

The Capricorn

Some fifteen years ago, I came across a fabulous book "L'Instinct chez les Insectes", written in the late 19th century by Henry Fabre, a famous French entomologist and author, a very curious, inquisitive man and above all, a great philosopher. One particular chapter has fastened in me, the story of the larva of the Capricorn.

Fabre maliciously addresses this story as an answer to Etienne de Condillac, abbé de Mureaux, founder of "absolute sensationalism", who claimed that knowledge is mainly transformed sensation and that man is nothing but what he has acquired through his experience.

So, one autumn, Fabre starts his studying on some chunks of an old oak-tree where the larvae have set up their home and where they will stay for another three years. "Bits of intestines crawling about", they eat their way into the tree, "the path is devoured while constructed; it is blocked behind as it makes way ahead". And to contest the Abbé's theories, he then goes on considering the worm's senses. Sight is inexistent, what would he need it for in this dark trunk? All sorts of experiments with cypress wood, camphor and in the end naphthalene show that it has no sense of smell, nor does it hear, but yes, Fabre as a true Frenchman admits its sense of taste, "taste is there, no doubt. But such taste! The food is without variety: oak, for three years at a stretch, and nothing else. What can the grub's palate appreciate in this monotonous fare? The tannic relish of a fresh piece, oozing with sap, the uninteresting flavour of an over-dry piece, robbed of its natural condiment: these probably represent the whole gustative scale". And yes, touch, "the far-spreading, passive sense common to all live flesh that quivers under the goad of pain" is probably present, and Fabre does not miss this sarcastic remark to Mr l'Abbé.

So rudimentary equipped with these two uncertain senses, the larva will meander through the trunk in captivity and total solitude. What drives it stubbornly forward? Where does it get his knowledge of the outside world, what makes it stop after three years close to the bark, "of which it leaves no more intact than the thinnest film, a slender screen", hiding in this manner from any bird or other enemy? Then comes the most amazing part of the tale: the larva turns around and starts to dig a chamber, much larger than its own size, yet the perfect size for the insect it will soon transform into, which is then covered with a soft casing from its own secretion as well as the exit hole made from calcium saved for the purpose in its stomach. And, "When the exit-way is prepared and the cell upholstered in velvet and closed with a threefold barricade, the industrious worm has concluded its task. It lays aside its tools, sheds its skin and becomes a nymph, a pupa, weakness personified, in swaddling clothes, on a soft coach". The head will always be turned towards the door. In fact, Fabre experiments a great deal just with both the position of the final beetle, as well as its ability to break through the "barricade". The slightest miss from the worm at this stage would be fatal. Soon, metamorphosed into a beetle, it will take its first flight!

What I find particularly catching, is Fabre's constant amazement during the whole process, how he circles the laws of Nature and makes you perceive them as a divine intervention. It is with respect and deep humility that he analyses this phenomenal instinct that all living creatures have within themselves.

Or have we all ?

It is difficult not to draw a parallel to ourselves, humans. In the loneliness of our lives, in this very noisy tree-trunk where we crawl, under this constant pulse of pictures and sounds which we cannot avoid, the billions of opinions expressed daily on Twitter, Face-Book, Google-blogs, do we still know where our law of Nature is leading us ?

Or could this chapter possibly be an allegory of the artist's life and purpose ? Can we transform ourselves and start to fly ?

Fabre concludes:

"(...)quite apart from sense-impressions, the animal, including man, possesses certain psychological resources, certain inspirations that are innate and not acquired"

François Gillet