

CICADAS

OR

**Because You Are the One
Who Decides What You Think**

being

A BOOK **ON TRUTH**

& at the same time
AN INTRODUCTION TO
PHILOSOPHY

THE BOOKS OF BECAUSE BOOK 1

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No character in this book has an analogue in an actual person known to the author. Still, does a good writer draw from experience or make it all up? Let it be understood, however, that no character in this book *stands for* or *represents* any actual person, and no incident is a *sketch of* any incident, in the author's experience. (Such claims made by some authors have invited my suspicion but be assured that no dissimulation is in play here.)

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PROLOGUE

IN WHICH EVERYTHING IS INTRODUCED

The most personal questions of truth. – ‘What am I really doing? And why am I doing it’ – that is the question of truth which is not taught in our present system of education and is consequently not asked; we have no time for it. On the other hand, to talk of buffooneries ... to talk to young people of their future and their pleasures and not of the truth – we always have time ... for that! – But what, after all, are seventy years! – they run on and are soon over;...!

– FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE,
DAYBREAK (1881), NO. 196

In the heat of August before Earl and Morgan went off to university they lay in the cool grass of the cemetery looking at the treetops, breaking the silence only occasionally to discuss the months to come.

— “It’s not Everest,” said Earl.

They were only days away from sitting in class at the same ivy-league school of colossal repute. In under two weeks they would be half way across the country seeing with their own eyes what such a place was like, taking its measure, fielding questions from some of the brightest minds in the country.

— “It’s a university, a place where we can learn something.”

Those were the facts, but really they were looking for the metaphor.

A journey? Would they be standing at the prow of a ship traversing great depths, advancing toward something as unknown to them as America to Columbus? This image was too dramatic for Earl.

— “It’ll be more college: high school but with professors.”

These two characters were cool, in the true meaning of cool: *people* are cool, not things, and their temperature was low. Displays of excitement were not their style.

In reality they could not have the metaphor because they did not know what they were really doing, much less why, nor would they be apprised of this at their prestige university. All they were equipped to do, stretched out on the grass, was picture a *thing* (university) and, nudged by the available facts (those in everyone’s possession), state the thing’s business and their part in it (classes with illustrious professors and so on). They were loaded up in the normal way, with elementary stuff, externals.

From that sort of tagging you could not extract the metaphor of the eight months to come; you could not foresee that the whole thing was

a test, a trial, in the form of not mid-terms and finals but a taxing of the spirit, a thing at which you could fail – falling down at, for instance, the everyday testing people are subjected to over truth. Both had looked at a scholarship awarded to recognize “respect for truth, difficult or complicated as it may be”; both supposed that they might be eligible.

But – back to the metaphor – the eight months to come, the test, might indeed be likened, contra Earl, to the ascent of a mountain. At his mention of ‘Everest’ Earl had somehow got hold of this exact image, but so as to discard it. So it was well within the realm of possibility for Earl and Morgan, having rejected this image of what they were doing, to go to the mountain and, oblivious to the fact that it was even there (much less there to climb) remain in the lowlands. To respect this mountain is to get onto it and climb.

Whatever the purpose of their coolness – whatever the *point* was of managing their reactions in their own eyes – it roped them into the task of wrestling against their state of mind, which, as they lay there in the grass, was actually *expectant*.

Earl and Morgan were in a state of heightened expectation. Heaved out of their routine they lay completely still because they were observing a phenomenon (as when a deer has just walked into the yard). *I am leaving home to learn from all of history. I will spend my time amidst things I care about. I will talk to intelligent people about matters of importance.*

They were silently having thoughts together, and thoughts appropriate to have. The thoughts hinted to them of what lay ahead and gradually urged words upon them (*It’s an adventure*), only to trigger the wrestling reflex. Words like these they dismissed. *Don’t overdo it*, they told themselves, *we are just taking some courses.*

But this moment of their lives was indeed something, a pregnant moment deserving of some acknowledgement and even celebration. It is fascinating that there are many things that Earl and Morgan would not for a moment have hesitated to call adventures, *true* adventures. Off-road biking, extreme skiing, hiking in the Andes. There the word ‘adventure’ *belonged* – but why? Is the only excitement physical excitement? Is it only *sensations* that are fit to thrill? Are *unforgettable sights* the things that you can see with your eyes; are no *visions* exciting?

Had this idea of *vision* occurred to them – getting a view, climbing to a height from where the topography of a whole expanse of territory, invisible from down below, stands revealed – they would have dismissed this analogy too. Earl and Morgan were Christians; they were not going to university for any vision. *Lost* people might think in such terms about courses in philosophy or sociology but why would they? They were not in search of wisdom; this they had, in that they had Christ. They both knew the Bible well, could readily quote chapter and verse from the Apostle

Paul, affirming the truth: that

We have the mind of Christ....

– 1 CORINTHIANS 2:16

The Christian's business with wisdom was to use it – do as the Psalm says, “apply our hearts unto wisdom.”

Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

– PSALMS 90:12

Earl had been struck by this verse when he had first read through the entire Bible; it was his Psalm verse. Wishing for more he had turned to Matthew Henry's commentary, where he found again the thought that had gripped him:

Instead of wasting our precious, fleeting days in pursuing fancies,....

Yes, life was too precious for us to find ourselves in it and miss the thing of importance, the treasure that was the essential thing, the *thing for which we were given life!* The Psalmist called this *wisdom*, which we must use the fading light to acquire. “What, after all, are seventy years! – they run on and are soon over.” But how do we get it? Henry answered that

Those who would learn true wisdom, must pray for Divine instruction, must beg to be taught by the Holy Spirit;....

Earl equated desiring with praying – that is, he took his eagerness to attain wisdom *to be* such praying – and read,

We then number our days to good purpose when thereby our hearts are inclined and engaged to true wisdom, that is, to the practice of serious godliness. To be religious is to be wise;....

– MATTHEW HENRY'S COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE,
(1708–10), S.V. PSALMS 90, VERSES 12–17

“To be religious is to be wise.” Earl had turned to Henry wishing for more, but shut the book with less than he had come with, with *less than* not more of the Psalm. If you read *desire for wisdom* (which, if you have it, was given to you) as praying for wisdom (which is a thing that you must do, and do repeatedly) then you co-opt the man you are reading into a booster of your own laxness. If you read *being religious* as counting religion central (which you do, intellectually), instead of being wholly bound to God (‘religion’ coming from the Latin *religio*, a binding restraint) – Henry's “to be religious” would thus mean to be *bound to God in every aspect of your being* (mind, body, and deed) – then you co-opt him again in the identical way. Your way of reading shows, actually, that you are bound by the image you have of yourself, as sufficient, in possession. “To be religious is to be wise.”

Wisdom was already coming; it would come to him as a kind of instinct, through a channel opened to him when he accepted Christ. What *ascent* to any *vision* was he going to make? – Apply their minds *unto wisdom* in their days on some campus? No, *apply* the wisdom in their minds. “We have the mind of Christ.”

So what was their purpose on that campus?

Their thoughts idled and the metaphors dissolved. The two lay on the ground, on their backs, down close actually to the dead, the senseless, spiritless bodies whose posture they copied. If pressed for an answer, in the end they would have given a disguised non-answer: they were going to Tip-Top-u out of *interest*.

Earl and Morgan had spent the past year at a local college that had introduced them to what is called ‘Great Books’: books, they were told, that contained Truth, that highest of prizes. Given their views on wisdom they were skeptical of this claim too, applied as it was to texts by pagan writers and playwrights whose Christianity was dubious. So they had *two categories*, one for *genuine Wisdom* (the mind of Christ, which was not withheld from them, which they need do no searching for) and the other for *lesser truth* (Marcus Aurelius, Shakespeare).

And yet it was the lesser truth that had excited them and hatched all their plans. It had not occurred to them even to ask whether there was some place that you *could* go to get the former, to acquire Wisdom. (Bible college? Their Bible knowledge was already exceptional.) What wisdom do you pursue when Christ is your shepherd – what are you afraid you might lack?

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for *thou art with me*; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

– PSALMS 23:4

The truth in the Great Books, on the other hand, they were sure they did lack. It had whetted their appetites and they had laid out a course of studies taught by world-renowned authorities so as to *go deeper*. But *go deeper for what?* They did not know.

To get anywhere there on the cemetery lawn – and a place like that is an excellent place to get somewhere – Earl and Morgan would have had to quit what they were doing (labouring to find the pose they wished to see themselves in, that being what a pose is: something to be seen) and start registering their feelings, which were doing considerably better than their thoughts. But their education had made that difficult; these two intellects were wary about feelings.

Instead of finding the precisely right way to talk about what they were going to do why not just report the state they were in, register as a basic fact that they *had great expectations* of their undertaking? Had they heard

the music of their nerves they might at least have turned in the direction of the metaphor (toward the truth about .. what it was that they were setting out to do). Was it an adventure? A test? An ascent?

— “What is that sound,” asked Earl.

— “What sound?”

— “That constant, high-pitched ... *whine*. Like a chainsaw. But it never stops. Do you hear that? I can’t tell if I am hearing it or if it is just my ears!”

Briefly Morgan was puzzled.

— “Oh. The cicadas!”

— “The what?”

— “Cicadas. ... Insects. Earl: are you just noticing them now?”

— “I don’t believe you. Where?”

— “Up there, up in the treetops.”

Their eyes trained upward they scanned with attention the great green crowns set off against the xxx blue, seeing nothing. In the heat cicadas begin their song, if you can use that word for the sound of a vibrating membrane in the abdomen.

— “But it’s constant, a single nonstop tone; how can that be insects?”

— “Well it is. You never see them. *Heard but not seen.*”

Then Morgan added, “They have five eyes.”

— “I have *never heard* this sound before!”

— “Of course you have! It’s every summer.”

They lay there, listless in the heat, and listened to the steady, unrelenting chorus of the cicadas, which in three weeks they would read about in Plato.

And I believe that the cicadas buzzing after their manner in the heat of the sun over our heads are talking to one another and looking down at us. What would they say if they saw that we, like the many, are not conversing, but ... too indolent to think? ... From the hour of their birth [they] are always singing, ... prophets of the Muses who are chiefly concerned with heaven and thought, divine as well as human....

— PLATO, PHAEDRUS, 259A, 259C, 262D

What *would* the cicadas say, supposing that they were prophets of the Muses, of two people “too indolent to think,” “like the many”?

What would these “always singing” prophets, sharing the Muses’ concern with “heaven and thought,” single out in the *thinking* unfolded below them? Ordinary thoughts, befitting an ordinary day.

Ordinary thinking. And what is that day that calls for *special* thoughts?

The cicadas had been there summer after summer, undetected presences high above, but detectable after all, out of the blue. In what sort of world are there other such presences?

Morgan, in advance of Plato, stared up into the column of space that towered up through the massed banks of leaves and wondered about the singing. It was not impossible to have much the same thought as Plato.

Imagine that here above us were invisible beings, creatures in nature even, singing the ‘music of the spheres’, so to speak. (She had heard of this but did not know what the ‘music of the spheres’ was or if there could be such a thing, but was it impossible?) Even spirits who sang *because of us*, she imagined: *we* could not hear their singing but they could hear ours – they were an audience of our thoughts, to which they listened in concern that we would have thoughts in harmony with theirs, with the Music.

Yes, if there could be such Music why not Spirits to sing it? Not spirits of the dead, of those whose bodies were buried here in the earth (Morgan supposed these would be as confused as the living), but spirits of something that does not die, spirits that spoke eternally spoken words. And heard our thoughts.

Suppose that in the midst of their song some of these spirits would speak to us – sing to us, in a kind of voice-over, telling us of the harmony or disharmony of our contribution to....

Wow, thought Morgan: we are singing, amidst something already being sung – *well* or *badly*, ... in harmony or against it, but either way all the time joining in. Thinking, we are thinking about the *things that are*, the possibilities *that are*, or about those that *are not*.

I SING the Body electric,

– WALT WHITMAN, LEAVES OF GRASS (1867)

wrote Whitman, a line that had resonated with Morgan and came back to her now.

This line is itself a *thought*, and if living bodies *are electric* (she was all of a sudden conscious of the discharged bodies all around her) then this thought, merely in being thought, is indeed a part of the Song. And living bodies, even dead bodies, are indeed something to sing about. She felt the time of her life was right now electric and the charge was all concentrated within the physical limits of her person.

If only we had help, to sing true: singing masters who would sing to us about our singing, she thought.

She thought of the spent bodies around her. All of that spending of energy, she thought, was a *response* – a response to everything that, in the world, these people were given. There is surely a good response to give to all of it.