Twitter Thread by Sebastian Milbank ■■■■■■■■■■

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“For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry.
For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.
For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.”

> this confuses and enrages the atheist pic.twitter.com/jYxji0CzDN
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> — Pavel (@es_aion) October 29, 2022

From Jubliate Agno by Anglican poet Christopher Smart. A friend of Samuel Johnson, he wrote the poem whilst confined in a lunatic asylum due to heavy debts and alleged “religious mania” https://t.co/shyikoPIod

What is it about cats, iconoclastic art and the madhouse? Painter and Bethlem patient Louis Wain was also cat crazy, producing unusual but commercially successful art almost entirely about cats.



Wain may or may not have been schizophrenic or just highly autistic, but he appears to have had a breakdown following his wife's slow death by cancer. In that time he and her drew much comfort from their cat Peter, which seems to have sparked his obsessive love of cats.

Dogs are a more obvious source of comfort and company for many, but they are essentially extroverts that you take for walks, go hunting with or just bring to the pub. Cats appeal to something else, special to invalids, prisoners and those in mourning and distress.

Dogs are part of the same pack as their own, cats have an interior life not fully accessible to their “owners”. This very distance oddly makes a cat a better companion in confinement and distress — a cat represents mystery and escape, a fragment of the wild world.

Cats bring comfort in the way that nature brings comfort. They draw us into an invisible but loving world, an order we cannot fully know or govern, but that compassionately opens a place for us.

A dog is an excellent companion, almost an honorary human. But a cat, no matter how long a pet, always brings something of the thrill of meeting or approaching a wild animal in the countryside. It's the same contemplative joy as the wind in the trees, or gazing at a clear stream.

The magnificent pleasure of owning a dog is that it has been tamed and has entered into human culture and belonging. The great wonder and reassurance of a cat is that it can never be fully tamed, even as it grows fat sleeping besides your fire.

I can well understand why Smart locked up and alone in an 18th century madhouse, or Wain and his wife, overshadowed by a deadly illness, found such comfort in a cat.

Wain is an interesting case because he is so easily dismissed as a sentimental Edwardian caricaturist, but there's something deeper at work. In common with Smart, Wain takes pleasure in the inherent playfulness of cats.

Cats are hunters, shaped by evolution to leap and chase after small fast moving objects. They'll pounce on mice and birds, but seem equally happy when presented with a sunbeam or their own tail.

Cats reveal something about the natural world, and our own own animal natures too. Their very otherness and interior lives makes them more perfect mirrors. For all its dark logic and struggle, nature is equally comprehensible as narrative, dance and play.

The funny thing about biology is that no animal is motivated by evolutionary urges. No living thing mates, eats, hunts or races across the ground because it wants to propagate its genes (sorry Dawkins). They (and we) do so because it brings pleasure, or escapes pain.

The childish urge to play, to do a thing for the joy of it, to run to see how fast you can go, to shout to see how loud your voice can echo, to seize food with both hands and race away when called to bed, is at one with the animal spirit of life — Bergson's elan vital.

More than just a brute search for pleasure, play has an ordering effect, our desires bring us into contact with other desiring and living things, a community of desire that has the quality of play — nature is a kind of playground.

Pre-urban indigenous groups are most naturally in touch with this perspective, which is why the just-so stories of groups from the Bushmen to the Aborigines to the Native Americans are filled with stories about animals negotiating their relationships.

The impulse to see the human in the animal and vice versa, is a continuous factor however, and is no less visible in the medieval bestiary tradition, which drew moral and prudential lessons from the natural order



Many of those who end up in asylums are poorly adapted to a highly rationalistic and urban society, where trust is low and calculating machiavellian intelligence pays off. Wain and Smart were both in financial trouble, and were exploited by cannier souls.

They became mad partly because they couldn't fit into society, and were placed under growing burdens. Creativity is reliably correlated to mental illness — they think differently, and feel things more strongly.

In traditional societies such characters (autistic, schizophrenic, depressive) would be more likely to be honoured and given status, in more rationalistic mass societies, they are disruptive and grow more isolated and anti-social, eccentricities become pathologies.

Asylums had their many problems, but the best of them (especially in Wain's time) were just that — refuges from a world of money and calculation, which allowed troubled souls who could find no place in the world a home and a place of safety and comfort.

The sanctuary that Wain and Smart found, the animal world, was an instinctive return to a world that had a place for them. Rather than the realm of calculation and alienation, they rediscovered the divine and natural world of play, the realm of

analogy, symbol and contemplation.

End of this extremely and proudly mad thread about cats, nature, the madhouse and (as ever) the horrors of the modern world. ■

