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Insects, worlds, and the poetic in Coetzee's writing

J. M. Coetzee's literary universe creates a space for creatures often thought so insignificant that they are mostly overlooked or, if noticed at all, discarded as useless pests. In his writing, we repeatedly experience moments of wonder when insects take centre-stage, touching characters and readers alike with awe at their power of transformation. These moments are like poetic epiphanies, flashes into worlds otherwise closed to human experience. But Coetzee's imagining of insects vis-à-vis his characters also challenges the way we think about the world in general and the environment in particular, not least our own role in it. Martin Heidegger is but one in a long line of philosophers at pains to reinforce the boundary drawn between human and animal, arguing that the animal, unlike the human, only has limited access to its surroundings. Yet it is also Heidegger who is early in his recognition of the repercussions of human arrogance on the environment. Zoologist Jakob von Uexküll's research into insect worlds challenges the understanding that the human has access to the world in its entirety, stressing the relational aspect that all living beings have with their surroundings, their *Umwelt*, the human animal included. Agamben brings to this the idea that all animals, even insects, experience a certain openness within their environment, a capacity that Heidegger granted only to the human. This diversity of environmental worlds shaped by species-specific needs and abilities suggests that humans are subject to the same mechanisms that limit access to the *Umwelt* of other creatures, from which follows that any attempt to know another being's *Umwelt* would involve a venture into territory which requires different and novel ways of seeing. Literature is the space which invites us into unknowable worlds and supplies us with the tongue to touch on the not-yet-formulated. Coetzee's poetic imagination draws our attention to what I would like to describe as an extraordinary rapport between insects and the poetic in

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his texts, both marked by being at once recognisable yet infinitely other, providing us with rare glimpses into unknowable worlds and our own implication in them.

Keywords

J. M. Coetzee; insects; the poetic; world; *Umwelt*; wonder; Derrida; Jakob von Uexküll; Martin Heidegger; Giorgio Agamben

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?
William Blake, 'The Fly'

His small Umbrella quaintly halved
Describing in the Air
An Arc alike inscrutable
Elate Philosopher
Emily Dickinson, 1575

This paper started its life in a very different shape; and it changed much during its gestation, much more, in fact, than is a common part of the writing process. Sketching the silences and mutenesses I have come to think of as a poetics of animacy, giving life to what appears inanimate, I found myself consistently drawn in another direction. I was bugged, *literally*, by a bug – more precisely, an insect, this tiniest and humblest of creatures, irresistibly marked by the paradox of its ubiquity and simultaneous invisibility.

I was first struck by its enigmatic pull on Coetzee's characters, and on me, reading the peculiar and powerful scene of torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Struck down by a hammer, the Magistrate seems to be more pained by the realisation that humans – 'the great miracle of creation' – would take so much pleasure in tormenting one another than by the physical assault itself. Crazed and blinded by the blow, he clings to consciousness reiterating a half-forgotten memory:

A miracle of creation – I pursue the thought but it eludes me like a whisp of smoke. It occurs to me that we crush insects beneath our feet, miracles of creation too, beetles, worms, cockroaches, ants, in their various ways.¹

As reader, I am simultaneously appalled and moved by the scene, appalled by its violence, but also moved by its startling sensitivity towards the smallest of the small, a creature barely recognised as an animal; the insect. For a moment the Magistrate is awe-struck by the insight that he shares the miracle of life with a creature that is at once recognisable and infinitely other; recognisable in its shared embodiedness, in its suffering when subjected to pain, yet infinitely other in its insectness, a being so different from ours that we can only guess at the way it perceives the world.

The question of world is important for my argument as it concerns the ways in which our idea of world has repercussions for the entire life of the planet, so I will return to it after a closer look at the insect as it appears in Coetzee. As critics have noted, and as I observed elsewhere, animals are a good starting point for entering Coetzee's literary universe as animals saturate his *oeuvre*, both in the literal and metaphorical sense. Animals infiltrate the language, steering vocabulary and imagery, shaping our perception of the characters. To give a few examples, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate refers to the Barbarian girl as a 'wild animal',² the prisoners clasp their hands to their faces 'like monkeys' paws'³ and the Magistrate is 'whining like a dog'.⁴ In *Disgrace*, Melanie 'slips under the quilted counterpane like a mole burrowing',⁵ submits to Lurie's sexual attentions 'like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck',⁶ Lurie 'wolves down' his food⁷ and is called a 'moral dinosaur' by his daughter Lucy.⁸ In *Dusklands*, Jacobus presents himself as a slayer of 'elephants, hippopotami, rhinoceres, buffalo, lions, leopards, dogs, giraffes, antelope and buck of all descriptions',⁹ tells us that he has 'always enjoyed watching coitus, whether of animals or of slaves',¹⁰ but is caught naked in the river 'like a sheep' while Bushman boys steel his trousers.¹¹ By the same token, the mortally injured Plaatje's 'eyes apologized like a dog's' and the screams of dying Bushmen are referred to as 'the bellowing of frogs'.¹²

But while the references to animals cited above (and generally citations by other critics too) mainly fall into the category of mammals, I was surprised to discover that Coetzee's novels abound in references to insects. I found, that once noticed, the insect was all of a sudden everywhere, loomed large in a multiplicity of ways in Coetzee's writing, inhabited whatever text I read, which, it seemed, turned on a creature so insignificant its presence in works of literature, biology and philosophy was disconcerting if not unsettling. Characters are described in insect-like terms and characters think of themselves as insects. Insects galore, and the more I puzzled over their mysterious presence, not least the way insects were referred to in connection to powerful scenes and moments of insights, the more I was struck by their improbable link to poetry, or, to be more precise, to *the poetic*. A closer look at a passage from *Dusklands* may flesh out what I here aim to elucidate, this elusive link between the

poetic at the heart of literature and Coetzee's insects. Eugene Dawn, for instance, in the 'Vietnam Project' section in *Dusklands*, muses that he finds 'insects fascinating' and, losing his grip on his project, 'would appreciate a firm grasp of cicadas'.¹³ Eugene, 'sitting day after day in solitary rooms secreting words as the spider secretes its web', despairs at his apparent inaptitude at giving his writing 'the air of a real world through the looking-glass'.¹⁴ Eugene Dawn's wish for 'a firm grasp of cicadas' and his reference to the act of writing as 'secreting words as the spider secretes its web' invoke a plethora of allusions. A powerful image here connects author and spider in a creative process at once physical and cerebral, and the web of words shares its enigmatic and secret quality with the spider's gossamer web.¹⁵ The verb 'secrete' cannily, or do I mean *uncannily*, communicates the stickiness of the web as an instrument of captivity as well as the duplicity of the art of the writer who 'generates and simultaneously conceals, brings something into light and at the same time shrouds it in darkness'.¹⁶ Let me stress that this duplicity is not limited to the writer's craft but is an inherent part of language. With this in mind, even the most accessible literary text is always also a work that 'emphasizes its enigmatic and secret quality'.¹⁷

Another image that springs to mind unbidden is Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott', sitting alone in her chamber, bound by a curse not to look at the world except through a looking-glass: 'But in her web she still delights/To weave the mirror's magic sights'.¹⁸ There is a sad poetry in these lines, the romance of the lady in her tower weaving while waiting for her knight in shining armour to break the curse, only to discover, to her cost, that the life of reality she longs for does not trump art. Coupled with the cicada in Coetzee's text, the poetic here enters surreptitiously in its most ancient shape. In their *Platonic Occasions*, a series of 'playfully serious and seriously playful' dialogues on literature, art and culture,¹⁹ Richard Begam and James Soderholm argue that, 'in the Platonic canon there are at least two Socrates, one of whom lingers with Phaedrus among the cicadas, those friends of the Muses who preferred art to life itself'.²⁰ This claim could serve almost like a comment on the Lady of Shalott who so tragically pined for the real. But more importantly, Begam and Soderholm remind us of the myth of the cicadas, quoting from Plato's *Phaedrus*, a tale worth repeating:

The story is that these creatures were once human beings, belonging to a time before the Muses were born, and that with the birth of the Muses and the appearance of song some of the people of the time were so unhinged by the pleasure that in their singing they neglected to eat and drink and failed to notice that they had died. From them the race of the cicadas later sprang.²¹

This myth grants poetic power to the cicadas, breathing inspiration into life and into the weave of the text. It would seem that there is 'something special about the relationship between poetry and animals, something that takes us, perhaps, to the very heart of what we mean by . . . "the poetic"'.²² For, as we know, the poetic does not belong to poetry only but to art as such, *at once recognisable and infinitely other*, which is, as we have seen in the 'miracle of creation' passage, as good a definition of an animal, or more specifically of an insect, as any. Art and its creative and critical potential rests in its ability to be non-identical with itself, in its power to strike us unawares, to touch, affect and trouble us. Art is not reducible to a single purpose, to the demand to justify itself in terms of usefulness, be it its ability to make us better people, or create political and social justice or to change the world. At the heart of art we find the poetic, which is always something more and other than we expect, inspiring an awe we cannot escape, something *untranslatable* glimpsed from the corner of our eyes, just out of our grasp. But there, unmistakably there.

This lure of untranslatability marks Coetzee's writing where figurative language relies heavily on animal terms, at once playing on resemblances and claiming special status for the human animal, yet never quite defining one or the other. In their eloquent discussion of poetry and its peculiar link to animals, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle remark on this failure of language to capture the very thing it sets out to delineate. Language, they point out, struggles in both instances to put into 'language what a specific animal is like', hence poems, especially animal poems, tend to convey 'a sense of the *impossibility* of finding the right words'.²³ One of the most alluring aspects of poetic language is precisely this inability to pin things down, that it is, as Bennett and Royle conclude, 'like an animal, *inscrutable*'.²⁴

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* Jacques Derrida makes a compelling case for the 'unsubstitutable singularity' of the animal, *any* animal, which he recognises as 'an existence that refuses to be conceptualized'.²⁵ He notes that this insight 'derives from poetry' and as such is beyond the grasp of philosophical knowledge, bound as it is to delimit and define.²⁶ For the poetic is precisely that which in its desire to give voice to the ineffable takes us to the very limits of language, reaching *beyond* its confines in the very process of using words, inviting us to *imagine* an otherness difficult to pin down. Derrida reminds us of his piece 'Che c'osè la Poesia?' ('What is Poetry?') where he explores the nature of the poetic, only to come to the conclusion that the poetic eludes all attempts at definition, so he envisages it in terms of a hedgehog, prickly, solitary, untamed. For Derrida, the hedgehog is a figure for the impulse that makes us love words in all their slipperiness, makes us want to remember certain phrases by heart, indeed, like a poem, it is 'the very thing that teaches the heart'.²⁷ Derrida's hedgehog is, as we know, not just any old hedgehog but an echo or ghost of Lewis Carroll's hedgehog

(‘I would of course have liked to inscribe my whole talk within a reading of Lewis Carroll’, as Derrida acknowledges in an aside).²⁸ So in keeping with his claims of his indebtedness to literature, we might want to remember that his thinking in this text as in so many others by him, if not all, ‘derives from poetry’.²⁹

Coetzee’s writer-protagonist Elizabeth Costello shares Derrida’s preference of poets over philosophers, as becomes apparent in her rejection of Köhler’s famous ape experiment in Tenerife as missing the point. ‘A good man ... but not a poet’, is her verdict, while well intentioned, Köhler seems to her locked in his observations, ill equipped to reach a fuller insight ‘with a feel for the ape’s experience’.³⁰ Ted Hughes, by contrast, is not bound by empirical method but free to turn to ‘poetic invention’ to make us feel an intense kinship with an otherness that generally remains beyond our reach, because for a wondrous moment Hughes ‘shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves’.³¹ And for Costello this wondrous moment comes into being through the poetic which in this instance *is* the animal it traces, mingling ‘breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will’.³² In this she echoes Hughes’ own understanding of the poetic which creates ‘a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside your own’.³³ Again, we encounter the poetic as something that is *at once recognisable and infinitely other*, forming a brief union of opposites that awards us a fleeting glimpse into something hidden from view.

Another such moment occurs between characters from *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*. In the former, Jacobus Coetzee, ‘the destroyer of the wilderness’³⁴ reveals a surprising fondness towards ‘a little black beetle’,³⁵ an insect that reappears on the pages of *The Heart of the Country* in the shape of Magda, who describes herself as ‘a thin black beetle with dummy wings who lays no eggs and blinks in the sun, a real puzzle to entomology’.³⁶ It is Magda who thinks of herself in terms of ‘a poetess of interiority, an explorer of the inwardness of stones, the emotion of ants’.³⁷ And it is Magda who claims that this is ‘a land made for insects who eat sand and lay eggs in each other’s corpses and have no voices with which to scream when they die’.³⁸ Eerily, her sentiments echo Jacobus’ pondering over what ‘passes through [the black beetle’s] mind during his last moments’.³⁹ Like Magda, Jacobus experiences an instant of feeling like an insect, a moment when he emerges from ‘the snug pupa of [his] blankets ... and stretched [his] wings’.⁴⁰ How odd that two so different characters – the poetess of interiority, sensitive to insect feeling, and Jacobus, a character so devoid of empathy for his fellow beings – should be drawn together by the image of the little black beetle. What is the special power of this smallest of creatures that its image recurs in literature in unforeseen ways?

The figure of the insect occupies a special place in the human imagination. Seen as creatures of beauty or as ugly pests, insects are remarkable in their powers of transformation and tend to evoke either admiration or revulsion. The least notable caterpillar will metamorphose into a graceful butterfly and the alluring dragonfly started out as a water larva, and as such these creatures catch our imagination. As Bruce Clarke notes, insects come in 'both angelic and daemonic anthropomorphic forms: the fluttering, ecstatic butterfly, the lethal wasp, the devout and philanthropic praying mantis' and points also to this tendency of perceiving 'insects [as] uninvited guests, parasites that insinuate themselves into houses'.⁴¹ While some insects fascinate and charm us, the majority it seems we find repulsive. Insects such as mosquitoes and ticks, seen as carriers of disease, are generally deemed useless pests.⁴² But more than anything, insects fascinate in their ability to shift shape, to metamorphose from earthbound grub into a winged creature of the air. They symbolise the ability to change more than any other animal alive and in this respect there exists a peculiar affinity between the figure of the insect and the poetic, both imbued with that magical power of transformation.

Before I look more closely at a few more instances of this extraordinary rapport between insects and the poetic in Coetzee's writing, let me briefly turn to a discussion of insects and world in scientific and philosophical discourse. When we talk about 'world' in everyday language we tend to think about the world as it appears to us, that is, our planet. World means 'our world', the world of humans, and as has become increasingly obvious of late, we perceive our world to be challenged by the rapid destruction of wildlife habitats and the ongoing extinction of countless species.⁴³ Slowly a consensus is emerging that suggests that this destruction is driven by an anthropocentrism that is now threatening our own existence. 'Meanwhile', as Heidegger recognised, 'man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself and postures as lord of the earth'.⁴⁴ This observation still holds true, I might add, for Heidegger made his claim at a lecture some sixty years ago. In December 1949 to be precise, long before the term 'the Anthropocene' gained currency to name the age shaped by and revealing the far-reaching and often disastrous impact human existence has had, and continues to have, on the planet and its life forms. Heidegger observes that 'the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct',⁴⁵ which, in turn, 'gives rise to one final delusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself'.⁴⁶ As we will see, this is an apt depiction of a prevalent misconception.

A telling example comes to mind, from Steven Connor's thought-provoking treatise *Fly*. Flies are, in the words of André Bay, quoted in Connor, 'the constant, immemorial witnesses to the human comedy' yet 'we are not

in the picture for them' as they do not notice us other than for their interest in 'our blood, sweat and tears, our droppings'.⁴⁷ Connor observes, drily, that

[w]hat we see in the fly is ourselves unseen by it; we are needled and made uneasy by our insignificance to this most definitionally insignificant creature.⁴⁸

But the human is not at the centre of the world, and however much we pretend otherwise, 'the question of animals and animality watches over us all, every moment'.⁴⁹ So it may well be worth to give some thought to how we think about insects and the ways in which 'this most definitionally insignificant creature' influences our philosophy about the world and our place in it. The theory of natural selection formulated in Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and *On the Descent of Man* (1874) transformed our understanding of the world and of our place in it. The scramble for limited resources ('competitive edge') guaranteed the survival of the fittest, rooting out less successful variations as abnormalities. Or so the story goes. But Darwin's theory also placed *man* within this framework of survival of the fittest, descended from and related to the great apes, clearly a mammal among other mammals. Ever since Darwin, the competitive drive has dominated evolution theory, but increasingly voices come to the fore pointing out what Darwin's focus on competition, on tooth and fang, overlooked – evolution through attraction.⁵⁰

Challenging the dominant Darwinian view of life as the result of a causal process of natural selection, zoologist Jakob von Uexküll studied the environments of insects in particular, to discover the different ways in which living beings experience their environment *subjectively* and how this perception determines their behaviour.⁵¹ His study of the tick reveals its ability to respond to certain markers and signs ('carriers of significance') in its environment, three, to be precise: odour of butyric acid, temperature of 37 degrees and certain skin characteristics. The tick responds to these markers only, which also form the limits of its world. This suggests that the external world [*Welt*] and the general surroundings [*Umgebung*] are meaningless to the insect. Uexküll refers to the tick's perceptual environment as its *Umwelt*, a soap-bubble like field that functions as a closed unit, open only to the senses, needs and abilities of its particular inhabitant species. *Umwelt*, then, is the unique phenomenological world embracing each individual, constituting a species-specific, spatio-temporal self-in-the-world perspective, denoting the subjective world of organisms.

Interestingly, while Uexküll differentiates between human and animal *Umwelten*, he does not limit this web-like *Umwelt* to animals. The same

soap-bubble like environment surrounds human beings and in this way shapes their subjective perceptions, so that 'each of our fellow human beings [is] enclosed in bubbles that effortlessly overlap one another because they are made up of subjective perception signs'.⁵² The general surroundings, what Uexküll calls *Umgebung*, comprises our own *Umwelt*, which then leads us to believe, as Giorgio Agamben notes, 'in a single world in which all living beings are situated'.⁵³ But this is an illusion according to Uexküll, who, throughout his work, stresses the existence of multiple worlds, contending that 'there no more exists a single world than there exists a single organism that inhabits it'.⁵⁴ It would seem to be the arrogance, and tragedy, of the human being to take his own *Umwelt* as the ultimate *Umwelt* of all creatures when instead there are as many environments as there are animals, and the relation between animal and *Umwelt* has to be understood in terms of interaction, '[meshing] with one another in the intricate web of life'.⁵⁵

In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben, noting that Uexküll was 'particularly fond' of 'tiny organisms', reminds us of the distance between human and insect worlds, and of Uexküll's reimaginings of the environments of spiders and the tick as 'excursions in unknowable worlds'.⁵⁶ Imagine, for instance, with Agamben, the tick 'suspended in her bush on a nice summer day, immersed in the sunlight and surrounded on all sides by the colours and smells of wildflowers, by the buzzing of the bees and other insects, by the birds' singing'.⁵⁷ An idyllic picture, but, Agamben assures us, the tick (*Ixodes ricinus*) 'perceives absolutely none of it' as its world consists only of 'the odor of butyric acid, which emanates from the sebaceous follicles of all mammals' which in turn 'works on the tick as a signal that causes her to abandon her post and fall blindly downward toward her prey'.⁵⁸ This suggests, as Uexküll claims, that 'no animal can enter into relation with an object as such'.⁵⁹ Instead

The fly, the dragonfly, and the bee that we observe flying next to us on a sunny day do not move in the same world as the one in which we observe them, nor do they share with us – or with each other – the same time and the same space.⁶⁰

Note that Uexküll does not attribute any particular privilege to the human *Umwelt*, or perceives animal captivation in its respective *Umwelt* in terms of deprivation. What he draws attention to is the importance of recognising the existence of countless worlds, each and every one specific to its creature and mainly closed to all the others. If Uexküll is correct in his interpretation of the diversity of the multitude of environmental worlds (*Umwelten*) shaped by the species particular senses, needs and abilities, then the human has, at best, only limited access to the *Umwelt* of another creature and any

such venture would inevitably constitute ‘an excursion in unknowable worlds’.

Literature is the space which invites us into unknowable worlds, where the imagination is at liberty to imagine the not-yet-formulated, and the poetic in particular is the place that allows us to touch on that which escapes definition. If science and philosophy demonstrate a disconcerting fascination with the humblest of creatures, insects animate literature both in a metaphorical and literal sense. One of Kafka’s most memorable and enigmatic stories opens with this line: ‘When Gregor Samsa awoke from troubled dreams one morning, he found that he had been transformed in his bed into an enormous bug’.⁶¹ This bug is generally envisaged as a cockroach, an interpretation supported by the German original: ‘Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren *Ungeziefer* verwandelt’.⁶² The German term ‘*Ungeziefer*’ today refers to vermin in general, that is, animals that are considered to be useless pests. But if we look at the etymology of the word, we learn that it has a long history, deriving from ‘the Middle High German *ungezibere*, originally denoting an unclean animal unsuited for sacrificial purposes’.⁶³ So from its earliest conception, ‘*Ungeziefer*’ carried negative connotations of unpleasantness, uncleanliness, lack of value. The very first thing we learn about Gregor is that he has changed into an enormous bug, an insect made monstrous not by its transformation into an insect, but by its metamorphosis into an insect of human dimensions. This uneasy mingling of human and insect violates all kinds of sensitivities and this is precisely the transformation that Gregor lives through, and as a result the human *Umwelt* increasingly becomes both a strange and dangerous place for Gregor-the-cockroach, an *Umwelt* that has little space and even less sympathy for a creature far older than humankind. Yet this monstrous insect displays a rare empathy for his human family that is not reciprocated by them and still more amazing, sets in motion another metamorphosis in his family, most notably in his sister Grete. It seems as if she mirrors his transformation in reverse, becoming more self-reliant the more he recedes into insectness, taking control of her own life as he loses his own.

While Kafka’s enigmatic story invokes a monstrous mix of man and insect, Coetzee turns to the cockroach as a potent symbol for indestructibility. At a speech addressed to the Weekly Mail Book Week almost 28 years ago (9 November 1987), Coetzee activates and plays on any number of associations, employing parable to explain why neither novel nor storytelling are handmaidens to history and more than capable of taking care of themselves. In Coetzee’s words –

Storytelling is another, an *other* mode of thinking. It is more venerable than history, as ancient as the cockroach. Nor is this primitiveness

the only way in which stories resemble cockroaches. Like cockroaches, stories can be consumed. All you need to do is tear off the wings and sprinkle a little salt on them. They are nourishing, to a degree, though if you are truly looking for nourishment you would probably look elsewhere. Cockroaches can also be colonised. You can capture them in a cockroach trap, breed them (quite easily), herd them together in cockroach farms. You can put pins through them and mount them in cases, with labels. You can use their wings to cover lampshades with. You can do minute dissections of their respiratory systems, and stain them, and photograph them, and frame them, and hang them on the wall. You can, if you wish, dry them and powder them and mix them with high explosives and make bombs of them. You can even make up stories about them, as Kafka did, though this is quite hard. One of the things you cannot – apparently – do is eradicate them. They breed, as the figure has it, lies flies, and under the harshest circumstances. It is not known for what reason they are on this earth, which would probably be a nicer place – certainly an easier place to understand – without them. It is said that they will still be around when we and all our artefacts have disappeared.⁶⁴

Indeed. The story, like the cockroach, is inscrutable in its singularity, and Kafka's tale is as good an example as any. Gregor-the-cockroach lends himself to any number of interpretations as critical readings attest to, maybe because he embodies that elusive *je ne sais quoi* characteristic of animals and the poetic. In its strangeness and unpredictability the story takes us to the heart of the poetic; you cannot pin down the lines any more than you can define the creature, yet we are given a glimpse into strange worlds, at once recognisable and infinitely other, we are struck with awe at its power to move us.

Let me return to Coetzee's literary oeuvre where insects figure strongly, both in a literal sense *as* insects, but also as Muses, so crucial, and often cruel, to the art (and the plight) of the writer. In *Foe*, Susan, that metafictional interloper in a novel that retraces Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* but so blatantly misses all the characteristic traits of the robinsonnade, despairs at the inspiration that keeps eluding her:

Can you recall no moment at which the purpose of our life here has been all at once illuminated? . . . have you never been struck of a sudden by the living, breathing quality of this island, as if it were some great beast from before the Flood that has slept through the centuries insensible of the insects scurrying on its back, scratching an existence for themselves? Are we insects, Crusoe, in the greater view? Are we no better than the ants?⁶⁵

Coetzee's Cruso remains silent but the reader recalls the emptiness of the barren walls he built with such industriousness, which uncannily aligns him with the ants of Susan's question. So industriousness to no purpose instead of creativity and the song of the cicadas, emptiness instead of inspiration, and a Cruso who is recognisable but at once so different from his famous namesake.

In *White Writing*, discussing Olive Schreiner's African Farm in 'Farm Novel and Plaasroman', Schreiner's farm is described as invoking two chronographies, coexisting, split, 'at war with nature'.⁶⁶ The first is 'extending from prehistory to a posthistory after man' and in it, 'the life span of individuals and even of peoples constitutes negligible intervals'.⁶⁷ Then there is a 'second scale of nonhuman time and distance ... by whose measure the plants and insects of the Karoo live'.⁶⁸ Here a 'pulsing and complex life goes on in the monotonous red sand, generations passing away, empires rising and falling within the space of a season'. Indeed, whatever life there is 'in the veld, it is not the life of sheep – which stand about sluggish and heat-stunned – but the life of insects'.⁶⁹ Man and sheep here belong to the same human chronography, transient, of little import in the greater scheme of things, which belongs to insects who know how to live in tune with a nature that is perceived as hostile to humankind and its insensitivity to the needs of the non-human. Insect world and human world coexist side by side, closed to another except for rare moments when the worlds collide.

In Coetzee's literary worlds, these collisions happen in unpredictable ways, and I would like to end by discussing a scene I have addressed in another context elsewhere.⁷⁰ It bears looking at again as it is a striking example of an instance where the insect trope comes into its own in a wily linkage of characters and insects in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where categories leak into one another, and characters are intricately allied through insect imagery, predator and prey are coupled in an uneasy and troubling relationship.

Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau introduces himself as top predator into the story, bragging about 'the last drive he rode in, when thousands of deer, pigs and bears were slain, so many that a mountain of carcasses had to be left to rot'.⁷¹ The novel's opening line links the insect trope to blindness, describing the puzzlement the Magistrate experiences faced with Joll's sunglasses: 'Is he blind?'.⁷² These glasses are referred to as looking 'opaque from the outside' but with the understanding that Joll 'can see through them'.⁷³ The Magistrate perceives the glasses in terms of 'two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me' which simultaneously portrays Joll as an Other and as the Magistrate's *doppelgänger*/double.⁷⁴

Eerily, Joll's glasses-cum-reflected-image-of-the-Magistrate perfectly mirror 'the dead centres of [the Barbarian girl's] eyes, from which twin reflections of [the Magistrate] stare solemnly back'.⁷⁵ In this instance torturer and victim are one, both equally unreadable to the Magistrate. All he is left with is 'a surface across which [he] hunts back and forth seeking entry . . . the body of the other one, closed, ponderous, sleeping in [his] bed in a faraway room, seems beyond comprehension'.⁷⁶ And yet, these insect-like unreadable eyes prefigure the coming together of the Magistrate and the Barbarian girl through the image of 'the worm-like sear in the corner'⁷⁷ of the girl's eye and the 'crust like a fat caterpillar' that has formed on the wound of the Magistrate's cheek,⁷⁸ for a split second creating an unholy trinity of torturer, victim, and voyeur-like observer, all locked in frozen immobility like an insect mounted in a glass case. There is a poetic ring to this familiar yet ultimately inscrutable constellation, in the dense imagery and choice of words, and its activating conflicting (mis)conceptions we hold about a creature we know (and think) very little about, ranging from helpless victimhood to repulsive mindless determination. And it appears almost like poetic justice that the character of the Magistrate, so alluring in his willingness to do good, and so pathetic in his indulgent self-delusion, is the one to give words to a bitter truth. In this scenario, there is no simple black or white, guilt or innocence, winner or loser, definitions are impossible as boundaries overflow and meaning shifts as perspectives change.

As we have seen, Coetzee's writing creates a space for the smallest and humblest of creatures, ubiquitous yet unseen, inviting us to pay attention to that which is recognisable yet infinitely other. Insects serve as connectives between the most unlikely of characters, creating sympathies and synergies where least expected, marking moments of rare poetic beauty. The complex ways in which characters and animals are handled in his texts gives credence to Uexküll's claim that all living creatures ought to be understood not as objects at our mercy but as subjects interacting with their particular web that forms their *Umwelt*. Coetzee's poetic imagination allows us a glimpse into unknowable worlds that otherwise would remain beyond our ken, alerting us to the multitude of ways in which insects, 'these most definitionally insignificant creatures' in their 'inscrutable singularity' are 'miracles of creation too'. In this, Coetzee's writing creates a bridge between human and animal worlds, insisting on their mutual interdependence, where damage done to the one inevitably signifies harm to the other.

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Disclosure statement

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Notes

- 1 J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 107.
- 2 Ibid., p. 34.
- 3 Ibid., p. 107.
- 4 Ibid., p. 108.
- 5 J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Viking, 1999), p. 25.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., p. 61.
- 8 Ibid., p. 89.
- 9 J. M. Coetzee, *Dusklands*. 1974 (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 79.
- 10 Ibid., p. 86.
- 11 Ibid., p. 89.
- 12 Ibid., p. 103.
- 13 Ibid., p. 36.
- 14 Ibid., p. 37.
- 15 The text itself is literally ‘a web of words’ as it derives from the Latin *textere*, *to weave*.
- 16 María J. López, *Acts of Visitation: The Narrative of J. M. Coetzee* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), p. 49.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Lord Alfred Tennyson, ‘The Lady of Shalott’, lines 64–5.
- 19 Richard Begam and James Soderholm, *Platonic Occasions: Dialogues on Literature, Art and Culture*. (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2015), p. xiii.
- 20 Ibid., p. 164.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Fourth Edition (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009), p. 152.
- 23 Ibid., p. 154.
- 24 Ibid., p. 153.
- 25 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 9.
- 26 Ibid., p. 7.
- 27 Jacques Derrida, ‘Che cos’è la poesia?’, trans. Peggy Kamouf, in *Points ... Interviews, 1974–94*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 295.
- 28 Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, p. 7.
- 29 It is tempting to see Derrida’s neologism, *animot*, as an attempt at giving voice to that which cannot be named without also doing violence to it, invoking at

- once the duplicity of language, the conflation of countless species within one word, and the germ of thinking otherwise.
- 30 J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 29–30.
 - 31 Ibid., p. 53.
 - 32 Ibid.
 - 33 Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making* (London: Faber, 1967), p. 17.
 - 34 Coetzee, *Dusklands*, p. 79.
 - 35 Ibid., p. 96.
 - 36 J. M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 18.
 - 37 Ibid., p. 35.
 - 38 Ibid., p. 108.
 - 39 Coetzee, *Dusklands*, p. 96.
 - 40 Ibid., p. 98.
 - 41 Bruce Clarke, *Allegories of Writing: The Subject of Metamorphosis* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 86.
 - 42 At the time of writing a newsflash travels around the world warning of the rapid spread of the Zika virus which is suspected to cause microcephaly in unborn children. Not surprisingly, the immediate response to this threat is the use of pesticides in a (vain) attempt to eradicate the mosquitoes from the face of the earth, echoing Conrad's 'exterminate all the brutes!'
 - 43 According to the *Living Blue Planet Report* published by the World Wildlife Fund in collaboration with the Zoological Society of London in September 2015, about half of all marine animal and plant life has been lost in 40 years. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/publications/living-blue-planet-report-2015>.
 - 44 Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1992), pp. 307–43, 332.
 - 45 Ibid.
 - 46 Ibid.
 - 47 Steven Connor, *Fly* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 7, 182.
 - 48 Ibid.
 - 49 Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature*, p. 152.
 - 50 Darwin was affected by the power of beauty, 'aesthetic selection', and returned to a discussion of co-evolution in his *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animal* (1872).
 - 51 *Umweltforschung*: the investigation of the communicative unity of the organism and the world sensed by it. Organisms should not be understood as objects, but as sensitive subjects actively creating their *Umwelt*. Focus on the organism's abilities to integrate itself into a complex environment.
 - 52 Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans* (J. D. O'Neil, Trans.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 70. German original: *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen: Ein Bilderbuch unsichtbarer Welten* (Sammlung: Verständliche Wissenschaft, Bd. 21.) Berlin: J. Springer, 1934).

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- 53 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 40.
- 54 Uexküll, *Foray*, p. 22.
- 55 Ibid., p. 25.
- 56 Agamben, *Open*, p. 40.
- 57 Ibid., p. 46.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ibid., p. 42.
- 60 Ibid., p. 40.
- 61 Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 11.
- 62 Franz Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2013), p. 5.
- 63 Patrick O'Neill, *Transforming Kafka: Translation Effects* (Toronto: University of Toronto) 2014), p. 69.
- 64 J. M. Coetzee, 'The Novel Today', *Upstream* 6.1 (1988): pp. 2–5, 4. Coetzee's words prefigure the resigned response by another John, John Costello, to his mother's claim that we no longer feel enough to hate animals, all we are left with is contempt, to which John retorts 'insects . . . may beat us yet. They will certainly outlast us.' *The Lives of Animals*, p. 59.
- 65 J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986), p. 89.
- 66 J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 65.
- 67 Ibid., p. 64.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Ibid., p. 66.
- 70 Claudia Egerer, 'The Speaking Animal Speaking the Animal: Three Turning points in Thinking the Animal', in Ansgar Nünning and Kai Sicks (eds.), *Turning Points: Concepts and Narratives of Change in Literature and Other Media*. (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 437–52.
- 71 Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 1.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Ibid., p. 44.
- 75 Ibid., 41.
- 76 Ibid., pp. 43, 42.
- 77 Ibid., p. 41.
- 78 Ibid., p. 115.