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Animals, Humans, Writing

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Caterpillar Faces and Mosquito Sovereignty: Humans Becoming-Insect through the Poetic Imagination

Difficult to catch yet so easy to crush without a second thought, insects simultaneously confirm and confound human sovereignty over nature. 'To exercise sovereignty', as Achille Mbembe[1] writes, is 'to exercise control over mortality', over who lives, who dies, and who is grieved. As pests and specimens, insects are in the killable category. But killing insects can be so impossible. That fly buzzing about the bedroom slips through fingers, and a pair reproduce too fast to be exterminated. One ant can be crushed, but an ant community can colonize a house. A swarm of bees can kill a human (or just one bee if they are allergic). Insects seem to us beyond death: a cockroach can live without its head; a caterpillar's metamorphosis signifies resurrection. While we exterminate countless little insect bodies with pesticide, millions of those insects—mosquitos, lice, fleas—invade *our* bodies, killing us with malaria, the black plague, the zika virus. Because of this paradoxical relationship, encounters with insects in poetry subvert human sovereignty and remake us into a different kind of human animal, one who becomes-insect. Rather than being sovereign, the human-becoming-insect is vulnerable; rather than rational, they are bodily; rather than overseeing, they look from the bottom, down in the mud with other critters. To explore this human-becoming-insect process, we will follow[2] two insect companions in two poetic insect-human encounters: Anna Leticia Barbauld's 'The Caterpillar' and D. H. Lawrence's 'The Mosquito.'

Before encountering our caterpillar teacher,[3] Barbauld's speaker has been killing insects. Specifically, she has been exterminating European tent caterpillars, also known as Lackey moth larvae.

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[1] Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics,' translated by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003) pp 11-40.
[2] Follow in the Derridean sense: 'The animal is there before me, there close to me, there in front of me—I who am (following) after it.' Jacques Derrida, 'Animal That Therefore I am (More to Follow), translated David Wills, *Critical Inquiry,* 28.2 (The University of Chicago Press: Winter 2002), pp. 369-418.
[3] Anna Leticia Barbauld, 'The Caterpillar,' *Selected Poetry and Prose,* ed. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Knight (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002), pp. 179-80.

The poet does not name the species, but they match her description of blue and orange stripes and communal silk tents.[4] These lackey moth larvae, Alice Den Otter informs us, are considered dangerous pests because they can 'infest' and 'defoliate' whole orchards.[5] The speaker presumably understands this threat, since she has been sweeping caterpillars out of her trees and dousing them in pesticide. But she does not call them pests. Nor does she begin with extermination.

Instead, the poet begins by encountering a caterpillar: the 'thou' to whom the poem is written and from whom the poem follows. This single caterpillar has 'escaped the general doom' of extermination, crawling out of the poet's 'garment' and curling around her finger.[6] Here begins their ethical encounter: the poet-gardener encounters 'the Other', a caterpillar. The caterpillar touches her, forms a bodily relation with her. She interacts with the critter as an individual being, not a figure nor symbol but, to play on Derrida's description of his cat, 'a real cat[erpillar], truly, believe me, *a little cat[erpillar].*'[7] With a 'curious eye', she observes the creature's 'azure and orange', is touched by 'velvet sides', feels 'the light pressure' of 'hairy feet', watches the 'precipitous descent' of a tiny head.[8] The poet's curiosity opens her imagination to this other. She exercises what Donna Haraway calls 'a curious practice', 'training ... the imagination to go visiting' and 'meet unexpected, non-natal kin',[9] and what J. M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello calls 'the sympathetic imagination' that 'thinks' oneself 'into the being of the other.'[10] Engaged in curious sympathy, she attends to the creature's body—'hairy feet', 'stretched out neck'—and imagines what might be the little 'head' which bends 'in airy vacancy.'[11]

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[4] Alice G. Den Otter. 'Pests, Parasites, and Positionality: Anna Letitia Barbauld and 'The Caterpillar,'' *Studies in Romanticism* 43. 2 (2004), pp. 209–30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25601672.>
[5] Otter, p. 214.
[6] Barbauld.
[7] Derrida, 'Animal,' p. 374. Derrida's emphasis.
[8] Barbauld.
[9] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) p. 130.
[10] J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Ebook.
[11] Barbauld.

When the poet bends her face toward the caterpillar's body, her gaze lowers from sovereign—what Martin Dines calls the 'sweeping aerial vantage point' common in other Romantic poetry[12]—to the 'optical precariousness'[13] of a caterpillar: intimate, small-scale, sensory, frail. The poet shares the caterpillar's vulnerability, albeit asymmetrically. Letting the caterpillar live might result in the larvae's repopulation and reinfestation of the poet's garden, a source of food and profit. Without total extermination, total sovereignty, her garden remains at risk. The poet is also emotionally vulnerable before the caterpillar, who touches, changes, and *affects* her: 'A single wretch, escaping the general doom, / *Making me feel* thy individual existence...'[14] Exposed to the caterpillar's touch, the poet now recognizes the creature's face, the 'defenceless' and 'infinite' face of the Other which signifies, as Levinas writes, 'Do not kill me.' [15] She interprets the creature's embodied gestures—'bending' head, 'precipitous descent'—as communication: 'thou hast seemed / To ask protection.' Facing the caterpillar, she hears the call of the other and she responds: 'now, I cannot kill thee.'[16] Having recognized the caterpillar's face, having touched and been touched, the poet can no longer kill. The caterpillar 'awakens' her 'to ethics.'[17]

The whole poem follows, in the Derridean sense, this encounter with the caterpillar. After pronouncing 'I cannot kill thee', the poet recounts her attempted extermination not as a gardener fighting a pest infestation (she doesn't even name the Lackey larvae species) but as a killer slaughtering innocents:

Yet I have sworn perdition to thy race,

And recent from the slaughter am I come

Of tribes and embryo nations: I have sought

With sharpened eye and persecuting zeal,

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[12] Martin Dines. *The Modernist Exoskeleton: Insects, War, Literary Form* (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) *ProQuest Ebook Central,* https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=6154598, p. 1.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Barbauld, my emphasis.
[15] Emmanuel Levinas, Totality *and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Alphonso Lingis (trans.) (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) p. 198.
[16] Barbauld, my emphasis.
[17] Jacques Derrida. *The Beast and the Sovereign* vol 1, trans. Geoffrey Bennington. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) p. 245.

> Where, folded in their silken webs they lay
>
> Thriving and happy; swept them from the tree
>
> And crushed whole families beneath my foot;
>
> Or, sudden, poured on their devoted heads
>
> The vials of destruction—This I've done,
>
> Nor felt the touch of pity...[18]

In the 'slaughter', the poet reduces the caterpillars to a 'race' which exists outside of 'pity'. With 'sharpened eye' and 'persecuting zeal', she methodically exterminates 'whole families' with stomping and pesticides. The 'thriving and happy' families, 'folded' peacefully in their homes, are suddenly extinguished by her violence. This she has done, she confesses, with no 'touch of pity.'

This is a strange way to describe an extermination which, within the frame of property and ecological management, is what a good gardener does. The poet acts according to the agricultural advice of her time, which taught that moth larvae damage the profits of orchards and are 'inimical to the welfare of mankind.'[19] She acts like 'the manager of the ecology', to quote Coetzee's Costello,[20] who understands the 'greater dance' which 'no other creature is capable of comprehending' and therefore exercises sovereignty, the 'power of life and death.' The manager sees the bigger picture; they can exterminate the larvae in good conscience. Further, the poet acts as a rational human should. Since enlightenment, western philosophy has taught that only the exceptional rational Man understands death, while animals (especially insects) do not know death. As summarized by Voltaire, 'the human race is the only one that knows it must die.'[21] Neither do animals have faces. Levinas himself based ethics in 'the human face'

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[18] Barbauld.

[19] Proceedings of London Aurelian Society, quoted by L. O. Howard, *A History of Applied Entomology* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1930) p. 217.

[20] Coetzee.

[21] Voltaire, quoted in Thom van Dooren, 'Mourning Crows: Grief in a Shared World,' *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University press, 2014), p. 131.

which he called 'completely different' from 'the face of an animal.' [22] Animals—much less larvae—do not cry 'do not kill me', the Other's 'primordial *expression*.'[23] These philosophies crown Man as Nature's sovereign, able to kill animals without 'the touch of pity.'[24] These philosophies make animals killable.

But the poem does not reify sovereign Man and killable Nature. Instead, it follows the touch of the caterpillar. Like their survivor, these caterpillars have faces: 'families', 'tribes', 'embryo nations', 'devoted heads.' They are 'thriving and happy' beings, living in community, basking in the sun, laying in silken homes. Confronted by the caterpillar's face, the poet's sovereignty is interrupted. The garden is not her property to manage; it is the home of living beings besides herself. She cannot complete the extermination. She has been touched, not by abstract 'pity', but by the caterpillar to whom she returns:

> ...but when thou, —
>
> A single wretch, escaped the general doom,
>
> Making me feel and clearly recognise
>
> Thine individual existence, life,
>
> And fellowship of sense with all that breathes, —
>
> Present'st thyself before me, I relent,
>
> And cannot hurt thy weakness.[25]

By presenting itself before her in 'weakness', the caterpillar awakens the poet to 'fellowship with all that breathes,' or what Judith Butler calls 'our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another.'[26] Whereas Butler and Levinas restrict responsibility to 'shared humanity',[27] the poem's ethics are constituted in shared life. As Barbara Davy writes in her 'critical reconstruction' of Levinas: 'What is

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[22] Emmanuel Levinas. "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas." Translated by Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright. In *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, edited by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988) p. 168-80.
[23] Levinas, *Totality,* p. 199. Levinas' emphasis.
[24] Barbauld.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Judith Butler, 'Violence, Mourning, Politics,' *Precarious Life* (Verso, 2006), p. 30.
[27] Ibid.

crucial in ethical relations is that the Other expresses infinity', 'teaches', and 'can provoke oneself, not that the call to ethics be given through the speech of a human face.'[28] The caterpillar, with its other-than-human face and embodied other-than-human communication, teaches the poet a new ethics: one of infinite fellowship. The poet's exceptional human sovereignty is 'displace[d]' before the caterpillar's tiny hairy feet and 'inquiring' head. Her morality becomes one that respects, to quote Derrida, not just 'the humanity of man' but the 'life' of every 'being.'[29]

The poem's reconstituted ethics tangle human-on-insect violence with human-on-human violence. Beginning with this final line about the caterpillar, the poet turns to a description of war that parallels the caterpillar extermination: 'And cannot hurt they weakness. — So the storm / Of horrid war... rolls dreadful on.' The caterpillars' silken tents become 'fields', 'cities', and 'peaceful villages.' As the poet exterminated caterpillars, 'the work of death and carnage' ravages human communities. Like a zealous insect-killer, the 'victor' exercises the sovereignty to kill without grief nor pity; he is 'triumphant'; he 'enjoys' the 'clang of arms.' By juxtaposing these descriptions, the poem emphasizes the insect-like frailty of humans who are exterminated as enemy others like caterpillars. The poem's metaphorical connection is reflected by material realities in the contemporary Napoleonic Wars, in which more soldiers died of insect-spread diseases than battle wounds.[30] In war, humans not only died like insects but *with* insects. All this carnage is interrupted by another encounter with a vulnerable other. A 'single sufferer', mirroring the 'helpless' caterpillar, confronts the 'hero of war.' 'Panting, pale, and bleeding,' this sufferer awakens the hero to ethics and the victor who 'would not stir for thousands, melts for one.' With 'sympathy' provoked, killing the other becomes impossible.

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[28] Barbara Jane Davy, 'An Other Face of Ethics in Levinas,' *Ethics and the Environment,* 12.1 (Indiana University Press, Spring 2007), pp. 39-65. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40339131>
[29] Derrida, *The Beast,* pp. 224-245.
[30] Robert K. D. Peterson, 'Insects, disease, and military history: the Napoleonic campaigns and historical perception,' *Montana.edu,* (Montana State University, 1995) <https://www.montana.edu/historybug/napoleon/index.html> [accessed December 14, 2022].

By comparing insect extermination to war, the poem constructs a humanity that follows the caterpillar in insect-like precarity. Like caterpillars, humans are vulnerable to sudden violence by which, as Butler writes, 'we are given over, without control, to the will of another.'[31] To exercise sovereignty over an other's life—insect, human, animal—is a violent exploitation of their vulnerability, a 'touch of the worst order.'[32] It is, to use the poet's own language, 'the work of death and carnage.'[33] But even killers and war heroes are vulnerable, as revealed when they encounter the other:

A single sufferer from the field escaped,
Panting, pale, and bleeding at his feet,
Lifts his imploring eyes— the hero weeps;
He is grown human.[34]

This 'he' who grows human could be both the sufferer and the hero. Following the sufferer, to be 'human' is to be a bleeding other who awakens ethics, who is grievable and infinitely unkillable. Following the killer, to be human is to 'weep' when confronted by the other, to be interrupted, affected, made vulnerable. The poem locates the hero's humanity not in his newfound 'Pity', and certainly not in 'triumphant' violence, but in weakness: 'Tis not virtue, / Yet tis the weakness of a virtuous mind.' The exterminator's violent touch is replaced by the caterpillar's velvet one.

The human who becomes-insect in 'The Caterpillar' shares a precarious 'fellowship' with all other living beings. The poet's focus on 'individual existence' — 'single wretch' and 'single sufferer' — might seem to restrict this human animal within a bounded individualism. However, the exterminated caterpillars and war victims are not described as individuals but communities: 'families', 'embryo nations', 'tribes', 'cities', 'fields', and 'peaceful villages.' It is the exterminator who reduces them to a 'race', collapsing their individuality to make them killable, and it follows that individuality—located in

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[31] Butler, pp. 28-29.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Barbauld.
[34] Ibid.

the face of the other—is required to break open the exterminator's reductions and awaken them to precarious connection. Responding to the caterpillar's touch, humans' sovereign boundaries are unsettled, permeated by 'fellowship of sense with all that breathes.'[35] Humans become caterpillar: velvet, vulnerable, and response-able.[36]

Our next insect encounter—D. H. Lawrence's 'The Mosquito'[37]—is between a man and a mosquito. Like Barbauld's 'The Caterpillar', this poem is addressed to the insect. But from the start, their relationship is more combative and less asymmetrical than gardener and caterpillar. The poet begins by addressing the mosquito like an opponent in a duel: 'When did you start your tricks / Monsieur?' In this duel, the mosquito is flitting around his head, trying to bite him, and the man is trying and, to his frustration, failing to stop him.[38] Unable to capture the creature with his hands, he attempts to capture his being with observational questions:

> What do you stand on such high legs for?
>
> Why this length of shredded shank
>
> You exaltation?[39]

Like Barbauld's speaker, the poet's curiosity causes him to think his way 'into the being'[40] of this radical other, exploring his sensory body: 'translucent phantom shred / Of a frail corpus', 'thin wings', 'streaming legs.'[41] He thinks himself into the creature's mind, imagining his motivations, his wicked strategies to win their 'Man or mosquito' duel. But every exploration makes the speaker more confused and produces more questions. 'Queer,' he repeats, 'Queer.' Unlike the gardener who reduces the

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[35] Barbauld.

[36] Haraway, p. 2.

[37] D. H. Lawrence, 'The Mosquito,' *Birds Beasts and Flowers,* Project Gutenburg [online] (released 2019, originally London: Martin Secker: 1923).

[38] I use male pronouns for the mosquito since the speaker genders him as 'Monsieur.'

[39] Lawrence.

[40] Coetzee.

[41] Lawrence.

caterpillars to a ‘race,’[42] this speaker cannot pin the mosquito down. Instead, he bestows titles upon titles: ‘you exaltation’, ‘you phantom’, ‘Winged Victory’, ‘streaky sorcerer’, and more. Like Derrida’s description of ‘*fourmi*’ (ants), the mosquito is ‘the microscopic figure of innumerable multiplicity, of the incalculable, of what swarms and teems... without being taken in.’[43] The mosquito teems with names upon names that collapse and surge, from miniscule—'you speck’—to lofty—‘Winged Victory’—to simply ‘A nothingness.’[44]

To the speaker, the mosquito’s irreducibility seems beyond death. He is a ‘translucent phantom of frail corpus’, a ‘Ghoul.’ Despite his ‘frailty’, the mosquito has a power over the poet, ‘filthy magic’ that evades his human sovereignty. He is unable to kill the mosquito, not because he recognizes a vulnerable face, but because the creature is beyond him, able to ‘read [his] thoughts’ and numb him with ‘anaesthetic power.’ As Derrida writes in his analysis of Lawrence’s ‘Snake’, the poet’s sovereignty is ‘displaced’ by the nonhuman other: ‘I become subject to the other, but the other is sovereign.’[45] The poet is under the mosquito’s spell:

> Queer, how you stalk and prowl the air,
> In circles and evasions, enveloping me,
> Ghoul on Wings, Winged Victory.[46]

Enveloped by the mosquito—who is before, behind, surrounding[47]—the man follows the mosquito, becoming his subject, his prey.

The mosquito’s power lies in the ability to permeate the poet’s boundaries. Even before physically piercing him, the mosquito tears at his emotions, getting, as Martin Dines writes, ‘literally and

[42] Barbauld, l. 14.
[43] Jacques Derrida, ‘Ants,’ translated Eric Prenowitz, *Oxford Literary Review,* vol. 24 (Edinburgh University Press: 2002), pp. 17-24.
[44] Lawrence.
[45] Derrida, *The Beast,* p. 245.
[46] Lawrence.
[47] Derrida, ‘Animal,’ p. 380.

figuratively' under his skin.[48] Whereas Barbauld's speaker responds with pity, this man responds with rage. He blames the mosquito's 'hateful little trump... which shakes [his] sudden blood to hatred'. But he interrupts himself, asks the creature 'Why do you do it?', and responds 'They say you can't help it.' He satirizes his emotion, triggered by such a little creature, and has a bubble of sympathy for the mosquito, considering its possible 'innocen[ce].' But then, the mosquito finally achieves physical trespass, with a buzz that 'sounds so amazingly like a slogan / A yell of triumph':

> I behold you stand
>
> For a second enspasmed in oblivion,
>
> Obscenely ecstasied
>
> Sucking live blood
>
> My blood.
>
> Such silence, such suspended transport,
>
> Such gorging,
>
> Such obscenity of trespass.[49]

The poet is horrified by this 'obscenity of trespass', this other 'gorging' his own 'live blood.' He has reason to be afraid. Less than 30 years before this poem, Sir Ronald Ross discovered that mosquitos carry malaria.[50] The poet's sovereignty falls apart not just because the mosquito evades him, but because that tiny 'frail corpus' can kill him. Their vulnerability before each other comes together in this bloody trespass— mosquito and man bound up in a contamination that verges on death.

But the poet is not reduced to fear and rage. He is also fascinated by the magic and ecstasy of this trespass, carried away in the 'suspended transport' that combines the mosquito's blood—that 'super-

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[48] Dines, p. 61.

[49] Lawrence.

[50] 'Ross and the Discovery that Mosquitoes Transmit Malaria Parasites,' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *cdc.gov,* < https://www.cdc.gov/malaria/about/history/ross.html> [Accessed 15 December 2022].

magical / forbidden liquor'—with his. After this contamination, this 'super-magical' coming-together, he bestows another title to the mosquito: 'winged blood-drop.' This blood is *his* blood and he, now inside the body of the mosquito, flies away from himself. As Dines writes, his 'fear of violation gives way to a fantasy of breaking out of one's skin—of becoming mosquito.'[51] Whereas before he was beside himself with rage, now he is beside himself with blood and ecstasy and magic. He ponders:

> Can I not overtake you?
>
> Are you one too many for me
>
> Winged Victory?
>
> Am I not mosquito enough to out mosquito you? [52]

Like an almost-vanquished hero making his final stand, he follows the mosquito and becomes-frail, permeable, vulnerable— he becomes-mosquito.

And then, a gap.

Something happens which goes unwritten. Unlike the mosquito biting flesh, unlike the gardener exterminating caterpillars, there is no graphic description. Instead, a negation, a stanza break. We find ourselves in the aftermath:

> Queer, what a big stain my sucked blood makes
>
> Beside the infinitesimal faint smear of you!
>
> Queer, what a dim dark smudge you have disappeared into![53]

Man has killed mosquito; the self has killed the other. By killing the mosquito, the speaker attempts to reassert his boundaries, but his violence does not reestablish human sovereignty. Instead, the speaker is struck by a new kind of irreducibility: he 'finds himself quite literally beside himself.'[54] The infinity of

[51] Dines, p. 62.
[52] Lawrence.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Dines.

the Other cannot be extinguished because self and other are not separate but mutually permeating, becoming-with, comingling. The ‘infinitesimal faint smear of you’ is simultaneously the ‘big stain [of] my sucked blood.’ We, mosquito and man, surge and collapse into each other. The poem becomes, to quote Dines, a ‘productive commingling of self and other, human and insect.’[55] Rather than being killed in this violence, the poem emerges out of destruction like an insect from its exoskeleton.

Tangled in insect and human encounters, following a caterpillar with a face and a mosquito with a crown, we find ourselves — a human animal who becomes and becomes-with insects. In exposure to each other, in vulnerability and contamination, we find the ‘super-magical’ fellowship of multispecies worlds. As the mushroom-follower Anna Tsing writes, ‘We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge.’[56] Contamination tangles us in worlds of irreducible vulnerable bodies escaping their pins. D. H. Lawrence put it this way:

> So that now the universe has escaped from the pin which was pushed through it,
> like an impaled fly vainly buzzing: now that the multiple universe flies its own
> complicated course quite free, and hasn't got any hub, we can hope also to escape.
>
> We won't be pinned down, either.[57]

[55] Dines.
[56] Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the end of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 27.
[57] D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious,* (London: Martin Secker, 1930), p.20.