

Clark University

## Clark Digital Commons

---

Faculty Works

Scholarly Collections & Academic Work

---

1981

### The Oilman Cometh

Nicholas S. Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.clarku.edu/facultyworks>

---

## The oilman cometh

Nicholas S. Thompson

If I had to identify a particular moment or experience that I've been striving for the last two years, this would be it. I am sitting in an oak tree overlooking a marshy field southwest of my house. Two crows are fooling around in the field. I can't quite see them. Every once in a while one flies up to a tree along the fringe between the marsh and the next

field to perch a few moments, only to swoop back into the marsh. The black-birds in the marsh are distressed; the marsh is alive with their clicks and scree calls. A brown thrasher is trying to figure out what I'm doing in the tree. He approaches me silently to a very close distance, almost within reach, always keeping a branch or a sprig of leaves between us. The air is cool but the sun is direct and hot; it filters through the fresh, new leaves of the oak tree. I have arranged my dew-drenched legs to catch a direct ray of sun and they are warming and drying. Here I am. The quintessential ethologist. No tape recorders, no fancy equipment. Not even a notebook to intrude between me and my animals. Attentive. In tune. Nothing to do. Bored.

I was totally unprepared for the discovery that "just" watching animals might be boring. Not to say that I hadn't been bored watching animals before. On the contrary. But I had always attributed this boredom to the constrained, unnatural, and equipment-ridden circumstances in which I was making my observations. My first experience at systematically watching animals was when I volunteered to assist on a study of the behavioral effects of several drugs thought to be related to emotional disorders in human beings.

The drugs were given to rats, and the rats placed in a biggish (for a laboratory rat) cage with lots of things to do in it. There was a wheel to run on, and little toys to play with, and water to drink, and food to eat, and on the right a male rat to talk to, and a female rat to talk to on the left. The room was warm and dimly lit, as any rat would demand. Some of the drugs made the rats frisky, and I would be frantic trying to keep up in my note taking. Some of the drugs made the rats sleepy, and I could catch up on my reading. One drug, however, made the rats groom themselves. I couldn't read because the animal was active all the time; but he was active doing the same thing over and over again. Watching a rat groom himself is like watching an ugly man brush his teeth. All of us who worked on this project dreaded these animals. Every fifteen seconds the timing light would come on and I'd write G in the appropriate space on my note sheet. Gradually my head would pitch forward onto my clipboard and then, sometime later, jerk back up. The rat would be in a slightly different place in the cage, grooming his tummy instead of his back, and the timing clock would read ten minutes later. The custom in such cases was to enter on the observer protocol the code OA, for "observer asleep." Despite the promising theoret-

ical argument on which this study was based, it produced only one statistically reliable result: the analysis of the data showed unequivocally that injection of rats with this particular drug caused observers to sleep an average of 6.6 minutes longer than injection of rats with any other drug in the study.

Since I attributed the boredom of such studies to the impediments of science—the darkened, stuffy rooms, the drugged animals, the stopwatches, the isolation—I was surprised to find myself bored in that tree. I was there as the result of a determined program to "go naked into nature," as it were. Even the decision not to carry a notebook was a conscious decision. Why did one need any equipment? Did not the human observer carry on his shoulders the most remarkable piece of analytical equipment in the universe—the human brain? Did I not possess the most marvelous balance of senses that evolution could produce? Did I not possess almost infinite resources for recording, analyzing, and interpreting information beneath my bald spot? All I had to do was turn these marvelous pieces of natural equipment loose upon the natural world, and I would have the purest, the most natural of sciences. Except I was bored.

How come? I thought to myself. Most people would give their right arms to be

me. Here I was, getting paid to sit in an oak tree and soak up the June morning sun. Tough life. My mind skimmed giddily on the envy of millions of people and then sank like a skipped stone that has caught a wave wrong. One of the two crows flew back across the marsh toward their nest, and I realized that I had been forgetting to watch them. How could I? I had nothing to do but watch those crows. I tried to concentrate on the remaining crow. It was balancing on the small low branch of a cherry tree, giving high-pitched caws. With each caw it bowed its neck, and the force of the caw caused it to rock on the end of its slender branch. "Here is the young ethologist, gone naked into nature, watching a crow." A wave of satisfaction spread through my being. "Here is the young ethologist about to make a major discovery about crow behavior. Here is the young . . . damn . . . here is the young ethologist having megalomaniacal fantasies." The crow had disappeared, dropped back into the marsh again, and I had missed it. I wrenched my mind back. Here I had gone naked into nature and what was I thinking about? Nature? No! I was thinking about *thinking* about nature. I might as well have had a brown paper bag over my head.

Over the next few weeks of that idyl-

lic summer, the problem got worse. I would set myself up in some ideal circumstance for observing nature, and then "it" would happen. "It" would develop like this: first, I would realize that I wasn't thinking about nature; I would try to pull my mind around to what was going on around me—if not to the crows, then at least to the sky, the sunshine, the smells, something. I would take a moment's satisfaction in that mental bootstrapping operation, but then I would realize that I wasn't thinking about nature, I was *thinking about thinking about nature*. Then I would realize that I wasn't even just thinking about thinking about nature, I was *thinking about thinking about thinking about nature*. And so on, until my brain began to feel like an overloaded fuse box. Pretty soon I shortcut all these intricacies by calling this process "it." I would be looking at some crows and "it" would happen. "It" was like a jammed typewriter that keeps making x's until you pull the plug out. The only way I could pull the plug out was to go *do* something. Write a memo, hoe a row of corn, split some wood, mulch some raspberries, read a student paper, *anything*.

I thought I was losing my mind. I had other evidence. There was the "Oilman Problem." The Oilman Problem was so

named not because the oilman had it, but because the oilman precipitated it. One day I was staring out the windows daydreaming and engaging in that mixture of fervor and depression which seems to precede some of my most creative moments, when I heard a clunk at the front door. I went to the door and found the oilman filling the tank. He had apparently bumped the door as he was fitting the ungainly nozzle to the tank pipe. Having come upon him thus, I felt obliged to pass the time of day while the tank was filling.

"Nice day," said I.

"Sure is," said he. "Home on vacation?"

"No," said I. "I work at home two days a week."

"You're the college teacher, right?"

"Right," I agreed.

"S'pose you spend a lot of time correcting papers?"

"No," I said. I considered explaining that in my business nobody could be sure enough of anything to "correct" a paper, but decided that that answer was just going to get me in deeper, so I explained my answer on technical grounds. "I have a teaching assistant who does the grading."

"Must be a lot of time you spend teaching," he said, flexibly.

"No," I said. "Not a lot. I spend about nine hours in the classroom a week."

"Nine hours? A week?" He was going to ask me another question, but then thought better of it. The oil hose clunked and twitched and the pump on the oil truck eased from a roar to a hum. The oilman started to detach the hose.

"I do research," I volunteered, suddenly afraid that the connection between us would be broken before I had had a chance to explain myself.

"Research!" he exclaimed. "My daughter—she's a nurse—she'd be really interested in that. Like those people on the television last night who are trying to find a cure for cancer. What are you doing research on?"

"Crows."

"Do you have a lot of them in cages in your barn?"

"No," I said. "I just watch them."

"But what do you *do*?" he asked.

"Well, I guess I think a lot while I watch them," I offered.

He gave the hose a yank and it reeled him back to the truck. He stashed the nozzle and came back with the invoice. He was clearly groping for a polite resolution to our conversation.

"Well," he said, "I still don't understand what you do, but if you can find a cure for the crow, you're my man."

He climbed up into the cab, waved, and drove off. He left me no time to explain that I loved crows, I was fascinated by crows, would like to populate the world with crows, to live with crows, to dine with crows, to sleep with crows, to be awakened by their staccato self-declarations in the morning, and to be lulled by their evensong caws in the dusk.

Here was a pretty state of affairs. Here I had spent my family fortune to own a farm and live where I could be in touch with nature, and now my brain jammed every time I came near nature. Worse, I now spent long hours in vigorous internal dialogue trying to explain myself to the oilman. In desperation I decided to consult with a friend of mine. One of the great joys of working in a psychology department is that there's always a clinical psychologist down the hall when things get rough. One doesn't like to approach one's colleagues overtly for help, but one can always approach them covertly as if discussing an interesting Phenomenon of the Mind. The phenomenon I brought to my friend's attention was "it"—my mental blot, as I had come to think of it. My friend, although no older than I, is an ideal of what one would hope for in a borrowed clinician. Tweedy, pipe-smoking, and

good-natured, he embraced my phenomenon like a long-lost friend, hugged it to himself vigorously, held it away from himself and looked at it admiringly, then hugged it to himself again. He liked my phenomenon, and what's more, he understood it and knew how to cure it. I was a victim, said he, of a misconception of "self." I had mistakenly assumed that if I stripped my nature-watching activities of all the encumbrances of doing—the notebooks, the telescopes, the tape recorders, and so on—I would get down to the basic essence of *being* a nature watcher. The self, he said, is not a thing apart from the activities of the person. In fact, he said, people know their "selves" from what they do. If I wanted to *be* a nature watcher, I had to *do* at least some of the things that nature watchers do. If that meant carrying binoculars and taking notes, then I should do that. "Not all goals are the same," he continued. "Some goals are mentally useful and some aren't. 'To experience' a thing is a bad goal, because it doesn't tell you what to *do*. Same with the goal 'to be happy.' Happiness and experience are two things that happen to you on the way to somewhere else." So, he said, if I had your problem—and I noticed he wasn't saying "phenomenon" anymore—I would stop going out in nature to experience it, and start going out in nature to take notes on it.

It was the best advice I've ever gotten from anybody. I was moved and grateful, and my eyes grew damper than I liked them. I stood up and shook his hand as one might in leaving a doctor's office. As if to alleviate my embarrassment, he concluded with a lengthy discussion of the theoretical significance of my "phenomenon."

Later that afternoon, I went out and purchased one of those leatherbound, prelined books with the word *notebook* embossed in phony gold. I bought myself two or three pencils, sharpened them well, and went home. By four o'clock that afternoon I was sitting out in my west field with my notebook and pencils. In the two hours that followed I took thirteen pages of notes. I never was bored and I never stopped thinking about nature once. "It" was conquered. The next time the oilman came, I told him I was writing a book about crows. That seemed to satisfy him, and now, whenever he comes, he asks, "How's the writing going?"

*Nicholas S. Thompson, a member of the class of 1960 at Harvard, is associate professor of psychology and adjunct in biology at Clark University. He lives in a nineteenth-century farmhouse in New Braintree, Massachusetts.*