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Becoming Zoö-curious: Reading Sexual Differences in the Field of Animal Life

Jacques Derrida's lectures in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* famously demonstrate that the Western archetype of "Man" relies upon "the Animal" as its hidden, absolute Other. As Derrida argues, philosophers as divergent as René Descartes, Jacques Lacan, and Emmanuel Lévinas all attempted to differentiate animals from man on the basis of a single negative trait or "lack" (*manque*): in Descartes, the lack of consciousness; in Lacan, the lack of the ability to truly respond (rather than merely react); in Lévinas, the lack of an ethically recognizable face. But Derrida further points out that the male philosophers who theorized man and animal always tended to deprive the animal of any sexual specificity. "The Animal" was a neutered concept that obscured many kinds of sex, sexes, and sexualities in different species of animals. In contrast, the dozens of animal figures in Derrida's own texts include and welcome richly vibrant sexual differences, so he claims; in his words, "all these animals are welcomed, in a more and more deliberate manner, on the threshold of sexual difference. More precisely of sexual differences [with an s], that is to say what for the most part is kept under wraps in almost all of the grand philosophical-type treatises on the animality of the animal" (*The Animal* 403-4).

In this article, I explore a range of curious sites where sexual differences are being reinscribed into the neutered philosophic concept of the animal. I put forth a new term — that of the *zoö-curious gender discourse* — to label the diversity of writers and thinkers who are revealing strange and multiple sexes and sexualities among animals. Certain gender theorists attentive to animal sexual differences are in fact employing these differences to reimagine and expand our own. "Zoö-curiosity" is evident, for example, in Eva Hayward's reflections on starfish and the process of trans surgery; in Rosi Braidotti's exploration of a "woman-insects nexus" as a space of gendered becoming; or in Elizabeth Grosz's essay on insects as philosophic fantasms of female sexuality. A particular locus of intensity in this zoö-curious terrain is what I refer to as *insex*: a tenderness for tiny life-forms that one finds in certain corners of the work of Derrida. In "Ants" or "A Silkworm of One's Own," Derrida approaches sexuality and sexual differences through insect metaphors; in doing so, he furthers the erotic entomology of other French-language writers like Jules Michelet, Maurice Maeterlinck, André Gide, or Simone de Beauvoir¹ in order to launch a poetic critique of discrete binary genders as they are inscribed into overly rigid, complementary structures of relation. The theoretical import of these poetic and erotic little life-forms extends quite far. As the

philosopher Kelly Oliver has recently wagered, paying attention to sexual differences in the field of animal life can fruitfully complicate the neutered concept of “the animal” in a way that reflects back on the plurality of sexual differences in and among human beings. Oliver writes, “By considering the multitudes of animal sexes, sexualities, and reproductive practices, perhaps we can expand our ways of thinking about the sexes, sexualities, and reproductive practices of ‘man’” (55). The zoö-curious gender discourse I allude to in this paper is, as Oliver insists, giving rise to new embodied experiences in the differentiated space of human sexuality.

I have defined the zoö-curious gender discourse as a brand of animal amateurism that is engendering and re-gendering the human being through the lens of our changing representations of animals, precisely where the sexes and sexualities that these animals display are the most surprising and obscure. By unfolding the strangeness of insects and other animalcules, Oliver, Hayward, Derrida, and gender theorists in the broadest sense of the term are spawning new imaginary matter for multiplying and nuancing human sexual differences, and for tracing and complicating the webs of relation that arise and dissolve all around them.

The insect is an electric figure in this process, as its sex is anything but normative. Take for instance the “he-she” butterflies known as gynandromorphs (perfectly divided down the middle); the instances of a third sex (like the sterile female worker bee); of a monstrous sex (like the hyper-fertile termite queen, or the seahorse father); or sex organs found in atypical locations (certain male octopi inseminate through a special tentacle, while female bedbugs receive insemination anywhere the male can penetrate their exoskeleton). Other invertebrates like slugs and snails possess varying degrees of male or female traits on a sliding scale of intersexuality. For many writers and artists, these anomalies suggest new ways of imagining what we mean by human sexuality. Anne Berger, in her article on Derrida’s “Ants,” claims they insinuate “the holographic and moving contours of bodies to come, of bodies as they might come” (64). Insects (we need to get close to observe them) present us with reproductive morphologies and markings that are strangely provocative, yet stunningly dissimilar to the sexual categories we impose upon ourselves. Insects provide us with an obscure impression of eroticism without confirming our expectations of where sex is, of how it must be parceled out.

Why would the matter of insects entice us, unsettle us, and sometimes arouse us? Sigmund Freud worked in a laboratory to study the sexes of eels before he turned to psychoanalysis (he dissected hundreds of them in search of the elusive male eel sex

organ)²; Alfred Kinsey completed a doctoral thesis in entomology and reared millions of gall wasps prior to becoming an expert in human sexuality.³ While I undertake this study, I too am observing insects through the impossible shifts and ruptures of their life-cycles, raising silkworms (sent live in the mail from my father), and watching nervously as aphids colonize our garden. In the meantime I remain attuned to the sexes of insects in their incidental manifestations. A gynandromorph butterfly was recently hatched in the puparium at London's Natural History Museum. Half-female, half-male, a "rare sexual chimera," its sexes are stitched along a nearly perfect line that cuts straight through the butterfly's genitals, or so the news story goes.⁴ This reminds me that Vladimir Nabokov engineered a method of tracing the evolutionary connections between butterfly species by comparing the forms of their genitalia, and that the boy-aged Nabokov in his memoir *Speak, Memory* possessed a pinned specimen of a gynandromorph butterfly, which a careless nanny sat upon and destroyed (127-128).

Why insects? Why the incredibly small? In *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe*, Mary Campbell argues that the visual imagination that emerged through advances in optical technology contained an inherently sensual aspect, especially when scholars with creative and artistic sensibilities began adopting the microscope (183-185). In his 1858 entomological memoir, the French historian Jules Michelet wrote that under the microscope, "A hundred things in anatomy which seem horrible to the unassisted sight, acquire a touching and impressive delicacy, and a potential charm which approaches the sublime" (145-146). To see the insect from up-close is to transform something tiny and confusing into something charming and detailed. And yet, the insect's allure remains ambivalent. Michelet devotes a chapter of *The Insect* to the tragic fate of Jan Swammerdam, a seventeenth-century Dutch scientist who labored in solitude at the microscope, and who was eventually done in (Michelet claims) by the microscope's confounding revelations. Swammerdam began his career by comparing the reproductive systems of wildly divergent species, from human beings to hymenoptera.

He was the first to see and understand the maternity of the insect and the human maternity. The latter subject, so delicate and yet so grand — in which he labored conjointly with his master at Leyden — I put aside: let us dwell upon the former. He dissected and described the ovaries of the bee: found in them the pretended "king"; and proved she was a queen, or rather a mother. In like manner he explained the maternity of the ant; an all-important discovery, which revealed the true mystery of the superior

insect, and initiated us into the real character of these societies, which are not monarchies, but maternal republics. (134)

When the Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck addresses the bee's historic sex-change in his 1901 insect tome, *The Life of the Bee*, he too praises Swammerdam as the first to decisively fix the true sexuality of the minuscule bee. A cutting technology — of dissection, injection, and even artistic engraving — helped Swammerdam define and preserve this new-found sexual reality.

The real history of the bee begins in the seventeenth century, with the discoveries of the great Dutch savant Swammerdam. It is well, however, to add this detail, but little known: before Swammerdam a Flemish naturalist named Clutius had arrived at certain important truths, such as the sole maternity of the queen and her possession of the attributes of both sexes, but he had left these unproved. Swammerdam founded the true methods of scientific investigation; he invented the microscope, contrived injections to ward off decay, was the first to dissect the bees, and by the discovery of the ovaries and the oviduct definitely fixed the sex of the queen, hitherto looked upon as a king, and threw the whole political scheme of the hive into most unexpected light by basing it upon maternity. Finally he produced woodcuts and engravings so perfect that to this day they serve to illustrate many books on apiculture. (2)

“Micrography” is the term that Maeterlinck ascribes to these modern technologies of viewing and describing the insect (2). Such micrography marks a shift beyond the paradigm of the “teeming” insect swarm, which literary historian Christopher Hollingsworth conceives as an ancient human (and primate) cognitive relational structure that organizes the process of distancing, blurring, and belittling (7-11). As Hollingsworth writes, “The word ‘insect’ implies distance, reduced or negligible importance, absolute difference ... One may similarly define and reduce an entire race or culture” (8). Within this cognitive structure that Hollingsworth refers to as “the Hive,” living things can be assimilated and amassed into a distant, single group. The viewer, from his safe point of vantage, is both repelled and strangely allured by the sight of teeming life. This entire dynamic becomes a metaphor for organizing political life and the power differentials between the rulers and the ruled. “The Hive’s pictorial space is bipolar; its emotional associations follow suit. Community attracts, but also repels ... Yes, to see the whole, the city, the future from afar is to long for it, to wish, as it were, to join the masons raising its walls. However, to see in this way is also to stand

apart and above, to be superior" (15). Can microscopic technology clarify the insect and undo its power as a metaphor for human debasement? How is the sex of the insect involved in the metamorphosis of its very metaphor?

Maeterlinck encounters "the Hive" as Hollingsworth describes it when he peers into a domestic beehive in *The Life of the Bee*. He recounts lifting the lid off a barnyard hive and pumping out a veil of smoke as he slowly approaches the bees within. Our first impression is one of unsettling confusion that leaves the author grasping for words.

The first impression of the novice before whom an observation-hive is opened will be one of some disappointment. He had been told that this little glass case contained an unparalleled activity, an infinite number of wise laws, and a startling amalgam of mystery, experience, genius, calculation, science, of various industries, of certitude and prescience, of intelligent habits and curious feelings and virtues. All that he sees is a confused mass of little reddish groups, somewhat resembling roasted coffee-berries, or bunches of raisins piled against the glass. They look more dead than alive; their movements are slow, incoherent, and incomprehensible. Can these be the wonderful drops of light he had seen but a moment ago, unceasingly flashing and sparkling, as they darted among the pearls and the gold of a thousand wide-open calyces?

...

They appear to be shivering in the darkness, to be numbed, suffocated, so closely are they huddled together; one might fancy they were ailing captives, or queens dethroned, who have had their one moment of glory in the midst of their radiant garden, and are now compelled to return to the shameful squalor of their poor overcrowded home. (7)

As our language for describing them fails, these bees make us uneasily conscious of death and the passage beyond. But Maeterlinck does not stop there, or capitulate to the collapse of discernibility. He patiently moves closer to bring out the lovely complicated patterns "within" the swarm, "beneath" the disordered groupings (things like grapes, *like* coffee beans, *like* the overcrowded poor) that muddle our categories and our thought. The perceived femininity of the bee, its sex-change at the foundation of modern entomology, provides the entryway into a new imaginary engagement with the hive.

From the height of a dome more colossal than that of St. Peter's at Rome waxen walls descend to the ground, balanced in the void and the darkness; gigantic and manifold, vertical and parallel geometric constructions, to which, for relative precision, audacity, and vastness, no human structure is comparable. Each of these walls, whose substance still is immaculate and fragrant, of virginal, silvery freshness, contains thousands of cells, that are stored with provisions sufficient to feed the whole people for several weeks. Here, lodged in transparent cells, are the pollens, love-ferment of every flower of spring, making brilliant splashes of red and yellow, of black and mauve. Close by, in twenty thousand reservoirs, sealed with a seal that shall only be broken on days of supreme distress, the honey of April is stored, most limpid and perfumed of all, wrapped round with long and magnificent embroidery of gold, whose borders hang stiff and rigid. Still lower the honey of May matures, in great open vats, by whose side watchful cohorts maintain an incessant current of air. In the centre, and far from the light whose diamond rays steal in through the only opening, in the warmest part of the hive, there stands the abode of the future; here does it sleep, and wake. For this is the royal domain of the brood-cells, set apart for the queen and her acolytes; about 10,000 cells wherein the eggs repose, 15,000 or 16,000 chambers tenanted by larvae, 40,000 dwellings inhabited by white nymphs to whom thousands of nurses minister. And finally, in the holy of holies of these parts are the three, four, six, or twelve sealed palaces, vast in size compared with the others, where the adolescent princesses lie who await their hour, wrapped in a kind of shroud, all of them motionless and pale, and fed in the darkness. (11-12)

Nothing short of the religious mood is required for entering and literally enumerating the folds of this new space. The confusion of the teeming swarm is clarified and rendered sensual, while the male human viewer finds himself ecstatically dwarfed. Instead of a swarm, we discover something like "the fold," and are shown a new imaginary pathway for making contact with the insect other.

These examples suggest that numerous possible threads feed into a zoophilic fantasy around the insect, a fantasy that reverses a phobic orientation, but not without introducing a new and more exquisite poetics of violence (pinning, dissection, and the penetration of seeing). The zoö-curious gender discourse I am describing frequently wrestles with its own need for violence: for technologies that freeze, fix, and magnify

the otherness of the animal. The insect redoubles this violence because its own anatomy implies cuts, or segmentation. The word *insect-*, meaning “cut up” in Latin (from the past participle of the verb *secare*), is reflective of this cut-like structure, as is the Greek word *entomon*, meaning “segmented.” Entomology can thus be regarded in some primary sense as the study of something that is *cut*. Derrida plays with these associations in his insect texts (“A Silkworm of One’s Own” and “Ants”), as he links the structure of insects to our notion of sex, which comes from the same Latin stem-word, *secare*.

Nabokov (the writer and professional lepidopterist) wove many of these threads into his transgressive story of sibling love, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. An anagram between insect and incest is constantly at play within the novel. Ada Veen is an aspiring entomologist. She and her brother Van (who is also her lover) pore over specimens of butterflies, orchids, and butterflies that look like orchids; they unfold their love and press its limits through their mutual fascination for *insex*. In one instance, the pair discovers the mating habits of a biting gnat named *Serromyia femorata* (in an intentional slip, the bug is referred to as *Serromyia amorata*). The gnat practices a form of sexual cannibalism that Ada and Van themselves devour as they read a book entitled *History of Mating Habits*. Laughing, lusting, they read,

Copulation takes place with both ventral surfaces pressed together and the mouths touching. When the last throb (*frisson*) of intercourse is terminated the female sucks out the male’s body content through the mouth of her impassioned partner. One supposes [...] that the titbits [sic], such as the juicy leg of a bug enveloped in a webby substance, or even a mere token (the frivolous dead end or subtle beginning of an evolutionary process — *qui le sait!*) such as a petal carefully wrapped up and tied up with a frond of red fern, which certain male flies (but apparently not the *femorata* and *amorata* morons) bring to the female before mating, represent a prudent guarantee against the misplaced voracity of the young lady. (144)

There is camp in this entomological erotica. Arousal capitulates into amusement and absurdity in the effort to humanize the sex lives of bugs. Slippage into humor and exaggeration is also evident in Isabella Rossellini’s recent series of zoö-curious short films entitled *Green Porno* and *Seduce Me*. These films seek to represent the sex lives of animals through a stage-like production involving human-sized costumes of flies, bees, mantises, spiders, and several species of fishes, marine mammals, and other creatures.⁵

In each piece, Rossellini herself plays the animals seducing and being seduced. She is demarcated as human by her hands, body, voice, and face, even as she plays on the borders of what would be considered erotic in the human realm.

In the beginning of the short film “Noah’s Ark,” pairs of iconic animals are seen filing up a ramp into a wooden ship. One of the elephants, but not the other, is endowed with a long, roseate-colored penis. Rossellini, standing under an umbrella in the role of narrator, asks, “How did Noah do it? How did he manage to organize *all* animals into couples?” She rehearses, “As it is written in the Bible, Noah gathered all animals into his ark, in order for them to reproduce and repopulate the earth. One male, and one female. Couples.” Cued by this binary word, a godly hand comes down from the sky and points at a solitary pink thing that is conveying itself into the ship. On the plank behind the elephants, this naked pink organ looks like the pachydermal penis, detached. “You!” the pointed finger calls out, “Why are you alone?” A close-up angle transforms the pink thing into a pointed worm: it is a sheath-like costume in which Rossellini herself is enclosed. “I’m an earthworm,” it says. “I am a hermaphrodite. I’m both male and female. To reproduce, I can mate with other hermaphrodites, or I can segment my body and clone myself.” Satisfied with this account of “sex” in the apparently asexual, the finger now points to a phalloid cluster that is making its way into the ark. “You!” it says, “What’s that pile?” The pile, again presenting Rossellini’s face, asserts, “We are *crepidula fornicata*. We are all male. To fornicate we form a pile. Then one of us, the bottom, turns into a female.” The pointed finger hesitates. What is the creator of dichotomous sexualities supposed to make of that? Rossellini is clearly playing with the Latin name *crepidula fornicata* to highlight the habits of this particular seaside fornicator.⁶ Sometimes called the “copulating slipper snail,” *crepidula fornicata* are sequential hermaphrodites that modify the composition of their testicular and ovarian tissue according to their position inside the copulating pile. Rossellini is able to embrace this animal strangeness, to wear it like a costume, as a vector of performative (be)coming.

Such manifestations of zoö-curiosity build upon a lengthy “tradition” of French entomological amateurism. In André Gide’s memoir *If It Die: An Autobiography*, an aged Gide exposes the nature of his own life-long love for adolescent boys; but he also sweeps back over the many other passions that marked his life from beginning to end, including entomology.

I doubt whether I ever extracted as much or as keen joy from anything later on, be it from books, music or painting, as I did in those days from

the play of living matter. I had succeeded in getting Suzanne [André's cousin] to share my passion for entomology; at any rate she would accompany me on my hunting expeditions and was not too much disgusted at turning up bits of dung and carrion in search for dung-beetles, burying-beetles and devil's coach-horses. (81)

The young Gide's hobby produces striking mental images that remain with him, strangely intermingling with his burgeoning sensuality. Just as many children learn about sex by watching pets, livestock, and other animals, the young Gide discovers a voluptuousness in living matter that precedes the need or the impulse to define his own. In the same passage, Gide describes being struck, overcome as he watches a hatchling emerge from an egg.

By digging into the sawdust, one found ... larvae as well — enormous white maggots, like cockchafer grubs. One found, too, strings or packets of soft, whitish eggs as big as damsons, and all sticking together; I was at first greatly mystified by these; they had no proper shell and it was impossible to break them; it was even rather difficult to tear open their soft parchment-like skin, but when one did — wonder of wonders! [*ô stupeur!*] — out slipped a tender grass-snake [*s'échappait alors, une délicate couleuvre*]. (81)

Does some aspect of the surprise in this passage owe to the way in which the revealed object, a phallic tail, is gendered in the French language, is emphatically softened by the feminine noun *une couleuvre* (grass snake), and preceded by the adjective *délicate* (translated here as “tender”), all within a broader gender-bending context of young love with the vigorous girl-cousin Suzanne? Like in Derrida's entomological memoir on silkworms (which I look at in a moment), insect sex is discerned without discerning a sex; there is an amalgamation of masculine and feminine features in a new and unprogrammed moment of birth; there is a desire, an innocent one, to tear sex's veil and to see.⁷

The broad context I am sketching here can help us interpret the seemingly strange insect metaphors in Derrida's work. Derrida's insex are indeed strange, but they do not emerge from nowhere; a specifically French tradition has taken the erotic insect as its topic at least since Michelet in the mid-nineteenth century. For many writers, the modern microscopic paradigm contains an inherently sensual and private aspect; moreover, the morphologies and behaviors revealed by the microscope both repel and

attract the eye of the viewer, precisely because they challenge or flout the more domesticated ideas of sexuality imposed upon the macro-level, human realm.

It is in this web that one might rediscover the insects of Derrida, and distinguish them in their specificity from the many, many other animals Derrida engaged with in his thought. Derrida described his own corpus as traversed by the tracks of animals. "Animals are my concern," he states in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, before providing a pages-long list of animals he had followed in the literary and philosophical writings of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Montaigne, Freud and Lewis Carroll (403-406). This interest in animals has intrigued and at times perplexed readers and critics. The fact that zoö-curiosity needs be explained already reveals something about the marginality of animals to philosophy and to serious thought. In a filmed interview published online⁸, Derrida commented upon the marginality of animals to philosophy in the following terms [I translate]:

The question of the animal persists in my texts from the beginning. But recently, over the course of recent years, I've consecrated fairly long publications to it. It's a very important point in deconstruction, the definition of "what's proper to man," of what is supposed to distinguish man from the animal in general. So that has interested me very, very much, and I've worked on it a lot, it's true. In general I avoid speaking of "the animal" in general. For me, there is no "the animal." When one says "animal" one has already started to no longer understand anything; one has already started in fact to enclose the animal in a jar [Derrida picks up a glass bug jar sitting at his side]. There are animals, with considerable differences between different types of animals. There is no reason for one to put in the same category of animal the monkey, the bee, the snake, the dog, the horse, arthropods and microbes. These are radically different types of organization of life. And already the gesture of saying "the animal" and of placing in one category both the chimpanzee and the ant is a gesture of violent repression, of violent enclosure on the part of man. All of these living things aren't man, so we put them in a single category: it's a stupid gesture, first of all, theoretically ridiculous. And it's also a gesture that is part of human violence in general in regards to animals.

Animals have been marginal to philosophy, but this very marginality becomes central to the Derridian criticism of it. The way out of a centuries-long philosophical impasse is through its margins: in this case, through the many teeming species demanding to be

recognized in and already beyond the overly rigid and impossible, “ridiculous” category of the animal. And just as it would be impossible to enclose all animals in a single theoretical category, it would be absurd to try to reduce the many animals in Derrida’s texts to a single matter, effect, or concern. Derrida says as much when he refuses to explain or summarize his “animal figures” in a simple and unified way, like an animal-trainer forcing beasts to perform at a circus (*The Animal* 403; 407). Each type of Derridanimal, each individual critter, has to be seen and heard in its specificity. Derrida’s insects are not his cats, his hedgehogs, or his sacrificial rams; they unleash a libidinal symphony and resound within a particular literary and philosophical history all their own.

What, then, is the specific meaning opened up by Derrida’s bugs? I would wager that Derrida’s insects swirl around the cut and the uncut, unleashing a curious kind of analytics around this distinction. I’ll address Derrida’s two primary insect texts in the coming pages, arguing that “A Silkworm of One’s Own” enacts a fantasy of the uncut, whereas “Ants” engages in the poetic sensuality of a body that is cut, segmented, or “constricted” at its origin. The division I am making may seem overly simple or binary, but Derrida’s insects precisely get us to think about the very play, the very alternation, between the cut and the whole, and the impossibility of arresting this movement or metamorphosis.

In the beginning of his public lecture “Ants,” Derrida creates a thousand and one little passageways between the metaphor of the insect, and the topic of the colloquium, “Readings of Sexual Difference.” One effect of using an animal metaphor in the first place is to show that the problematic of sexual difference cannot be limited to the human realm. Derrida does not specify what sexual difference is, but instead seems to define it as a structure in movement, a productive site, in and between living things. Giving rise to an apparent division (for example, between male and female), sexual difference doesn’t stop there; it produces further traces that give shape to and undo the stable sexes or entities we’re putting under the microscope. “[T]his is my hypothesis, as soon as there is sexual difference, there are words or rather traces to be *read*. [...] There can be traces without sexual difference, for example for unsexed living things, but there can be no sexual difference without traces, and this goes not only for ‘us’, for the living thing we call human. But henceforth, sexual difference remains to be interpreted, deciphered, decrypted, read and not seen” (20-21). The double force of the insect — the way it pulls us in because we want to see it, and pushes us out, because it remains too small — now provides a kind of methodology for looking at what the human and nonhuman sexes “are.” Rather than clear and straightforward objects of science, sexual

differences provoke science — knowledge aided by sight, knowledge as sight — but also and more fundamentally give rise to readings, to interpretations, like those of the micrographer entering ever deeper into the insect's folds. The cuts of the insect, or of sex, do not refer to something, but to this movement that draws us in, at times inviting violent over-readings and efforts to firmly differentiate one "insex" from another. Derrida establishes this structure and its violent magnetism in his long remarks on the figure of the ant.

As an *insecta* [...], the ant is a cut invertebrate (the name means *cut*, it names the cut), which is to say divided into small strangulations by so many annulations.

In the end, the ant well deserves this title of insect: it is an annulated animal. Its body is marked, scanned, strictured by an annulated multiplicity of rings, that cut it without cutting it, divide it without cleaving it, differentiate it without dissociating it — although the name, *insecta*, from *inseco*, means 'cut'. Thus it is that a word meaning 'cut' can come to mean 'strangled,' but not 'cut', and (but) cut and (but) not cut, separated but (and) not separated, cut but immediately repaired. Stricture.

This is what we would like to talk about: about the separated/not separated, about the cut/not cut — and about the word "sex", about sexual difference in relation to the cut (and) (but) not cut, to the cut that is no longer opposed to the un-cut, between the 'separating' and the 'repairing' [...]" (21-22).

Like the hedgehog whose bristly body provided a new figure for poetry in Derrida's "Che cos'è la poesia?", the ant here provides a shift in scale, and a radically new and unexpected vocabulary for engaging with sexual difference. The ant, as Derrida states, is a figure of the un-seeable precisely where one wants (or does not want) to see. The ant is also a figure of the eminently destructible, in that the magnifying glass we turn upon the ant to see it better also threatens to send it up in a tiny puff of smoke. But though the ant is a symbol of powerlessness and vulnerability, it can also embody strength in numbers, like ants in an "army," amassed in a teeming puddle. When parsed out, however, under the microscope, the ant bears a three-part structure, and also possesses the jointed legs that arthropods are named for. They bear cuts, an idea which is also found in the classificatory name of hymenoptera, or "membranous wing." The forewings and hindwings of bumblebees, for example, are linked together by a series of hooks called hamuli, which can make it appear that they only have two wings (when in fact they have four). The wings of ants are used during their "nuptial

flight,” as if “hymenoptera” also referred to marriage, mating, and joining together (the Greek god of marriage is Hymen). The ant’s split wing becomes the possibility of “marriage,” without itself being repaired or joined together. It is this structure of an undecideable fold, of a surface with a hidden seam, that seems to electrify Derrida’s discourse on the insect. A notion of gender ambiguity, and a refusal of total vision in determining the scientific contours of a “sexual” relationship or of one’s “sexual identity,” emerge from this zoö-anatomical metaphor. The insect shows the way in which human genders are continuously marked, and re-marked, by the cutting, classifying societal impulse which is bent on marking clear differences in the mingling matter of sex. It is perhaps to acknowledge this cutting, “sexing” impulse that Derrida in fact re-sexes the word ant in his essay, changing it from *la fourmi* to *le fourmi* or *le fourmis* (35). The move is double-edged: it is a flouting of linguistic gender norms, and a “violent” redefinition which unleashes the cutting metaphors of inscription and the pen.

This strange “ant” can seem like a break from previous conceptions of the insect, but there is continuity between Derrida’s *insex* and the founders of poetic entomology. Michelet saw the insect’s cut/not cut structure as part of its fundamental attraction as an object of study. He said that the order of insects included so many species, most of them unknown, that the very effort to classify them was muddled. “Our collections contain about one hundred thousand species. But taking into consideration that every plant at the least nourishes three, we obtain the result, according to the number of known plants, of three hundred and sixty thousand species of insects! And each, be it remembered, of prodigious fecundity” (18). The number of individual species in the insect world is enormous — mathematically sublime. But the task of counting common species is in fact an illusion, an oversimplification, as each insect itself contains ever-smaller species in its layers, fluids and folds. “Now call to mind that every creature nourishes other creatures in its surface, in the thickness of its solids, and in its blood; that each insect is a little world inhabited by insects; and that these again have parasites of their own” (18). Like Derrida unfolding the structure of *différance*, Michelet continues this reflection in a totalizing vein, seeing or inscribing the cuts of the insect into every material structure, into the most essential parts of ourselves. “[I]n the masses men have supposed to be mineral or inorganic, animals are now revealed to us of which it would take a thousand millions to form one inch in thickness, — the which do not the less present us with a rough sketch or outline of the Insect, and have the right to be spoken of as insects commenced” (22).

What are Derrida, Nabokov, Gide, and Michelet precisely doing in grafting the matter of human sexuality into this physical materiality of the organic (and inorganic) world? In a sense they are proposing a methodology, a practice of reading that displaces the need to see — or rather, which relishes seeing, while breaking the equivalency between seeing and the truth. “[W]e are *interpreting* sexual difference in the sense that we are reading it, which is to say without seeing it, only so as to bear witness to it beyond the anatomical fact, beyond the proof of civil status, beyond every system of so-called objective criteria of sexual identification” (“Ants” 36). Derrida describes this labor as an “endurance of blindness,” gesturing in jest toward the insect’s antennae as another sensory metaphor for how we might learn to re-see (36). Michelet also interrogates the power of the eye as the organ or technology most capable of producing the truth. He claims that using the microscope, a prosthetic eye, ultimately destroys a person’s vision, and, by metaphoric extension, the self or the very person (the eye/I) that seeks to see. Jan Swammerdam, great refiner of the microscope, “the Galileo of the infinitely little” (130) who discovered the ovaries of the queen bee and other social hymenoptera, as well as metamorphosis, veered eventually into mysticism (a sight beyond sight) and was done in by *seeing too much*. “What really killed him? His own science”: his encounter eye to eye with “the living infinity” beneath the surface of the visible world. Under the microscope, “It was not a matter of a decreasing scale of abstract greatnesses or of inorganic atoms, but of the successive envelopment and prodigious movements of beings which are the one in the other. For the little we see, each animal is a tiny planet, a small world inhabited by animals still more diminutive, which are in turn inhabited by others very much smaller. And this, too, without end or rest, except from the powerlessness of our senses and the imperfection of optical science” (138-9).

“Insex” is the neologism I want to introduce to lead the way into this network of ideas around the structure of difference, and the passage from seeing to reading in the study, curiously erotic, of life that is segmented and small. Like Derrida’s famous neologism *animot*, which looks like a singular but sounds like a plural (*animaux*), “insex” is a singular noun that contains the plural form (*insects*). It is difficult to say whether Derrida’s other major insect metaphor, the silkworm, really is an *insex* at all.

In “A Silkworm of One’s Own,” the insect’s segmented physicality is temporarily suspended in Derrida’s turn to a worm that has yet to metamorphose into a proper bug. The silkworm is of course an insect, but in the popular imagination it is also a worm, both in English and in French (silkworm: *un ver à soie*). Derrida seems attracted to this repugnant little creature — or to these repugnant little creatures, which are never raised in isolation — because they seem protected, as it were, from the structure of the cut.

Erotic singularities, they escape the narrator's own desire to see and define the insect's sex.

"A Silkworm of One's Own" was written in a sort of blind contract with feminist theorist Hélène Cixous (as was "Ants"). Cixous wrote an initial text entitled "Savoir," which Derrida responded to with his own text, which also included a spontaneous close-reading of hers. Although the broad theme had been agreed upon in advance, the two theorists paradoxically "planned" to be surprised by the event of reading the other. Both pieces were published in single book entitled *Veils*, with drawings by the visual artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest. These drawings are curious in that they freely represent a fantasy of erogenous tissues, of intact skins or membranes, piled and folded upon themselves. As a point of entry into Derrida's silkworms, they suggest the paradox of the intact, the "untouched," precisely where it appears so touchable. As a space that Derrida and Cixous are carving within the problematic of the cut-uncut, the book is longing to be a whole in excess of itself. It's an imaginary space full of secrets, of secretions. Beyond total reading, but in a sticky way, an inchoate way, like the worm.

Michelet described the finished product of silk as "a living tissue" (189). His chapter entitled "The Silkworm" in *The Insect* of 1859 is indeed not about the silkworm (the animal) at all, but about the raw material (silk threads) and finished products (dyed and cut silk fabrics) extracted from this little insect laborer. Michelet likens silk cloth to a second skin, or to a second head of hair, that becomes a part of the person who wears it. "Inferior to the skin, undoubtedly, yet it seemed related to it; or rather it became in the end a part of the body, and, as it were, melted into it, like a dream which informs our whole existence, and cannot be separated from it" (189). The "Oriental ladies" who wear layers of silk and cashmere ingeniously imitate the silkworm, which spins its own soft envelope of light-colored thread. Humans prize this protein fiber because we can appropriate its biological function. It does not yield clothing, but a true cocoon. Silk "embraces willingly the living person" (189).

The theme of a second skin pervades Derrida's meditation on the silkworm. "A Silkworm of One's Own" is an autobiographic text that deals with religious belonging, through discussions of the tallith (a fringed prayer shawl made of linen, wool, or sometimes silk, worn by observant men in Judaism) and of circumcision, with the one (the tallith) reading almost like the substitute, the second skin, given to replace the other. Derrida explains that he never *wears* his tallith, but that he keeps it furrowed inside a well-worn paper bag, and feels it, blindly, before falling asleep at night (43). This admission of private eroticism is confessional, but Derrida also connects it to the

philosophical structure of the self. The self is presented as a kind of fantasy of touching oneself, of giving oneself to oneself, without separation, or without recourse to any other. The self, *le soi* in French, rhymes with the word for silk, *la soie*. The silkworm pupa, which encloses itself in a cocoon of whitish silk ejected from its salivary glands, seems to figure this desire for a self-enclosed subjectivity safeguarded from the touch of the other.

In this autoeroticobiographical work, Derrida (or the narrator posing in his autobiographical person) states that he raised silkworms as a young adolescent in his family's home in El-Biar, Algeria. This memory (which came to him in the night, like a dream) gives rise to a long meditation, scanned with commas, spewing out like the filament of the silkworm. In contrast to all the "religious" signs, like the tallith, used to mark sexual difference or to celebrate the "instars" of sexual development (coming of age), the silkworm's ambiguous or unidentifiable gender represents the desire for a sex or sexuality that would be free from any identifying "stamp." When the pre-adolescent Derrida gazed at his pet silkworms, he saw an obscure, "pure" form of self (or silk)-cultivation. He saw a "being" "re-engendering itself in the spinning of its filiation, sons or daughters — beyond any sexual difference or rather any duality of the sexes, and even beyond any coupling. In the beginning, there was the form that was and was not a sex, the child could see it clearly, a sex perhaps but which one?" (90). Here and throughout the zoö-curious gender discourse, the strange and invisible sexualities of bugs are providing a seeming freedom beyond our social categories. The memory is printed in italics, a snaking print, inserted like a foreign language into Derrida's own.

Before I was thirteen, before ever having worn a tallith and having even dreamed of possessing my own, I cultivated (what's the link?) silkworms, the caterpillars or larvae of the bombyx. I now discover that that's called sericulture (from Seres, the Seres, it appears, a people of Eastern India with whom there was a silk trade). In the four corners of a shoebox, then, I'd been shown how, I kept and fed silkworms. Every day, but I would have liked to make myself the indefatigable officiant of this service. Several times a day, the same liturgy, you had to offer them mulberry leaves, these little indifferent idols. For weeks, I would leave the room where the box was kept only to look for mulberry trees. These trips were journeys and adventure: we didn't know where to look for them anymore, or whether we were going to find any more. My silkworms stayed there, then, with me, in my place as in their place, in the rack of the magnanery, so many words I knew nothing of in those days. In truth, they needed lots of mulberry, always too much, these voracious little creatures. They were especially voracious between

moltings (at the moment called the instar). You could hardly see the mouths of these white or slightly grayish caterpillars, but you could sense they were impatient to nourish their secretion. Through their four moltings, the caterpillars, every one for itself, were themselves, in themselves, for themselves, only the time of a passage. They were animated only in view of the transformation of the mulberry into silk. Like the movement of this production, like this becoming-silk of a silk I would have never believed natural, as this extraordinary process remained basically invisible. I was above all struck by the impossible embodied in these little creatures in their shoebox. It was not impossible, of course, to distinguish between a head and a tail, and so, virtually, to see the difference between a part and a whole, and to find some sense in the thing, a direction, an orientation. But it was impossible to discern a sex. There was indeed something like a brown mouth but you could not recognize it in the orifice you had to imagine to be at the origin of their silk, this milk become thread, this filament prolonging their body and remaining attached to it for a certain length of time: the extruded saliva of a very fine sperm, shiny, gleaming, the miracle of a feminine ejaculation, which would catch the light and which I drank in with my eyes. But basically without seeing anything.

Is the silkworm then an insex, producing *différance* and eliciting the cutting impulse of the viewer? Or is it born in a place that is beyond the touch of the other, “indifferent” as well as undifferentiated? In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida writes that his silkworms are “precisely a matter of nakedness, with or without a veil,” of “that which is naked, as it is said, as a worm” (404). He then recopies the moment where the silkworms “extruded saliva of a very fine sperm, lustrous, shiny, the miracle of a female ejaculation which would catch the light and which I drank in with my eyes. But basically without seeing anything” (89). The microscopic revelation is again being deflected, at least somewhat, at the very moment where the drive to behold it is the most intense. Like the ant, the silkworm doesn’t mean or represent *anything*, but introduces a shift in methodological sensibility around the matter of sexual difference. The ant and the silkworm are transposed into a language which only in turn gives them *un effet de réalité*. Ginette Michaud, in her article “On a Serpentine Note,” emphasizes that the silkworm and other Derridanimals are not metaphors that simply transfer meaning from one word or idea to another. Nor are they metonyms that privilege a part (whichever “part” that would be!) to stand in for a larger whole. Instead, they are more like “antimetaphors,” carriers of significance that evoke a sense of loss or mourning at the unknowable secret of their truth (59). I would locate them in a somewhat more immediate realm, in the electric imaginary zone of that which begs to be touched, even

while implying the untouchable itself (like a box of writhing whitish worms). The erotic charge of the silkworm vision, even if it shows no *thing*, takes us to a curious place where one could reimagine (and in some sense “touch”) one’s own sex beyond the touch of the other, or the sex of the other beyond the touch of one’s self. The fundamental structure of the bug metaphor (if metaphor it is) creates a space in which “the cut [...] is no longer opposed to the un-cut” (22). The he-ants, she-ants, silkworms, *crepidula fornicata*, *serromyia amorata*, and other insex invite an indefinable metamorphosis in the open and differentiated space of human sexuality.

But it’s a notion like the one I have just employed — that of “the open and differentiated space of human sexuality” — which directs me toward a possible critique of the zoö-curious gender discourse. I would argue that our very rhetoric of the “open space” or “free movement” of human sexual difference(s) may remain attached to a binary mode of relating ourselves to the difference of the animal. The turn to a concept of gender, broadly signifying a continuum of differences among and within our human selves, and associated with agency and the possibility of performance, free play, and unlimited engenderment, might owe something to the fantasm of “animal sex,” to the idea of a base, instinctual drive to reproduce that is limiting, constraining, animal. The animals invoked in zoö-curious gender discourse are frequently species of invertebrates, creatures very alien to human beings and other “higher mammals.” What if, in their very strangeness, insex are again suggesting the wide gulf between the animal and us? What if the terrain of insex reasserts a man-animal divide, one in which the human is set apart not by our capacity for language or logic or conscious thought, but in terms of our supposed access to Difference itself? Of the many divides that philosophers have put forth between the human and the animal, perhaps the most basic and the most ineradicable is precisely this: that the human being possesses a monopoly on difference itself. The insect’s wild diversity ultimately figures our own changeability, our own lack of limits, in other words the very transcendence that has always been attributed to mankind in opposition to the animal.

The many instances of zoö-curiosity I’ve explored in this paper all partake in a broader sensibility and even a coherent tradition. Perhaps we can embrace zoö-curiosity not only as an impetus for questioning, but also as an analytic in itself. Zoö-curiosity is a leaning, a tending or a reaching, that turns upon an axis of affinity rather than a certainty of knowledge. Perhaps many of the conversations taking place now in the fields of animal studies and human-animal studies lean this way, and lean together in a coordinated but differentiated fashion, because of a certain pleasure in beginning to

know, because of “amateurism” in the literal sense of an animal-curious, other-curious, “love-research.”

Notes

1. Though I don't have the space in this essay to undertake a full reading of Simone de Beauvoir, it would be worth investigating the roles as signifiers of “feminine” insects like the spider or the praying mantis in her chapter “Biological Data” in *The Second Sex*.
2. See Ursula Reidel-Schrewe's “Freud's Début in the Sciences,” an analysis of how the biological complexities of sexing eels shaped the later analytic style of Freud's psychoanalysis.
3. See specimens in “Shelf Life 09: Kinsey's Wasps.” *AMNH.tv*, American Museum of Natural History, Aug. 2015. Web. 19 Aug. 2016.
4. Carpenter, Jennifer. “A rare he-she butterfly is born in London's NHM.” *Nature News*. BBC News. 12 July 2011. Web. 19 Aug. 2016.
5. The entire series was made accessible online on the YouTube page of the Sundance Channel. In an interview for the Italian/American Cinema Project, Rossellini explains her attraction to the sex lives of insects: “I have been personally always interested in animals and animal behavior, [I] take course in biology, take trips to a safari, but I know that people out there are not so interested in animal as I am, but I do know that people are interested in sex. So I said OK, I'll do a series about the sex life of animals, but not mammals! [I'll do] bugs and crustaceans, because they're very far from us, otherwise we would pretty much know what they do. But the others, they do different things.” “Green Porno: Interview with Isabella Rossellini.” (i-ItalyTV. YouTube, 3 Mar. 2010. Web. 18 Aug. 2016.) In another interview, she compares her own father, the director Roberto Rossellini, to a male seahorse, because of his strong nurturing inclinations and behaviors. See “Isabella's Green Porno - The Graham Norton Show.” BBC. YouTube. 23 Oct. 2009. Web. 18 Aug. 2016.
6. In fact, the name means “a small arched boat,” because if you turn the shell upside down, it resembles a small hollow boat with a little bench inside. See “The Limpet of Light Virtue.” The London NERC Doctoral Training Partnership. The London NERC DTP, n.d. Web. 18 Aug. 2016.

7. This openness in engaging with the “play of living matter” is very different from what Gide does in another zoö-curious text, *Corydon*. *Corydon* is a sweeping polemic arguing for the cultural superiority of “Greek love,” with extensive footnotes contrasting the sex lives of bugs (in which the female is often bigger and dominant) to what Gide describes as the superiority of the “male element” in humans and other higher animals.

8. See “Jacques Derrida and the Question of ‘The Animal.’” Canalul utilizatorului hiperf289. YouTube. 18 Dec. 2008. Web. 18 Aug. 2016.

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