Following Snakes and Moths: Modernist Ethics and Posthumanism

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In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Jacques Derrida turns to D. H. Lawrence's modernist animal aesthetics when searching for an ethical encounter not centered on the human subject. Lawrence's poem "Snake," his "ironic or perverse translation of the Garden of Eden,"[1] not only presents a meeting between a human and radically other nonhuman creature but a creature who "comes before" the human, a coming before that is the foundation of Derrida's animal ethics (2009, 246, 240). As Lawrence makes clear, the human speaker of the poem must "stand and wait, for there he [the snake] was at the trough before me" ([1923] 1999, 99). But the snake that comes before the speaker is a threat because it is of the "earth-golden" kind that is "venomous" and should, according to the "voice of [his] education," therefore "be killed" (99–100). For Derrida this raises a "moral question: must I respect and leave the first comer to do as he will, even if I see that he is dangerous?" Is the only solution here a "fight to the death," where the (hu)man will show his strength, his instinctive or trained will for survival? (2009, 240).

The response of Lawrence's speaker is actually, at least initially, to undercut this potentially violent scene of opposition between human and beast:

> But must I confess how I liked him,
> How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at
> my water-trough
> And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,
> Into the burning bowels of the earth? ([1923] 1999, 100)

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And yet later, when the snake tries to leave, when "his back was turned," the speaker violently throws a log to try to kill him. What he quickly realizes, however, is that his ethical response has not disappeared simply because the snake has turned away from him:

> And immediately I regretted it.
> I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
> I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human
> education (101)

It is in this regret that the speaker then truly longs for his serpentine companion—"I wished he would come back, my snake"—and sovereignty, as Derrida notes, is given over to the animal (2009, 243): "he seemed to me again like a king" (Lawrence [1923] 1999, 101). Again, for Derrida, a central question that is presented in Lawrence's poem is: "Does an ethics or a moral prescription obligate us only to those like us . . . i.e. man, or else does it obligate us with respect to anyone at all, any living being at all, and therefore with respect to the animal?" (2009, 244).

Unrecognizable modernism

Derrida's reading of Lawrence reveals the ethics of "unrecognizability" that he delineates earlier on in *The Beast and the Sovereign*. He considers it a principle of "justice" that is founded on "responsibility with the respect to the most dissimilar . . . the entirely other . . . the unrecognizable other." In recognizing and, crucially, *responding* to the radical alterity of the unrecognizable, Derrida presents an argument that attempts to uproot the bias in an ethics founded on human life: "The 'unrecognizable' . . . is the beginning of ethics, of the Law, and not of the human. So long as there is recognizability and fellow, ethics is dormant. It is sleeping a dogmatic slumber. So long as it remains human, among men, ethics remains dogmatic, narcissistic, and not yet thinking. . . . The 'unrecognizable' is the awakening. It is what awakens, the very experience of being awake" (2009, 108). Here Derrida resists the simple incorporation of animals into a human moral code. It is not enough to simply build on or extend an ethics based on humanist models that calculate suffering (utilitarianism), construct universal principles (rights), or cultivate dignified modes of life (capabilities)—three prominent contemporary approaches to moral considerations of animals.[2] Instead, if we are to provide an ethics that is truly open to nonhuman as well as human "others," we must probe the existing anthropocentric frameworks through which we think of ethics. It is only this that has the potential to truly transform the relationship between "humans" and "animals" because it depends on a transformation of how we conceptualize both these categorizations. It is only then that we can truly recognize, without seeking to capture and control, that which is unrecognizable.

In one sense, Derrida's reading of "Snake" is indebted to Emmanuel Levinas, and specifically his view of ethics as "first philosophy," where ethics comes before being: it is "the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty" in the "face of the other." Thus Levinas theorizes an ethical response to radical alterity that is not an incorporation of the other into the same (or the self) (1989, 84–85).[3] But in Levinas's originary ethics the animal fails to fully qualify as an ethical "other" because it is deprived of language. When asked in an interview if the animal has a "face"—in one of the few occasions when Levinas explicitly discusses animals—he responds: "The human face is completely different and only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal. I don't know if a snake has a face. I can't answer that question. A more specific analysis is needed" (1988, 171–72). In contrast to this, Derrida seeks an ethical response to animals that, as he outlines in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, "thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, and as something other than a privation" (2008, 48). He deconstructs Levinas's anthropocentric ethics of the "face," where the animal is "outside of the ethical circuit" (106). Levinas's "nonresponse" to the question of whether the animal, and specifically the snake, has a face is "all too human," betraying the same anthropocentric bias that has permeated European philosophical discourse from Descartes to Kant to Heidegger (108–9). In turning specifically to the snake with its "immense allegorical or mythical weight" that typically ties it to evil, Levinas enacts a kind of diversion. He avoids confronting this difficult question about a multiplicity of animals that threatens to uproot the very foundations of his ethics grounded in the potential for human discourse (110). Derrida's response to Lawrence's snake in *The Beast and the Sovereign* can, then, be read as an example of a willingness to go beyond Levinas's evasive "I don't know." For Derrida, Lawrence's snake demands a response even as it is turned away from the human, even as it cannot be recognized as having a "face" or language. After all, what can be more unrecognizable than that which we cannot speak to or hear, that which is not even, like Lawrence's departing snake, facing toward us?

Derrida's reading of Lawrence's modernist animal aesthetics can be understood to exemplify a *posthumanist* approach to literature on two levels: firstly, he encounters the text without the implicit need for it to reveal something first and foremost about human culture and language; secondly, this approach yields insight into the nonanthropocentric content and form of the poem itself as an ethical force. In this sense Derrida's reading can be linked to other recent critical views of this poem in which the "evolutionary primogeniture" of animals "displaces" or "marginalizes" the human (Rohman 2008, 92), where "instead of regarding the human—with its expansive point of view, instrumental command of nature, and subjective self-awareness as point of culmination toward which life is directed—'Snake' moves in the opposite direction . . . the animal opens onto a time and sense well beyond the 'I'" (Colebrook 2011, 42). In following Lawrence's snake as it turns its back on the human, we might say that Derrida responds to an unrecognizable modernism—a modernism that is not about the triumph of human culture over nature nor about the overcoming of ethics. This special issue themed on "Modernist Ethics and Posthumanism" sets out to explore more widely the potential for ethical readings of modernist texts that, like Derrida's, are not centered on the human. In doing so, it claims that across the span of its work modernism ethically responds to the nonhuman—including animals, environments, and objects—and that this in turn affects our response to modernist aesthetics. Reorienting modernist ethics alongside posthumanism—a term outlined in more detail below after a discussion of literary ethics and anthropomorphism—the essays collected in this special issue all explore a kind of unrecognizable modernism. They open possibilities for a modernist ethics founded on what is often in the background, on what turns its back to us, in modernist texts.

Literary ethics

The variety and complexity of growing engagements with literary ethics is clearly evident in a landmark special issue of *PMLA* on "Ethics and Literary Study." As Lawrence Buell remarks in his introduction, "as *ethics* has become a more privileged signifier it has also become an increasingly ductile and thereby potentially confusing one" (1999, 11). Such plasticity in approach—whether concerning the agency of authors in producing texts, the responsibility of the reader, the scrutinizing of rashly totalizing ethical paradigms, or the probing of the distinction between politics and ethics—means that the question remains an open one as to whether this focus on ethics in literary criticism offers something new and adequately meets the challenges of rethinking the humanities for the twenty-first century, or whether it is a backward step, a conservative, individualized view of the act of criticism. In Buell's words, the pursuit of ethics in literary criticism can be viewed "honorifically," as that which revitalizes "scholarly and pedagogical conscience, as a revival of a once distinguished humanistic sensibility unfairly stigmatized in recent years, as a substantial retheorization of alterity," but it can equally be seen "as a copycat moral majoritarianism or as a retreat from a politics of social transformation to privatism" (12).

The choice, however, between the concern over "privatism" against the more celebrated revival of "humanistic sensibility" and "conscience" has its own limitations—these two responses themselves shield or even erase potential ethical dimensions of literature. Modernism's contribution to ethics was for a long time judged negatively along these lines, with accusations of a kind of privatism in its perceived turn inward to questions of the self and subjectivity. One story goes that if modernism is a challenge to Victorian moral codes and artistic forms, if it is about exploding myths and subverting conventions, and about moving beyond notions of good and evil, then it can have little to tell us about ethics. In Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep*, one of the books that announced the return to ethics in literary studies in the late 1980s, "high modernism" is written off as "a direct and often deliberate attempt to depose 'the good' as the sovereign served by both classical philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition" and instead sought "to crown in its place the individual and his creative works" (1988, 251). In more recent modernist scholarship, this dichotomy between humanist sensibility and privatism is found in Lee Oser's *The Ethics of Modernism* (2007). On the one hand this book is an attempt to return to questions of "humanistic sensibility." For Oser, our examination of ethics in modernism—and elsewhere—should not be complicated by theoretical approaches to "the other" but instead thought through as a practical process for improving "human nature." But, on the other hand, in seeking to return to a universal idea of "the human," Oser's view is that "the modernist moral project" is the effort "to transform human nature through the use of art" (2007, 16): "Modernist art is aesthetic art. Individual consciousness is the privileged medium of the modernist view of things." The ethics of modernism is, in Oser's critique, "itself a form of aesthetics" (7). In the name of a return to practical questions of "human nature," Oser arrives at a thoroughly conservative view both of human subjects and of modernism.

It is this return to a universalizing human nature that leaves Oser oblivious to the subversive potential in modernism's challenge to the very idea of anthropocentrism, and certainly to the subtle ethical readings offered by Derrida, such as outlined above (curiously, Derrida is dismissed by Oser as displaying a "Cartesian bias" in his writing [3]). A specific example of how Oser's view of human nature results in a reductive anthropocentrism is seen in his brief but revealing reading of Virginia Woolf's "The Death of the Moth." Oser focuses on the final paragraph of the essay, where Woolf writes: "The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. The struggle was over. The insignificant little creature now knew death. . . . The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am" ([1942] 2011, 444). From the beginning this moth—the moth that comes before the narrator—is merely "symbolic": Oser fails to consider, even for a moment, that Woolf may be interested in *real* moths. In many ways this seems reasonable enough—after all, how can a moth, in its radical alterity, actually tell us something valuable about life? According to Oser, the "friendless and loveless and independent end" that the moth meets is devoid of emotion; it is representative of modernism's "sentiment of coldness," and the idea that the death of this moth could have any kind of ethical import is, he claims, parodied by Woolf: "The tragedy is ridiculous—absurd. One must have a heart of stone not to laugh at the death of the 'little' moth." And it is very distinctly Woolf's modernist aesthetics that has made him laugh: "Too much style has been lavished on dispatching an 'insignificant little creature'" (2007, 24).

Yet, we might ask: is modernism's ethical import not precisely to be found in the style in which it expresses life? As Derek Attridge puts it in *The Singularity of Literature*, there is "a sense in which the formally innovative work, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the most sharply challenging . . . ethical demand." We might say that modernist literature provides the kind of innovation in content as well as in form that acts as "a testing of the operations of meaning, and is therefore a kind of ethical experimentation. To respond to the demand of the literary work as the demand of the other is to attend to it as a unique event whose happening is a call, a challenge, an obligation: understand how little you understand me, translate my untranslatability" (2004, 130–31). Recognize, we could add, my unrecognizability. Hidden in Oser's comments on Woolf's moth is an assumption that is specific to modernist encounters with animality—namely, that the experimental style of modernism, the sophistication of language, is necessarily at odds with a serious treatment of animals. The question is never asked as to whether Woolf's "The Death of the Moth," like Lawrence's "Snake," could offer an example of modernist innovation as "ethical experimentation" that makes ethical demands on readers, which include a consideration of nonhuman, even the most radically nonhuman and least obviously significant, creatures.

"As if" anthropomorphism

"The Death of the Moth" carefully balances an interest in the nonhuman creature and its environment without exaggerating its capabilities or the richness of its life. Consider the fact that the moth has agency, sharing "the same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughman, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed downs" (Woolf [1942] 2011, 442)—a material and vital life is pulsing through these creatures, nonhuman (rooks, horses, the downs) as much as human (ploughman). Woolf goes on to subtly employ figurative language, and in particular the connective "as if," as she continues to explore life: "Watching him, it seemed as if a fibre, very thin but pure, of the enormous energy of the world had been thrust into his frail and diminutive body" (443). Even though this energy is shared, Woolf's narrator does not reductively or naively equate everything with the same material significance: "The possibilities of pleasure seemed that morning so enormous and so various that to have only a moth's part in life, and a day moth's at that, appeared a hard fate, and his zest in enjoying his meagre opportunities to the full, pathetic" (442–43). The view of the moth as "pathetic" clearly resists sentimentalizing it, but having "a queer feeling of pity" is a far cry from Oser's laughter (442). Woolf provides the moth with its own world, however diminished, and one that the human cannot entirely penetrate or fully imagine. But the moth *does* help Woolf to explore the "life itself" that, in her 1925 essay "Modern Fiction," she famously claims is missed by her Edwardian predecessors. Just as her argument in that essay is often misread as an endorsement of the internal life of the mind over the external material world,[4] here it is the moth that brings the human closer to a life that is often overlooked: "One is apt to forget all about life, seeing it humped and bossed and garnished and cumbered so that it has to move with the greatest circumspection and dignity." However, the moth "dancing" and "zigzagging" reveals "the true nature of life" (443). The moth becomes a material form of memory, shaking the narrator, and the reader, out of their complacent view of a life that is cultivated and controlled by humans.

At times Woolf's figurative language signals a foray into anthropomorphism in her drawing of the animal world (indeed it can be argued that all attempts to explore nonhuman life with human words will contain at least a latent anthropomorphism). But anthropomorphism is handled tentatively in Woolf's writing. For example, she employs the variation "as though" for the "rooks" when imagining their "exciting experience" of the world: the rooks moved through the air "with the utmost clamour and vociferation, as though to be thrown into the air and settle slowly down upon the tree tops were a tremendously exciting experience" (442). We can draw a comparison here with "Snake," when Lawrence also makes use of the "as if" connective to enter a figurative world of the snake that moved "slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream" ([1923] 1999, 101). This allows him to imagine the snake's internal world as mirroring its external movement, to imagine its languid movements as representative of a deep dreamlike state. Lawrence's anthropomorphizing, his "uncanny personal intuition of snakehood" (Inniss 1971, 72), therefore acts to both draw a comparison with humans (that snakes could have a state of experience such as dreaming) and distinguish animal life (snakes are of limited consciousness compared with humans). In both cases, the use of "as if" allows this anthropomorphism as an imaginative leap without offering certain judgment. What is important is that Woolf and Lawrence demonstrate a *nonanthropocentric anthropomorphism*. It is an anthropomorphism that comes after the nonhuman, an anthropomorphism that seeks to follow the snake and the moth in order to find a conception of life that is not centered on human subjects. This nonanthropocentric anthropomorphism allows Woolf and Lawrence to here articulate nonhuman worlds—to use language to create environments that are nonetheless not centered on humans—but to do so while acknowledging that some anthropomorphism may be necessary in any attempt to make sense of these worlds. This practice is recognized today by many ecologists, ethologists, and philosophers who suggest that "an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances . . . revealing similarities across categorical divides," thereby helping to challenge human claims to privilege over nonhuman worlds (Bennett 2010, 99). Refusing to run the risk of anthropomorphism at all simply allows the perceived hierarchy between human and nonhuman, and settled anthropocentric understandings of ethical encounters, to remain unchallenged.

It is worth remarking that Woolf's use of "as if" in "The Death of the Moth" is more frequent than Lawrence's sole use of it in "Snake." There are no occasions in this essay where the more common connective words "like" and "as" introduce similes concerning her moth, whereas Lawrence more readily turns to these terms that offer more blatant signals of anthropomorphism (the snake "looked around like a god" [(1923) 1999, 100] and seemed "like a king," as noted above). There is something particularly suitable about the chosen "as if" to introduce these similes; in its less certain, more conditional comparison it presents an added hesitation in the attempt to find a rhythm that expresses the relationship between human and nonhuman. Moreover, in Woolf's story this hesitancy of "as if" takes hold of the human narrator too, less sure of her humanity now that she has seen a life that humans often fail to: "I looked as if for the enemy against which he struggled" ([1942] 2011, 444). What is significant about this sentence is the way it simultaneously signals the awareness of anthropomorphism while undermining the certainty of the human and of an anthropocentric viewpoint. The narrator searches for something outside the human but to which she knows she can never truly have access. Nonetheless, the search is important because she knows that something else is somehow present—there is, after all, "something marvellous as well as pathetic" about the moth. Lawrence and Woolf offer examples, then, of the ways in which the sophistication of language allows for a careful nonanthropocentric anthropomorphism, a subtle opening of possibilities, an attempted recognition of, and response to, the unrecognizable. They negotiate uncertainty as to the creature's life and answerability in the response to that life, and it is these features—uncertainty and answerability—that make modernist literature especially useful for thinking about ethics, as Melba Cuddy-Keane argues: "Modernist ethics meets the question of how to live ethically in a questionable world with a paradoxical conjunction of metaphysical uncertainty and individual answerability." Modernist literature has a "special claim" to ethical import in the way in which it "participates in this multivalent inflection," resisting universalizing claims and offering more precise and complicated explorations of ethics (2009, 209–10). Furthermore, as Jessica Berman expertly demonstrates in *Modernist Commitments*, it is in its resistance to universality that modernist ethics connects to a politics "that understands community as primordial and inescapable but not derived from a single universalized experience, predicated on normative unity, or dependent on a singular consensus for its model of justice" (2012, 16–17).

When Woolf's narrator concludes that "the insignificant creature now knew death" ([1942] 2011, 444), it is not a parody of ethical recognition so much as a challenge to humanist doctrines that assert that even if animals are truly *alive* (and of course Descartes would not even grant them that), they certainly do not know how to die. Woolf again risks the accusation of anthropomorphism in this claim of knowing death, but to simply dismiss this possibility as readers of the text is to show a Heideggerian bias, whereby the animal, as he writes in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, does not have access to death "as such": "the animal cannot die in the sense in which dying is ascribed to human beings but can only come to an end" (1995, 267). Responding to this, Derrida himself claims that "it's not at all certain in any case that man has a relation to death or an experience of death *as such*, in its possible impossibility, or that one can say, properly, in the proper sense and simply, calmly, that the animal is deprived of it" (2009, 308). Gilles Deleuze goes further, arguing that animals do know how to die: "an animal seeks a corner to die in," animals "search for a territory of death." In the example Deleuze offers of his own cat's death he also, however, employs the connective "as if," signaling that the precise nature of the animal's experience of its environment in death just as in life will surpass human comprehension: "We saw the little cat slide itself right into a tight corner, an angle, as if it were the good spot for it to die in" (2012). The "last protest" of Woolf's moth where "he succeeded at last in righting himself" is an example of seeking this territory for death ([1942] 2011, 444), which in turn affirms a life that is irreducible to humanity.

The dismissal of Woolf's moth as "symbolic" and "insignificant" (Oser 2007, 24) also misses a wider point about the ways in which Woolf often responds to her own knowledge of insect classification gained through her brother Thoby's childhood study of entomology,[5] as well as her intellectual response to developments in the natural sciences. As Christina Alt has shown, Woolf's writing resists taxonomizing in favor of observation in "The Death of the Moth" and elsewhere as she moved from childhood entomology to post-Darwinian ethology: a "shift from a taxonomic perspective towards a more observational outlook" (2010, 147). Woolf's creature is a day moth, and therefore resists taxonomy: "Moths that fly by day are not properly to be called moths." Significantly, as a "hybrid" creature the day moth is "neither gay like butterflies nor sombre like their own species" ([1942] 2011, 442)—Woolf also distances it from a symbolic system that anthropomorphizes butterflies and moths by attributing moods based on their appearance. Instead, the essay repeats the sense of "looking" and "watching," and when Woolf's narrator states "my eye was caught by him" (443) Alt rightly points out how this "inverts the dynamics of capture into a statement of observation and thus signals her movement away from a taxonomic view of her subject" (2010, 147). Observing the animal in its own environment, recognizing that it has an environment that is unrecognizable to the human, Woolf maintains an openness to the view that animal life, even insect life, is more complex than we are often aware.[6]

Lawrence himself commented on the embodied relation of animals to their environments. In a striking example, the following passage argues that far from displaying the Cartesian divide between thinking humans and machinic animals, "instinct" betrays an embodied creaturely mind or consciousness:

> What we call "instinct" in creatures such as bees, or ants, or whales, or foxes, or larks, is the sure and perfect working of the primary mind in these creatures. All the tissue of the body is all the time aware. The blood is awake: the whole blood-system of the body is a great field of primal consciousness. But in the nervous system the primary consciousness is localised and specialised. Each great nerve-center has its own peculiar consciousness, its own peculiar mind, its own primary precepts and concepts, its own spontaneous desires and ideas. . . . When a bee leaves its hive and circles round to sense the locality, it is attending with the primary mind to the surrounding objects, establishing a primary rapport between its own very tissue and the tissues of the adjacent objects. (1962, 135)

Here Lawrence is, like Woolf, engaging with the developments in post-Darwinian natural science (Wallace 2005, 109). Animals, whether insect or mammal, negotiate their surroundings with an awareness that cannot be reduced to automatism.

We might even say that in their exploration of animal territories Woolf and Lawrence display what the influential biologist and ethologist Jakob von Uexküll described in the first decades of the twentieth century as the "Umwelt" of the animal: "All animal subjects," he writes, "from the simplest to the most complex, are inserted into their environments to the same degree of perfection. The simple animal has a simple environment; the multiform animal has an environment just as richly articulated as it is" ([1934] 2010, 50).[7] The meaning derived from animal Umwelten comes about through the animal's ability to discern what aspects of its surroundings help it to function, what objects are of significance to it. Uexküll firmly rejects the mechanistic model of animal behavior and focuses on how animals meaningfully behave in their respective worlds. What is emphasized is that meaning-making is not restricted to the human's cultural realm: "*The question as to meaning must therefore have priority in all living beings*" ([1934] 2010, 151). In recognizing the animal's meaning-making and world-making capacities—even if this will for Uexküll, as for Woolf and Lawrence, involve some form of anthropomorphism—there is a twofold movement away from anthropocentrism: "Animals are promoted by virtue of their human-like ability to construct their own environment; humans are demoted by virtue of our animal-like inability to transcend our Umwelt" (Winthrop-Young 2010, 222). In presenting their respective ethical encounters with animals, Lawrence's snake and Woolf's moth provide just two examples of the way in which at the heart of their writings, and of modernist literature more widely, is a response to the increasing focus on nonanthropocentric worldviews, whether with the development of modern ethology, or other contemporaneous scientific discoveries relating to the new physics and astronomy.[8] If modernism has an ethics, it is an ethics that engages with the possibility of such nonanthropocentric perspectives.

Posthumanist ethics

The imagining of nonanthropocentric worldviews can properly be called "posthumanist" in their attempts to decenter the human and move beyond humanist individualism and universality. Rooted in a "vital materialism," posthumanism "contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the 'exceptionalism' of the Human as a transcendental category" (Braidotti 2013, 66). Posthumanism meets ethical and political demands in a way that not only extends to a consideration of what we understand as our nonhuman "others" but also seeks to challenge the anthropocentric ways in which this encounter with the other is conceived. As such, posthumanism is invested in the imagining of alternatives, in affirmatively bringing nonhuman others into an ethical and political consideration that marks it out from the "antihumanism" of Althusserian Marxism.[9] But posthumanist ethics do not seek to simply bypass concern for humanity. Unlike contemporaneous philosophies such as "transhumanism," which strives to use technological advance to form a greater, more perfected humanity, posthumanism tries, as Cary Wolfe illustrates, "to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with *greater* specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection" (2010, xxv). The key distinction between posthumanism and transhumanism is that the latter wants to perfect an anthropocentric world for the future whereas the former wants to open up nonanthropocentric worldviews *in the present*, in order to address the range of pressing concerns—whether the mistreatment of animals, climate change and the environment, or the issues around bioethics and the instrumentalization of technology. Posthumanism urges humans to respect and respond to nonhuman worlds and to reject essentialist and hierarchical divisions between culture and nature, but it does so by reorienting the human rather than turning its back on humanity altogether. In this way, a posthumanist ethics is an ethics that both turns its back on an apolitical privatism and suggests that returning to humanist ethical pursuits is insufficient.

It is, broadly, this sense of posthumanism that has started to yield insightful readings of modernist literature. The last decade or so has seen studies directly concerned with this changing, less anthropocentric, relationship between human and nonhuman in modernism, whether focused on the disconnection of the "human" from humanism (Sheehan 2002), animals and animality (Rohman 2008), nature and ecofeminism (Scott 2012), scarcity and wealth (Willmott 2012), or objects and "things" (Brown 1999; 2001). All represent examples of a shift in modernist studies toward the possibility of nonanthropocentric life, and a sense that modernism—in both responding to its scientific and philosophical context and in its aesthetic experiments and theoretical articulations of nonhuman others—has much to add to contemporary debates on posthumanism.

As Jeff Wallace argues in *D. H. Lawrence, Science and the Posthuman*, while "posthumanism is a theoretical construct, a way of *thinking* the human" that has emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this "does not disallow its application to earlier periods," especially given the rapidly changing conception of the relation between humans and the material world in the sciences and philosophy (2005, 6). Part of thinking about modernism and posthumanism together, then, involves the combination of contexts, the forging of affinities between present and past, but this is both a historical and theoretical move that allows us to rethink and renew modernism's lasting significance. It is also modernism's experimental style that allows it—just as it does in relation to ethics, as Attridge suggests above—to articulate posthumanist worldviews in new ways, because posthumanist theorizing is always a form of experimentation (Braidotti 2013, 39).

The essays in this special issue explore the various ways in which the ethics of modernism involves a serious consideration of nonhuman alterity, demonstrating historical and conceptual links between modernism and posthumanism. While this introductory discussion has focused primarily on animality as an example of this alterity and has done so in relation to two relatively minor works, the essays that follow broaden this exploration to include an array of nonhuman materials, objects, and environments across a range of pivotal modernist texts. Placed in dialogue with Derrida and other posthumanist theorists, including Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett and Cary Wolfe, the ethical import of modernism is explored variously in radical critiques and close readings of the experimental aesthetics of both canonical and more marginalized figures: Stephen Ross follows indeterminate animals in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*; Gabriel Hankins maps networks of non/human agents in Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" and Woolf's *Jacob's Room*; Jeff Wallace details a pacifism built on relations among people, animals, and things in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*; Sam Wiseman focuses on responsibility to, and distance from, rural environments in the writings of Mary Butts; and Laci Mattison accounts for objects (lost and found) and the threat of extinction in the late modernism of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Little Girls*. What emerges, in multiple ways, is an account of modernist ethics that is embedded in material relations between human and nonhuman, culture and nature, and that gains its force through experiments in both content and form. As such, each contribution to this collection can be said to follow Lawrence's and Woolf's response to snakes and moths in finding ethics situated in an encounter with an unrecognizable modernism, in that which turns its back on us in modernist texts. Indeed these two emerging concerns in modernist studies—ethics and posthumanism—have had *their* backs turned on each other for too long; the essays in this special issue suggest that modernist innovations might be precisely a response to, and a following of, the unrecognizable.

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Notes

1. See Wright 2000, 176–77, for a discussion of the biblical symbolism of Lawrence's "Snake." On its allusions to literary tradition, including John Milton, Samuel Coleridge, John Keats, and Shakespeare, see Murfin 1983, 104–21.

2. For examples of seminal work on utilitarian approaches to animals see Singer 1995, on animal rights see Regan 2004, and on a capabilities approach to animals see Nussbaum 2006. For readings in these and other approaches to ethics alongside literature see Pojman and Vaughn 2010.

3. For a critique of the relationship between an "ethical" Derrida and Levinas, see Hägglund 2004.

4. See Ryan 2014b.

5. Woolf's early diaries contain detailed descriptions of Thoby's method of "catching moths" (1990, 144). Woolf displays her continued knowledge of insect types in the short essay "Butterflies and Moths: Insects in September," published in 1916 ([1916] 2011, 381–83). Notably, Woolf also employs the connective "as if" when speculating on what "charms a dragon fly": "they circle by the score, floating joyfully and silently on their red and blue and white wings, as if they were at worship about a shrine of sun-baked turf" (382).

6. For a wide-ranging discussion of the significance of insects in literature, see Eric Brown's *Insect Poetics* (2006). Woolf's exploration of animal life is most extensively seen in *Flush*, her fictional biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel, and a number of critics now take Woolf's representation of animality in this novel more seriously than was once the case (for recent examples see Weil 2012; Ryan 2013; Herman 2013; Dubino 2014).

7. For a more detailed discussion of Woolf, Uexküll, and animal "Umwelten," see Ryan 2014a.

8. In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben notes that these developments in the natural sciences share with "artistic avant-gardes" an "unreserved abandonment of every anthropocentric perspective in the life sciences and the radical dehumanization of the image of nature" (2004, 39).

9. As Rosi Braidotti writes: "Posthumanism is the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and antihumanism and traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives" (2013, 37).

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