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The Insect Itself Cannot Be Touched*: A Blattopoetic Reading of Lorna Crozier’s “Cockroach”

К самому насекомому прикоснуться
нельзя: «блаттопоэтический» анализ
стихотворения Лорны Крозье *Cockroach*

Абстракт

В настоящей статье предлагается «блатто-поэтический» анализ стихотворения Лорны Крозье *Cockroach* («Таракан») из сборника «What the Soul Doesn’t Want» («Чего душа не желает»), опубликованного в 2017 году. Эта интерпретация, основанная на зоопоэтике и литературных исследованиях животных, отсылает к таким понятиям, как отвращение, антропоморфизм или внимательное слушание, и исследует, как стихотворение Крозье подрывает омерзение, которое часто определяет отношения между насекомым и человеком. Одной из предпосылок статьи является то, что таким образом стихотворение открывает пространство для эмпатического межвидового контакта и превращает таракана в соавтора поэтических значений. Текст канадской поэтессы позволяет вообразить

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Abstract

This article proposes a “blattopoetic” analysis of Lorna Crozier’s poem “The Cockroach,” from her 2017 collection *What the Soul Doesn’t Want*. Set within the framework of zoopoetics and literary studies of animals, this interpretation draws on concepts such as disgust, anthropomorphism and mindful listening, and examines how Crozier’s poem challenges the revulsion that often defines the relationship between insects and humans. One of the article’s premises is that, in this way, the poem opens up space for empathetic, interspecies contact and transforms the cockroach into a co-creator of poetic meanings. The Canadian author’s text allows for an imagined “touch” without disgust, critiquing the anthropocentric boundaries between human and nonhuman experience. Here, the cockroach

* In a letter to his editor dated 25 October 1915, Franz Kafka rejected the suggestion to depict the insect on the cover of *The Metamorphosis*, stating, “The insect itself cannot be depicted.” Franz Kafka, letter to Kurt Wolff, 25 October 1915, in *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 49.

«прикосновение» без отвращения, подвергая критике антропоцентрические границы между человеческим и нечеловеческим опытом. Таракан становится здесь материально-семиотическим – неприкосновенным, но центральным – поэтическим образом.

Ключевые слова: зоопоэтика, «блаттопоэтика», Лорна Крозье, таракан, прикосновение

becomes a material-semiotic – untouchable yet central – poetic presence.

Keywords: zoopoetics, blattozoetics, Lorna Crozier, cockroach, touch

“Literary animal studies is concerned with the marginal, with critters that populate the fringes,”¹ reads the opening sentence of Matthias Preuss’s study of spider metaphors in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Within the field, the concern is marked by “attentive listening”²; in real life, however, Preuss observes, our “uncomfortable encounters”³ with critters of the fringes are often tinged with negative emotions, most notably, disgust. Lorna Crozier’s poem “Cockroach,” from her 2017 collection *What the Soul Doesn’t Want*, signals the *possibility* of such unease. The poem opens with the insect “[scuttling] through your sleep / and [leaving] greasy tracks across the pillow slip,” evoking not just an intrusion but a contamination of personal space.

William Ian Miller’s *The Anatomy of Disgust* provides a useful framework for understanding the revulsion cockroaches evoke. Disgust, Miller argues, is often triggered by “things that stick,”⁴ as well as “slippery, slithery things that are impossible to get a grip on.”⁵ These, he explains, “surely don’t stick but they leave filmy, clammy, or oily substances that do,”⁶ such as the cockroach’s “greasy tracks.” The poem’s reference to the insect’s proximity further “[invokes] the *sensory* experience of what it feels like to be put in danger by the disgusting, of what it feels like to be too close to it, to have to smell it, see it, or touch it.”⁷ By stepping on your pillow, the cockroach gets unpleasantly close to your nose and mouth, as well as to the naked skin of your face, which is the “location of touch.”⁸ As Miller, drawing on Walter Benjamin,

¹ Matthias Preuss, “Spinning Theory: Three Figures of Arachnopoetics,” in *What is Zoopoetics? Texts, Bodies, Entanglements*, eds. Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann (Cham: Palgrave, 2018), 193.

² Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann, “Introduction,” in *What is Zoopoetics? Texts, Bodies, Entanglements*, eds. Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann (Cham: Palgrave, 2018), 3.

³ The term “uncomfortable encounters” was introduced by Nathaniel Otjen in his article “Uncomfortable Encounters: Cockroach Narratives, Selfhood, and Togetherness.”

⁴ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 62.

⁵ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 62.

⁶ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 62.

⁷ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 9.

⁸ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 67.

points out, "touch shares with smell (and both more than taste) the honor of being the sense that is most intimately involved in sensing the disgusting."⁹ "The fear of skin-on-skin contact," in turn, "results from an 'obscure' sense for an unsettling affinity between human and nonhuman animals."¹⁰ Disgust, in this view, protects anthropocentric boundaries,¹¹ the very boundaries that the following reading seeks to subvert.

A fitting example of how revulsion for the cockroach inhibits attentive listening comes from Hugh Raffles's *Insectopedia*. In a chapter titled "The Unseen," the narrator recalls his two encounters with American cockroaches – "the big water bugs."¹² Although they mirror Derrida's experience with his cat as depicted in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* – "as his cat gazes upon his naked body in the bathroom, [the man] feels vulnerable and experiences a flattening of difference"¹³ – their outcome is more than a philosophical reflection:

One night, distracted and without thinking, I swiveled around. A healthy-looking water bug was sitting on a pile of books behind my shoulder. We locked eyes. Its head extended like a turtle's. Its face was angular and inquisitive. Really, as Karl von Frisch once remarked, it had "the lofty brow of the philosopher." Our eyes met as in an animal movie. An understanding beyond words. But I must have moved too suddenly, and it took off and I took off after it, grabbing a broom – everything all of a sudden kinetic – trapping it in a cluttered corner, its legs a whirl of mad scrambling, and caught up in the moment, I beat it and beat it, until I realized I was trembling and disgusted and confused and it was just a smush of fat and chitin on the wooden floor.¹⁴

The second encounter – the narrator is in the shower, "trapped and defenseless and covered in soapsuds" – also involves looking into the cockroach's eyes, "her handsome and intelligent face cocked at a philosophical angle, giving me a funny, quizzical look up and down as if amused by this unexpected situation and intrigued to see what would happen next."¹⁵ This time, the narrator does not describe the killing that follows, jokingly remarking that even Erika Elizondo would probably not

⁹ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 67.

¹⁰ Preuss, "Spinning Theory," 195.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "Gloves," in *One-Way Street*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 28.

¹² Hugh Raffles, *Insectopedia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 298.

¹³ Nathaniel Otjen, "Uncomfortable Encounters. Cockroach Narratives, Selfhood, and Togetherness," *Resilience* 8, no. 2. (2021): 95.

¹⁴ Hugh Raffles, *Insectopedia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 299.

¹⁵ Raffles, *Insectopedia*, 300.

feel good about it.¹⁶ This reference – in a short film titled *Smush* Elizondo “stamps her bare feet on [live worms], and their intestinal fluids shoot from their anus like an orgasm”¹⁷ – makes it clear that the act is particularly gruesome.

In his analysis of Raffles’s encounters with the two water bugs, Nathaniel Otjen suggests that in “The Unseen” “the expected relationship between the so-called rational, respectable human and the thoughtless, disturbing insect is reversed.”¹⁸ Indeed, it is the cockroach who is “philosophical,” and the man who turns “animalistic,” i.e., is overcome by an apparently irrational impulse to kill. Neither the look, nor the subsequent understanding the man and the insect seemingly share, save the bug from being turned into smush. In fact, the cockroach is “killed” even before the narrator depicts their slaughter; the narrative’s comic tone and anthropomorphic caricature strip the insect of any agency even before their body is crushed.

This moment opens up a central concern in my reading of Crozier’s poem: how literary representations of insects differ from embodied encounters with them. If, as Benjamin suggests in “Gloves,” “all disgust is originally disgust at touching,”¹⁹ the reader appears protected from it with the gloves of language. What separates us even further from the “horrible vermin”²⁰ is the prevalent anthropomorphisation of animals, insects included, in literary texts. As an example, interpretations of Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* often see “Gregor Samsa [as] a human who, in becoming an animal, also becomes the living metaphor of his life as a human, which has resembled up to the point of his transformation that of the vermin he inevitably becomes.”²¹ Read as a symbol, the “monstrous insect”²² is repulsive only figuratively; it is, in fact, the human body that is the real object of disgust. Correspondingly, the lyrical subject of Crozier’s poem asserts that Samsa’s metamorphosis is rooted in Kafka’s finding his own body repulsive.²³

In an attempt to look for textual spaces where attentive listening to the cockroach is made possible, the following reading of Crozier’s poem is concerned with contact zones. Rather than offering a comprehensive interpretation of the poem, the analysis focuses on select excerpts that exemplify moments of intersection between texts and species. The reading proceeds in two stages: first, it considers

¹⁶ Raffles, *Insectopedia*, 300.

¹⁷ Raffles, *Insectopedia*, 272.

¹⁸ Otjen, “Uncomfortable Encounters,” 94.

¹⁹ Benjamin, “Gloves,” 28.

²⁰ This translation of Kafka’s *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* appeared in David Wylie’s 2005 English version of *The Metamorphosis*.

²¹ Mario Ortiz Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1–2.

²² This translation of Kafka’s *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* appeared in Susan Bernofsky’s 2016 English version of *The Metamorphosis*.

²³ Lorna Crozier, “Cockroach,” in *What the Soul Doesn’t Want* (Calgary: Freehand Books, 2017), 41.

the intertextual dialogue that "Cockroach" initiates with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*; second, it examines poetic spaces where the insect *possibly* awaits. This approach is grounded in the concept of zoopoetics, originally introduced by Jacques Derrida in his reading of Kafka, and later expanded by theorists such as Aaron Moe (2014), and Kari Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann (2018). In Preuss's phrasing, a zoopoetic reading "traces the material gestures and bodies of nonhuman animals in the text and treats literary life-forms as reflexive figures that speak to the interimplication of life (matter, nature) and literature (text, culture)."²⁴ As a result, it sees poetry as a zone of "encounter between humans and other animals [who leave] a trace in the text that cannot be translated into meaning."²⁵

Within such a framework, Crozier's poem can be construed as a liminal space of metamorphosis where the cockroach is neither "*only or simply*"²⁶ a metaphor nor "*only or simply*" an insect. As a poetic subject, the cockroach "literalizes a condition of alterity that can only be brought to cultural attention by virtue of being literary."²⁷ Translated into a sensitive contact zone, the poetic text opens itself to the *possibility* of touch that does not evoke disgust. To explore what enables this imaginative reordering in Crozier's poem, I first take a closer look at how liminality and reframing are inscribed within the term "zoopoetics" itself.

Moe's seminal examination of the concept, titled *Zoopoetics. Animals and the Making of Poetry*, is concerned with animals as makers (of texts), and particularly with how they "have shaped the making of human poetry."²⁸ Gestures of animals, such as his cat's kneading his lap, create bonds that generate culture.²⁹ Although some animals, Moe suggests, "possess a degree of agency in the making of signs,"³⁰ he "intentionally [anthropomorphizes] animal gestures and [zoomorphizes] human gestures" through "bodily *poiesis*."³¹ "Poetry, poetics, poet," he continues, "are terms generally reserved for the human sphere, but the bodily *poiesis* of animals extends that sphere through its implied anthropomorphism."³² For the reason that the "bodily *poiesis* of animals also suggests a zoomorphism of humans,"³³ poetry becomes a contact zone between different species.

²⁴ Preuss, "Spinning Theory," 197.

²⁵ Driscoll, "Introduction," 7.

²⁶ Driscoll, "Introduction," 4.

²⁷ Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, 146.

²⁸ Aaron Moe, *Zoopoetics. Animals and the Making of Poetry* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 11.

²⁹ Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 12.

³⁰ Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 18.

³¹ Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 18.

³² Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 18.

³³ Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 18.

However, Christopher (Kit) Kelen and Chengcheng You take a more critical stance in *The Poetics and Ethics of Anthropomorphism: Children, Animals, and Poetry*. They challenge Moe's claim that animals "make texts," arguing that such a notion can only be understood through analogy with human cultural production. For them, anthropomorphism is best understood as a trope – i.e. "not only a conscious rhetorical strategy, but also a mode of human perception"³⁴ – and as a transgressive "liminal zone in which different rhetorical imperatives are obeyed or disobeyed."³⁵ In this view, anthropomorphism is less a bridge to animal expression than a reflection of the complex ways in which humans relate to nonhuman animals through language.

Building on the problem of animal agency and anthropomorphism, in their *What is Zoopoetics?* Driscoll and Hoffman explore the origins of the term. Even though in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* Derrida referred to "Kafka's vast zoopoetics" without further clarification, his allusion points toward a particular approach to animals in Kafka's work, explored by Walter Benjamin in his 1934 essay "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death." Benjamin argues that a central feature of Kafka's writing is the retrieval of what has been forgotten – a process in which animals play a crucial role. Kafka listens to them in an effort to recover these obscured elements of memory, which leads to what Benjamin identifies as the reanimalisation of language. The philosopher's most significant yet often overlooked claim, Driscoll and Hoffman assert, is that animals in Kafka's texts are not merely symbolic, but essential to the poetic process itself. They are not, in other words, the end goal, but they are indispensable to reaching it – whatever that elusive "it" may be.³⁶

On this basis, the theorists define zoopoetics as an articulation of the "affinity between 'poetic thinking' and 'animal thinking,'"³⁷ whose specificities – for the elusiveness of "it" – remain unclear. A literary or poetic animal is an *animot*³⁸ or a "material-semiotic knot";³⁹ the focus of a zoopoetic reading, therefore, is "the mutual imbrication and entanglement of the material and the semiotic, the body

³⁴ Christopher (Kit) Kelen and Chengcheng You, *Poetics and Ethics of Antropomorphism. Children, Animals, and Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 4–5.

³⁵ Kelen, *Poetics and Ethics*, 20.

³⁶ Driscoll, "Introduction," 2–3.

³⁷ Driscoll, "Introduction," 2.

³⁸ *Animot* is a neologism coined by Jacques Derrida. "When spoken in French, *animot* sounds like the plural word for animals, (*les*) *animaux*." With the word *mot*, meaning *word*, the philosopher "calls on readers to reconsider how language and the ability to see and name things have been used throughout the tradition to differentiate human beings from animals." Matthew R. Calarco, *Animal Studies. Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2021), 13.

³⁹ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.

and the text, the animal and the word."⁴⁰ For this reason, it centers on the complexities of representation; specifically on how animals are portrayed, by whom, and to what effect. This concern raises questions about whether literary criticism can, in fact, allow animals to "be themselves" – and what this may entail – as well as about how depictions of animality reshape our understanding of what it means to be human.⁴¹

Importantly, Driscoll and Hoffman notice, representations of animals in literary texts reflect the "irreducible multiplicity and heterogeneity"⁴² that the term "animal" contains. Zoopoetics, similarly to Animal Studies in general, does not avoid the mistake of "taking it for granted that everything from spiders to dogs to whales falls under the purview of the field"⁴³ under the name "animal." In fact, however, "[it] makes a difference that Moby-Dick is a whale."⁴⁴ Accordingly, the present analysis, centred on the cockroach – "Phylum Arthropoda, order Blattaria"⁴⁵ – focuses on what might be called a *blattopoetics* of Crozier's poem: a mode of inquiry that makes space for the insect.

Although she does not refer to the concept of blattopoetics *per se*, in her comprehensive study of the cockroach and their place in the Western culture, Marion Copeland also invokes Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* highlights the influence it had on Gabriel García Márquez. Kafka's "giant insect," she writes, "emerges early as the father of magic realism, a connection that has been overlooked by a number of mainstream commentators who have assumed that Gregor is to be understood as a symbol rather than as animals are in the traditions of magic realist writing."⁴⁶ Recalling Walter Benjamin, John Gardner, Harold Blackham and Kafka's translator Jay Neugreshel, Copeland proposes that "Kafka creates empathy – total mental and spiritual identification – for nonhuman characters in the readers of his animal fictions,"⁴⁷ which inspired Márquez's writing.

The fact that Copeland's study and Crozier's poem – both titled "Cockroach" – acknowledge that Kafka's novella is a testimony to the widespread identification of Kafka's "horrible vermin" with the eponymous insect. In fact, however, the term *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* used in the original text does not refer to the cockroach *per se*. "While the denotation of *Ungeziefer* in German is indeed equivalent to 'vermin' in English," Naama Harel explains, "its etymological meaning, which harks

⁴⁰ Driscoll, "Introduction," 4.

⁴¹ Driscoll, "Introduction," 6.

⁴² Driscoll, "Introduction," 5.

⁴³ Driscoll, "Introduction," 5.

⁴⁴ Driscoll, "Introduction," 5.

⁴⁵ Crozier, "Cockroach," 37.

⁴⁶ Marion Copeland, *Cockroach* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 120.

⁴⁷ Copeland, *Cockroach*, 121.

back to Middle High German, is ‘an unclean animal, unfit for sacrifice.’⁴⁸ The English word “vermin” seems equally ambiguous, as it “groups all those otherwise unclassifiable animals that appear in literature as abject others”⁴⁹ and therefore are likely to evoke disgust. That being so, the narrator of *The Metamorphosis* describes Samsa’s new form as repulsive,⁵⁰ the character’s father realising that the family ought to “swallow down the disgust he aroused in them.”⁵¹ More importantly, the unspecified vermin’s transformation into a cockroach – an identification that Kafka himself opposed – indicates that the insect has been perceived as a particularly apt representation of disgust. As suggested in the introductory paragraphs, this “quasi-automatic (‘instinctive’) form of nay-saying”⁵² stands in the way of attentive listening and makes us avert our eyes from the object of revulsion. And yet Raffles’s *Insectopedia* is markedly different from *The Metamorphosis*. Even though Kafka’s novella also endows “a lowly, potentially repulsive form with a human consciousness and a will toward art [...], the text’s true subject (as in Kafka’s other animal stories) is the condition of being caught between human and animal forms [...]”⁵³ Kafka’s zoopoetics, in other words, opens a space where disgust at the insect metamorphoses into “a moral and social sentiment”⁵⁴ and a space of empathetic engagement.

The same liminal empathy resonates in Crozier’s poem, where the lyrical subject never owns the emotion of disgust. When it appears, it belongs to others. For instance, the single stanza that evokes Kafka’s novella reads:

Franz Kafka found his body
so repulsive
that his character Gregor Samsa
woke to find himself ‘changed in his bed
into a monstrous vermin.’
His skin had thickened in the night
into overlapping armoured plates,
a putrid brown. Skinny legs waving

⁴⁸ Naama Harel, *Kafka’s Zoopoetics. Beyond the Human–Animal Barrier* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 22.

⁴⁹ Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, 24.

⁵⁰ Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, trans. Susan Bernofsky (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 32.

⁵¹ Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, 32.

⁵² Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust. Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 2.

⁵³ Mark M. Anderson, “Sliding Down the Evolutionary Ladder? Aesthetic Autonomy in *The Metamorphosis*,” in *Franz Kafka, The Metamorphosis. A New Translation, Texts, and Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Mark M. Anderson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 150.

⁵⁴ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 2.

helplessly in the air, he struggled
to roll from his back to his side
to get up. Half awake, you make yourself
turn over every morning before you dare
to open your eyes.⁵⁵

The opening and closing lines of the stanza constitute contact zones between the species, as Kafka's self-disgust is first translated into the "monstrous vermin," and then transforms back into a more universal, human experience. Enclosed in the stanza's center, the cockroach is "an intrusive presence" and "a nearness that is not wanted"⁵⁶ but feels uncomfortably familiar.

This oscillation between revulsion and recognition echoes the broader tension in zoopoetic inquiry: is *touching* a literary animal possible? As much as my reading is informed by zoopoetics, I remain cautious about Matthias Preuss's suggestion that "scholars should take off their gloves and prepare to get a full feel of animal skin,"⁵⁷ seeing it as aspirational rather than attainable in interpretive practice. Instead, I suggest that Crozier's poem makes possible a reframing of disgust into the desire to "reach out,"⁵⁸ enabling a gesture of curiosity. This dynamic is exemplified in one of the poem's most striking sequences, spread over four stanzas, in which a woman "on the insect help line" asks "Why are cockroaches attracted to me?"⁵⁹

They fall upon her
in the shower, hop into her lap
from the luggage racks of trains and buses,
tumble from trees, from the wings
of low-flying birds. Though they bother
no one else in the house,
they creep from the baseboards,
climb the couch and burrow in her hair.⁶⁰

The expert, Dr. Bug, "suggests she might exude a pheromone / the antennae of the males pick up."⁶¹ His answer reflects what is traditionally thought of nonhuman animals: they "experience *attraction*, by instinct, whereas humans experience *love*,

⁵⁵ Crozier, "Cockroach," 41.

⁵⁶ Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 1.

⁵⁷ Preuss, "Spinning Theory," 195.

⁵⁸ Preuss, "Spinning Theory," 195.

⁵⁹ Crozier, "Cockroach," 38.

⁶⁰ Crozier, "Cockroach," 38.

⁶¹ Crozier, "Cockroach," 38.

which is instinct supplemented and complicated by cultural forces (law, art, language, custom, psychology, and so on).⁶² In the eye of the expert, such instinctual attraction from an insect associated with “ugliness and dirt, scum and sewer pipes, the fetid / stench when you stomp them flat”⁶³ cannot possibly be reciprocated. For this reason, he is “gobsmacked” when a week later the woman calls back to ask “Do they like to be touched? / Can they be happy? Lonely? Can they feel / grief?”⁶⁴ Captivated, Dr. Bug asks the woman out and when he sees her “at the door of the café / he thinks of Gabriel García Márquez’s postman / whose head, wherever he went, was haloed by blue butterflies.”⁶⁵ As cockroaches leap on the table and crawl toward the woman “beneath the immaculate white cloth,”⁶⁶ he says “yes, they like to be touched” with “the slowness / and deliberation of one who lives bookishly / alone.”⁶⁷

Had the woman walked into the café actually haloed by butterflies, her encounter with Dr. Bug might have qualified as a textbook meet-cute. The fact that it is cockroaches, not butterflies, that trail her, however, shifts the tone, highlighting both the woman’s surprising tenderness toward the insects and the man’s kinship with them (the attraction the cockroaches feel for the woman seems predictive of Dr. Bug’s desire for her). Echoing the larger trajectory of the poem, disgust directed at the cockroach is here embedded within a broader cultural context, reflected in the inquiries of other callers (most of them “ask for poisons”⁶⁸) and Dr. Bug’s presumed expectations. Yet, neither the woman nor Dr. Bug appears to find the insect repellent. The poem’s transformative quality, then, does not emerge from an inversion of revulsion into attraction, famously addressed by George Bataille and Julia Kristeva, but from a different kind of affective engagement. The woman’s questions – “Do they like to be touched? / Can they be happy? Lonely? Can they feel / grief?”⁶⁹ – may be read as an empathetic gesture, a form of “reaching out” toward the cockroach. Whether the expert’s affirmation – “yes, they like to be touched”⁷⁰ – reflects solely the sensory preferences of the insects or projects his own desire remains unresolved, which further destabilises the volatile boundary between human and nonhuman experience.

⁶² Dominic Pettman, *Creaturely Love. How Desire Makes Us More and Less than Human* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), ix.

⁶³ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 38.

⁶⁴ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 38.

⁶⁵ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 39.

⁶⁶ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 39.

⁶⁷ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 39.

⁶⁸ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 39.

⁶⁹ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 38.

⁷⁰ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 38.

While the exchange between the woman and Dr. Bug offers a vivid instance of emotional entanglement with the insect, the poem as a whole adopts a broader blatto poetic approach. Here, the lyrical subject engages the cockroach through a dual gesture. On one level, they list observable behaviours – what the insects snack on, what sounds they make, and even how often they fart,⁷¹ and provide multilingual translations of the term “cockroach.” On another level, these facts are interwoven with allusions to Kafka, Plato, and Proust, sometimes anthropomorphising the cockroach (who, notably, has a taste for Proust). This intersection of discourses underscores a key zoopoetic claim: animals do not merely possess their own communicative codes, “they also influence us in our production of language, and specifically in the making of poetry.”⁷² The “greasy tracks” the cockroach leaves on your pillow are a demonstration of the “reanimalisation of language.” Literary animals, therefore, are entangled with the lives of “real” animals – human animals included – and vice versa.⁷³ This entanglement also challenges assumptions about which animals are allowed to inhabit poetry. Even though the cockroach is absent from Aaron M. Moe’s examples in *Zoopoetics* – none of which evoke disgust – and they may not produce emblematic gestures akin to a cat kneading their caretaker in gratitude, they still “generate culture.”

If *blatto poetics* calls into question which animals are allowed to speak within poetry, it also forces us to confront how animals enter literature not just as metaphors, but as matter. In the closing section of this study, I return to Matthias Preuss’s assertion that a zoopoetic reading “traces the material gestures and bodies of nonhuman animals in the text.”⁷⁴ Preuss examines “three different figures of arachnopoetics in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: the spinning spider, the weaving spider, and the secreting spider.”⁷⁵ His discussion of the latter, subtitled “Cryptic Corpses,” “considers how animals are fed into texts as literary objects”⁷⁶ often constituting their “material substance,”⁷⁷ sometimes quite literally: they “give up their hides for literature.”⁷⁸ In this view, animal death is not only a literary motif – it is bound up in the physical production of the text itself.

While Crozier’s cockroach neither spins nor weaves, they are implicated in cycles of ingestion, digestion, and excretion. Some of the things they “love to snack on”⁷⁹ – hair balls, spit, the skin they shed – are already excreted. Others, such as

⁷¹ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 39.

⁷² Driscoll, “Introduction,” 7.

⁷³ Driscoll, “Introduction,” 7.

⁷⁴ Preuss, “Spinning Theory,” 197.

⁷⁵ Preuss, “Spinning Theory,” 209.

⁷⁶ Preuss, “Spinning Theory,” 206.

⁷⁷ Holsinger, quoted in Preuss, 205.

⁷⁸ Preuss, “Spinning Theory,” 210.

⁷⁹ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 42.

“the binding paste, / preferably in a first edition, / preferably Proust” or “the word *madeleine*,”⁸⁰ suggest a literal consumption of literature. The cockroach does not devour the book metaphorically, but rather consumes its very material: the glue, the ink, the pulp, often made with glycerin, bone char, gelatin, or shellac derived from animal bodies. Here, the line between feeding on dead matter and feeding on language becomes blurred. The cockroach’s own death, too, is inscribed into the poem, in the matter-of-fact observations offered by the lyrical subject: “Crushed, then applied to a wound/they ease the sting”;⁸¹ “Cockroaches can hold their breath / for forty minutes, live for seven days / without a head.”⁸² In the blattopoetic framework, even the most “killable” insect leaves a trace – semiotic and material – within the poetic field.

Even though some of the scientific facts cited by the lyrical subject reflect a cultural tendency to erase the cockroach’s death, they also express a genuine sense of curiosity and wonder toward the insect. Within the poem, the cockroach emerges as a remarkable being, one that long predates humans and will likely outlast them (although “[they] may not / survive a nuclear blast / [...] they can endure fifteen times/the dose that will kill you and me”).⁸³ Its resilience, as the poem suggests, stems from a simple ontology: “they never think / of not to be.”⁸⁴ Even more astonishingly, “[because] their ganglia / run from head to tail,” they are said to “*think in their periphery*.”⁸⁵ This concept, both biologically grounded and imaginatively expansive, is explored in the following invitation:

You try to stream your brain
 down your body
 so your feet debate with Plato,
 so your liver memorizes
 Christopher Smart’s *Jubilate Agno*
 and recites it to the spleen.

In light of such extraordinary qualities, and especially the unthinkable nature of “peripheral thinking,” it seems fitting to end this paper with a paraphrase of Matthias Preuss’s reflection on spiders: “cockroaches are also more than just cockroaches.” “The insect itself cannot be depicted,” because in the poetic space it inhabits, it is both material and semiotic. A blattopoetic reading allows us to trace

⁸⁰ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 42.

⁸¹ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 39.

⁸² Crozier, “Cockroach,” 43.

⁸³ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 43.

⁸⁴ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 43.

⁸⁵ Crozier, “Cockroach,” 42 [italics in the original].

the cockroach's gestures and invites us to reciprocate with our own gesture of reaching out without disgust. Yet even in that moment of reaching, the cockroach eludes our grasp, remaining untouchable in that it unsettles the boundary between the human and the nonhuman.

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