, and footnoting extensively? The methods of modern scholarship are meant to structure “critical” distance between subjects and objects. Yet, in my experience, they seemed to do the opposite, cultivating a sense of closeness to that which they nominally set apart. “It’s as if you were there,” Mirka once remarked, “as if you know it because you lived it.”

In his studies of insects, Jean-Henri Fabre (1823–1915) got close like that. In his best-known experiment, he watched and described a ring of processionary caterpillars seeming to rim each other while circling the rim of a large palm-tree pot.¹⁴ In Fabre’s estimate, the creatures completed 335 rotations over the course of seven full days, covering a distance of 453 meters—without getting anywhere. But their motion was stop-and-go, like sexual edging, and the caterpillars walked only half of the total time, being otherwise too tired or cold to proceed. While they rested at night, Fabre rested, too.

Fabre’s observations confirmed his sense that the intelligence of the processionary caterpillars was very limited. Yet, as Smart notes, he “reads and records their repetition, as unable to bring himself out of the loop as they are. It’s a good poem, continually returning to its beginning but never quite the same. Security and seduction at once.” I think of Dante’s *Inferno*—another good poem—in which lovers are

blown around in circles.¹⁵ Trapped in that literary ring, thinking is remembering is feeling is torment. It's a kind of edging without end: becoming one with environment, perpetual description—the narratives are all in the past—with no hope of a “liberating accident,” a “defaulter,” “some revolutionary,”¹⁶ that is, a redeemer. Or was that Dante's role? A literary savior, causing his objects to be loved? Victor Hugo called Fabre “the insects' Homer,” though neither knew their language. But to me, Fabre was more the insects' Dante. Variousy sympathetic and judgmental, and edging into territory that was “a little deathy,” he found himself lost in a dark forest midway through life, a forced retirement that led him to close study of insects.

I look for images of Fabre. Unsurprisingly, given when he lived and that celebrity came later in his life, the photographs I find show him only as an elderly person. But his appearance seems strange, even unsettling, to me. I assume he is alive, but he looks desiccated and stuffed like a mummy or—how could this be missed?—an insect specimen: an old grasshopper at Deyrolle, wrapped in human clothing and posed as if sitting erect in a chair. “Clothes make the man,” they say. I think of J. J. Grandville's many strange drawings of insects figured as if humans,¹⁷ images Fabre despised, and I remember a childhood book in which insects do human things, including treating other insects “like animals.”

As Smart notes, Fabre's experiments were “designed to test, and then confirm, his faith in the fixity of insects”—meaning, the degree to which their actions were guided by instinct. Yet, Fabre did not think of them as machines.¹⁸ He recognized their sensitivity to circumstances (for example, cold, hunger, and fatigue), and he parsed “insect mentality” into two domains, instinct and discernment, insisting that those not be confused.¹⁹ In Fabre's view, instinct is unchanging (“Time adds nothing to it and takes nothing from it.”²⁰), but it is also “the unconscious impulse that presides over the most wonderful part of what the creature achieves.”²¹ In contrast, discernment is the faculty through which insects assess proximate conditions and navigate contingency, so it is how they know time:

No two moments in time are identical; though the background remain the same, the details change; the unexpected rises on every side. In this bewildering confusion, a guide is needed to seek, accept, refuse and select; to show preference for this and indifference to that; to turn to account, in short, anything useful that occasion may offer. This guide the insect undoubtedly possesses, to a very manifest degree. It is the second province of its mentality. Here it is conscious and capable of improvement by

experience. I dare not speak of this rudimentary faculty as intelligence, which is too exalted a title: I will call it DISCERNMENT. The insect, in exercising its highest gifts, discerns, differentiates between one thing and another, within the sphere of its business, of course; and that is about all.²²

And that is about all. Evidently, the sphere of one insect's business did not seem like much to Fabre, though he understood well, and described thoughtfully, the collective power of social insects.²³ In our own moment, the sphere of *humans'* business has come to coincide with that of the natural world, as a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, acknowledges how social humans have impacted the environment at global scale. But insects have been impactful at that scale for eons.

Looking again at the photos of Fabre, I guess that he was a childless bachelor, loving insects—and causing them to be loved—in place of love that never came his way. But then I read that he married twice and had many children. I also read that he was a great teacher.

Smart imagines edging against environment like a caterpillar in Fabre's circular experiment: "If only we could stay in the beautiful loop forever, free of thought and free of any fantasy but this one of good friends and pleasing form." Instinct and discernment. But I'd like to try it in a different way, by getting thought out of my head and distributing it both throughout and beyond my body. For the modern mind, such a move is literally hard to grasp, as critical distance collapses into closeness and, even more, coincidence or sameness. Into my head comes a phrase, *extended massive organism*. I wonder if I have coined it, but a Google search shows four results, three of which point to a blogger who used it a decade ago to describe wild violets invading their yard.

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- 1 Jean-Henri Fabre, *The Insect World of J. Henri Fabre*, ed. Edwin Way Teale, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991), 3–4.
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- 2 Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1960), 73.
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- 3 Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York, NY: The Merlin Press, 1970).
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- 4 Svetlana Alpers, “Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation,” *New Literary History* 8: 1 (1976): 16.
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- 5 Cynthia Sundberg Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 27.
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- 6 Harold F. Searles, *The Nonhuman Environment in Normal Development and in Schizophrenia* (New York, NY: International Universities Press, 1960), 148–149.
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- 7 U.S. Department of Commerce Office of Security Western Region Security Office, “Bugs and Other Eavesdropping Devices” (November 2011): https://www.wrc.noaa.gov/wrso/security_guide/intro-17.htm
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- 8 Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 138.
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- 9 Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” (1935), in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank, trans. Claudine Frank and Camille Nash (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 97.
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- 10 In “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” Caillois argued that the mimicking insect is trying not to hide from or deceive its predators but instead to become its environment.
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- 11 Roger Caillois, *The Mask of Medusa*, trans. George Ordish (New York, NY: Clarkson N. Potter, 1964), 41.
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- 12 *Ibid.*, 38.
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- 13 Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics*,” in *The Compass Rose: A Collection of Twenty Short Stories* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1982), 3–14.
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- 14 See Jean-Henri Fabre, *The Life of the Caterpillar*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead, And Company, 1916), ch. III: The Pine Processionary: The Procession, 58–89.
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- 15 See Canto V, describing the Second Circle of Hell.
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- 16 These terms are all from Fabre, *The Life of the Caterpillar*, 81–82.
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- 17 See, for example, J. J. Grandville (pseudonym of Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard), *Scènes de la vie privée et publique des animaux* [*Scenes of the Private and Public Life of Animals*], ed., P. J. Stahl (Paris, France: J. Hetzel et Paulin, 1842).
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- 18 See, for example, Jean-Henri Fabre, *Bramble-Bees and Others*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead, And Company, 1915), ch. VI: Instinct and Discernment, 192–193: “Just like mill-stones unable to cease revolving though there be no corn left to grind, let them once be given the compelling power and they will continue to perform their task despite its futility. Are they then machines? Far be it from me to think anything so foolish.”
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- 19 *Ibid.*, 195.
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- 20 *Ibid.*, 194.
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- 21 *Ibid.*, 193.
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- 22 *Ibid.*, 194–195.
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- 23 See, for example, Jean-Henri Fabre, *Social Life in the Insect World*, trans. Bernard Miall (New York, NY: Century, 1912).

Biographies

Willy Smart is an artist and writer whose work proposes expanded modes and objects of reading and recording—stones, insects, ponds, surfaces, hormones, spores, clouds. They have presented visual and performative work at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Bas Fisher Invitational (Miami), the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow, the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in Cambridge, MA, and other prominent venues. Publications include a novel forthcoming from Meekling Press and essays published by MIEL press, *Bad at Sports*, the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, and *Dilettante Journal*, among others. Willy directs the conceptual record label Fake Music (fakemusic.org) as well as a personal website (willysmart.com).
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