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## Rachel Murray, *The Modernist Exoskeleton: Insects, War, Literary Form*

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**THE MODERNIST EXOSKELETON:  
INSECTS, WAR, LITERARY FORM**  
by Rachel Murray

*Reviewed by Alan Munton, University of Exeter*

This book establishes a new concept for modernism: the presence of insects.<sup>1</sup> It is an unexpected argument persuasively made by Rachel Murray's intense and significantly theorized discussion. Four authors are discussed: Wyndham Lewis, D. H. Lawrence, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), and Samuel Beckett. Simply to name this diverse group shows how pervasive insectification has been, and a mass of new words is involved (though "insectification" is not yet one of them). The term "exoskeleton" refers to what holds an insect together from outside: unlike us, they have no internal structure. The exoskeleton is made of chitin, which is related to glucose, and in many insects it falls off and has to be regrown again and again. (The painting *Mr. Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* shows, we shall be told, its subject's features "beneath a chitinous facial armour" [33].) In literature, the obvious example is Gregor Samsa, who in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) wakes up as a large but unspecified insect. An early quotation is from this source, and Murray uses the date of the story's publication, 1915, to move to the theme of war. She does this through a quotation from Lewis's account of his war experience in *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), where he saw men "become stuck like houseflies upon a section of flypaper, in a marshy patch" (BB 1967, 161). (The quotation neglects to mention that these men were sitting on a pole "with their pants down"!) Murray then makes a significant legitimating statement: "Insects, it seems, played a surprisingly prominent role in Western society's self-understanding during this period, helping scientists and artists alike to think through some of the central concerns of the modern age" (8).

If this large claim can be justified, we shall have to think about modernism in new ways. Which "central concerns" did D. H. Lawrence engage with? It isn't immediately apparent that there are many insects in his best-known works: *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920) get a mention, but the main discussion is of *The Ladybird* (1923), *Kangaroo* (1923), and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). The first two are problematic in various ways: *Kangaroo*, set in Australia, "allows itself to be contaminated by the rhetoric of fascism" but encourages the reader to fight back (84). The primary term here is "swarm," which means human swarms, or crowds in a democracy, and where the main character, former soldier Richard Somers, "is caught like a fly on flypaper," in

the novel's words (77). Unlike the character nicknamed Kangaroo—a political reactionary—Somers represents the individual accepting collective life “in all its sticky discomfort” (78). Citing Arthur Rimbaud in a rather complex allusion, Murray argues that a “swarm poesis” allows Lawrence to “harness [the] turbulent energy” of the swarm (78). It will be apparent from this that the insect argument becomes complex and allusive, but at the same time asserts the significance of positive energy in interwar society. In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the hardness of the insect's shell is lifted so that the selves of Connie and Mellors may emerge “tenderly” (90, quoting the novel) and develop into identities that can survive in the new collectivity, or swarm. The title of this chapter is “Formication,” but *Lady Chatterley*, needless to say perhaps, allows a discussion of fornication around a minor character's mention of “th' insex.” This witty transition from insects to sex helps renew “the boundaries of the self” (89) against the threat of dissolution, though this is a wider concept that some readers may have difficulties with.

The discussion of H.D.'s novels—but not her poetry—is very different. She was in a disturbed marriage to Richard Aldington, was a friend of Lawrence, a lover of Ezra Pound and of Bryher and other women, and an analysand of Sigmund Freud. Internalization is crucial to her fiction. That often deals with the world wars and their associated traumas. These include the loss of a child at birth, as is developed in *Asphodel* (1921–22, published 1992), in which the Aldington figure is “like a great moth” (110), and the main character Hermione endures a “cocoon state,” which gives this chapter its title. In *Nights* (1935) a character based on Pound resembles a giant mosquito (111). In *Bid Me to Live: A Madrigal* (1949, published 1960) Julia undergoes war while “a frail-spiderweb of a silver cord’ . . . weaves its way through her psyche” (122); here the character Rico, based on Lawrence, draws Julia into a relationship in which she finds herself “drawn inexorably to his ‘spider feelers’” (123). Whereas Lawrence conceives identity as a “vital potential self,” Murray understands H.D. as exploring identity as “a state of radical indeterminacy” (124). Insects make persistent appearances in H.D.'s fiction, and help generate a genuine sense that outside shells can be active generators of subjective modernist experience.

Samuel Beckett is far more clearly committed to insect forms. In 1948 he wrote a letter proposing that it was “in the eternally larval” (129) that being and non-being should be sought. His work is predominantly a critique of the exoskeleton, “the psyche as an armoured structure” (135), leading him to invoke Charles Darwin's interest in the developmental potential of the caterpillar. In *Murphy* (1938) the title character represents the larval, while Endon, his opposite, has a consciousness “encased within a solipsistic shell” (139), in Murray's words. Beckett even invented the word “vermigrade,” which is recognized by the *Oxford English Dictionary* and means “proceeding in a worm-like manner” (140). In *Malone meurt* (1951) Macmann is described as

“nu comme un ver,” or “naked as a worm” (142). In *The Unnamable* (1953) there is, next to the unnamed figure, a character (if that is not too definite a word) named Worm. A complex argument ensues. The main figure, though without a name, is real; Worm scarcely exists, yet performs an essential function in the structure of Beckett’s thinking, which derives directly from Henri Bergson, specifically from his *Creative Evolution* (1907). This argument places instinct above the word—that is, animal instinct, which is the development from larvae to insects, means that the successful arrival of a completed butterfly or moth allows Beckett to practice a language of instinct that takes precedence over words that attempt to define the world precisely. The outcome is the writing in *The Unnamable*, and elsewhere, which Beckett—writing about Proust—sets out as a desire for “instinctive perception” over phenomena that have been “distorted into intelligibility in order to be forced into a chain of cause and effect” (143). Murray’s summary is that Beckett is attempting “to transport subject and text alike back towards a more elementary stage of existence, a process that entails resisting, often unsuccessfully, the pull of ‘the great life torrent’ of narrative” (144). I was grateful for the description “often unsuccessfully,” because—as much as I enjoy Beckett’s writing—I did not want to submit wholly to a conceptual world dominated by the “instinctive” activities of insects. Murray has more of value to say, but this summary will have to suffice.

What, then, of Wyndham Lewis? He turns up in asides and supportive comments throughout this book, and seems to have something relevant for all the authors discussed here. Rachel Murray herself won the 2015 Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust Essay Prize with an outstanding essay entitled “‘Diabolical Indigestion’: Forms of Distaste in Wyndham Lewis’s Body of Work,” which ranged perceptively across much of what he wrote (see *JWLS* 6, 2015); Murray has a grasp of both generality and detail, and that emerges significantly here. The most important source for the study of insects is the work of Jean-Henri Fabre, and Murray finds plenty of evidence that Lewis read Fabre (1823–1915), whose series *Souvenirs entomologiques* established him as an entertaining and widely read expert observer of the behavior of insects of all kinds. Murray establishes that Lewis would have read Fabre in translation in *The English Review* before the war, and that he held in his library J. Arthur Thompson’s *Outlines of Zoology* from 1895, and the 1915 edition of John Lubbock’s *Ants, Bees and Wasps*, while also referring to work by Maurice Maeterlinck and to the myrmecologist Auguste Forel’s *The Senses of Insects* (1908). This is a remarkable discovery, all the more so in that it has scarcely been noticed by mainstream Lewis criticism.

Insects are there in “Candleman’s Spring Mate,” in *The Caliph’s Design*, and above all in the 1922 version of the short story “Bestre,” which is here discussed across five pages. Insects show up three times, but Murray makes a skillful analysis of much more, with a particular discussion of Bestre’s intense

gaze through the window, which “explod[es] the distinction between inside and outside, subject and object, self and surroundings” (36). Madame Riviere, the put-upon woman, has an appearance that resembles a large Coleoptera, or beetle, with her “feline battle mask” that puts her into relation with Fabre’s researches. When Bestre cannot break her using his hostile gaze, he exposes himself to her, thereby protecting himself against her stare. Murray goes on to quote from a Lewis essay in *The Tyro* itself, where he reflects that “We are all, in a sense even, so thoroughly hidden from each other because we *see* each other,” and she invokes Freud’s “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” (1915) to suggest that when Bestre’s self-exposure makes him “the object of the gaze,” Lewis is proposing that “Bestre achieves a degree of mastery over the conditions of his [self] exposure” (37–38). This argument, the invocation of Freud, and the reimagining of what would normally be considered Bestre’s oppressive gesture, is fascinating and persuasive.

The discussion of *The Childermass* (1928) begins by drawing attention to the many “exuviae” found on the Time-flats that Pulley and Satters negotiate; this is a term for the exoskeletal remains of the selves that they encounter. The novel has such words as “anopheles,” “ephemerids,” and “epeira,” all of which occur in Fabre and the other books Lewis owned. (Mosquitoes, mayflies, and spiders, should you not know.) The theme of war is present here, given Pullman’s experience, and this fulfills another aspect of Murray’s argument. The author further argues that this novel is a critique of the way in which modernism, in Lewis’s view, was no longer strikingly original, so that mimicry (conceived as positive) becomes a way of remaining creative. For Fabre, mimicry embodies “the sheer variety of adaptive behaviours in the insect world” (40) rather than a Darwinian struggle for survival. The arrival of Alectryon near the end leads to Murray’s proposition that there are “signs of fascism” in the novel that are “most troubling in that they resemble little more than a superficial colouring” (49). That surely suggests that the signs are trivial. Why mention fascism and then (“superficial”) withdraw from it? In my view the reader is not expected to sympathize with Alectryon; he talks mostly about sexuality in a peculiar way that is satirical and not to be taken seriously. His cloak has “a bangkok swastika temple design” (C, 294) on it, which probably means that it is not the sloped Nazi version, but instead the perpendicular Thai religious version, meaning good luck and prosperity. This is therefore not what Murray calls “a troubling development” (48) in *The Childermass*. These are difficult matters, I agree, but more caution should be exercised in linking Lewis with extremist politics on such slight and contestable evidence.

The positive reading of insect life here stands alongside a different concept, with which I had some difficulty. *The Childermass*, Murray says, gives insight “into the surface modifications that Lewis made to his body of work in the late 1920s” so that he could resist the “destructive forces in his cultural

surroundings” (40). This looks like Lewis’s critique of culture and society—in other words, his central concern: satire. Yet the word “satire” is not used here, and these “surface modifications” are mentioned again but never defined, though they become “increasingly frenzied” and indeed show “the versatility of his outward shell” (43). Perhaps Lewis has become a functioning insect?

*Snooty Baronet* (1932) mentions Fabre in its first chapter, and Murray argues that the entomologist inspires Snooty’s attempts to present “my human specimens” on “the same footing as ape or insect” (52–53). The problem is that the author has decided that Snooty is a version of Lewis himself, and that he “submits an extreme, unrepentant version of himself to intense scrutiny” (52) in the novel. Snooty is as he is because he holds behaviorist theories about human identity, and the novel is a critique of the self that develops from that pseudoscientific theory. Lewis’s own identity is not at issue in any case; but since Murray nowhere mentions behaviorism, this suggests that her discussion contains a significant misreading. To argue further that Lewis’s writing “slips between the role of victimiser and victim, predator and prey” and that Snooty also “resembles a grotesque caricature of his author” (who is nevertheless “fascinated by insects” [52]) is perhaps incautious in drawing too direct a parallel between author and text, and accordingly risks misrepresenting Lewis himself.

A similar assumption about Lewis’s fictional presence occurs in the discussion of *The Revenge for Love* (1937), where Percy Hardcaster is said to resemble Lewis (he’s called Percy, after all). According to Murray, this is “a work of political satire set during the Spanish Civil War” (56), which it is not—it was carefully set before fighting began. There is plenty of satire around Hardcaster, but this phrase ignores the account of the love affair between Margot and Victor, which is crucial to the novel. For me this is an unpersuasive reading of the moving moment in the last lines of the novel when Percy at last shows some human feeling when he learns that the couple have died and “a sudden tear” rolls down his face. Fredric Jameson’s well-regarded remark that “there hangs and gleams the realest tear in all literature” is dismissed because Stella Benson, sitting for a portrait, had noticed Lewis’s *teeth* were gleaming! For Murray to describe *Revenge* as “more sentimental” than his earlier fiction is, I feel, inaccurate. Surely it is not sentimental at all, but is rather the first of Lewis’s novels to strive purposefully after a humane outlook, which is a quite different matter.

This discussion of Lewis is uneven, therefore. At its best it is excellent—there are fascinating pages on Lewis’s appearance in Joyce’s “The Ondt and the Gracehoper,” (1928) which I haven’t space to discuss, for example. In its weaker moments it succumbs to the temptation to give Lewis himself a hard time, as though his personal behavior were an aspect of his writing. Altogether, this book is complex and often difficult, as it moves rapidly from text to theory and back again. Nevertheless, the perceptive reading of the texts of all four authors, and the extraordinary range of Rachel Murray’s reading, together with her remarkable ability to find valid points

of reference in a multitude of places, will remain valuable for us all. We shall live with modernist insects.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Rachel Murray, *The Modernist Exoskeleton: Insects, War, Literary Form* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2020, 2022), 210 pages.