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In the Vermicular

Janelle A. Schwartz, *Worm Work: Recasting Romanticism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 304 pp. \$82.50 hb; \$27.50 pb.

“It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly organized creatures.” So claims Charles Darwin in his “earthworm treatise,” *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, through the Action of Worms, with Observations on Their Habits* (1881). Indeed, as an avid gardener, I know that the worms’ work plays a significant role in a healthy summer harvest, and there’s nothing I like better each spring than cracking into the earth to find a plenitude of wriggling forms enriching the plot. Despite my gratitude, when I see an earthworm struggling on a sidewalk after a rain shower, it is with great squeamishness that I pick it up and deliver it to the protection of a grassy yard. Janelle Schwartz’s fascinating study in *Worm Work* suggests I’m not alone in my paradoxical appreciation of and repulsion by “these lowly organized creatures”; the British Romantic writers shared a similar sense of anxiety and esteem for the worm and the organic processes it represents.

“Worm” here encompasses a range of vermicular species, from the caterpillar to the polyp, but Schwartz is careful to focus on invertebrates. *Worm Work* examines the growing interest, for naturalists and literary authors alike, in worms throughout the long nineteenth century, positing the worm as central to the development of a Romantic literary discourse. This particular historical moment finds the worm firmly planted at the intersection between the organic and the aesthetic; “both natural historical and Romantic writings,” the author claims, “share an oftentimes disregarded slippage between an articulation of the material world as inscribed by the figurative and the metaphorical as it is informed by matter itself” (xvi). In examining this slippage, via the worm, Schwartz opens up new avenues for inquiry that move the discussion beyond two usual suspects, the beautiful and the sublime. As an alternative, Schwartz offers what she terms a “vile aesthetic.” Naturalists’ studies of worms, she contends, “provided late-eighteenth-century and Romantic writers with a vocabulary for recognizing the instabilities of classification and for constructing an aesthetic imaginary that could take up those instabilities as its central logic” (xxi). Worms, which naturalists perceived as treading a hazy line between plant and animal, threw a wrench in attempts

to classify and organize life forms. The complications associated with categorization serve as a trope throughout the text, and the author demonstrates how Romantic literature recasts conversations about taxonomy and the desire for a coherent natural order.

A second theme of decay and generation surfaces in the Romantic texts Schwartz surveys, which further emphasizes the slippage between the material and metaphorical. Throughout *Worm Work*, Schwartz herself oscillates between illustrating the direct influence of scientific vermicular experiments and discoveries on Romantic literature and offering figurative “vermicular readings” of texts. For example, in her analysis of Erasmus Darwin’s poem *The Temple of Nature* (1803), Schwartz claims that, “By filtering the elements of natural history through the body of poetry, *Temple* transforms unfathomable nature into a sound cultural artifact” (28). Through decomposition, a composition emerges. This movement between the material worm and the metaphorical use of worm work might prove problematic for readers like myself who approach the book through the lens of Human-Animal Studies (HAS). I brought to the text an admiration for, but no scholarly training in, the writings of the British Romantics; instead, I was curious about literary representations of the physical worm itself. This is not to critique the author’s approach. Her “vermicular readings” are thoughtful, and they engaged the literary scholar in me. On top of that, the reader will recognize that the author has fun with wormy puns and analogies; her pleasure in the language makes this an enjoyable read. Nevertheless, from an HAS perspective, I was often left wanting more of the worms on their own terms. As Philip Armstrong notes in *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (2008), scholars in HAS reject Claude Lévi-Strauss’s notion that animals are “good to think with,” and are instead, “interested in attending not just to what animals mean to humans, but to what they mean themselves; that is, to the ways in which animals might have significances, intentions and effects quite beyond the designs of human beings.”¹ I found most compelling the moments in Schwartz’s text when she articulated the correspondence between the worm of natural history and the worm of literature. There’s plenty of this in the book to satisfy readers from an HAS background, and if I voice a complaint, it’s only to indicate that I found this aspect of the text to be a welcome contribution to the field, and I wanted more of it.

In the first chapter, “Transitional Tropes: The Nature of Life in European Romantic Thought,” Schwartz provides representative examples of eighteenth-century worm and insect studies, which set the natural historical and cultural contexts for her later analyses. Starting with an overview of the shifts in methods of categorizing animate objects, the chapter illustrates how the worm’s mutability complicated taxonomic

practices and attempts “to build a *complete* catalog of the natural world” (5). Additionally, vermiform animals sparked debates about theories of generation, which extended outside natural history into theological understandings about the process of life. This chapter also suggests a rationale for Schwartz’s interest in more figurative vermicular readings later in the text. In her discussion of the various ways in which humans integrated man’s relationship with the worm into such forms as the church hymn (as a means for humbling the congregants) the slippage between the material and symbolic worm becomes clear. She contends, “The metaphorized worm would only increase in sense, value, and frequency as the scrutiny of the origins and development of the insect world raised to a fever pitch throughout the eighteenth century” (8). As someone who has little knowledge of “vermicular activity” of that time, the opening chapter left me feeling equipped with a helpful foundation with which to approach the readings that follow.

I suspect that Chapter Two, “‘Unchanging but in Form’: The Aesthetic Episteme of Erasmus Darwin,” may be of less interest to readers in HAS. Despite the fact that the elder Darwin was both a scientist and a poet, this section of Schwartz’s text relies more heavily than others on worm work as an analogy. The author appropriates the concept of diplopia, a condition in which one sees objects in double, and transforms it into a framework for reading Darwin’s final work, *The Temple of Nature; or, The Origin of Society*. Schwartz reimagines diplopia as “a kind of coding of vision that allows for the necessary de-centering of the human — and, by extension, the irony of singularity to be that which is neither differentiable nor single valued — in favor of a more holistic rendering of the aesthetic imaginary” (29). While the chapter opens by noting that “Darwin decisively submits that ants and worms must be seen, or realized, as man’s coarticulating actors,” Schwartz’s analysis here favors what she terms the “diplopic paradox.” As I noted earlier, the reading of the poem in itself offers thoughtful insights, but I found myself asking as I read, “Yes, but what about the *worms*?”

The next chapter resituates the text in the realm of material worms. In “‘Not without some Repugnancy, and a Fluctuating Mind’: Trembley’s Polyp and the Practice of Eighteenth-Century Taxonomy,” Schwartz outlines the major shifts in scientific, literary, and philosophical thought that the tiny polyp initiated. This “marine invertebrate with distinctly vermiform associations” (72) is sure to enthrall contemporary readers as much as it did those of the eighteenth century. Chapter Three shows in practice much of the larger theories and debates outlined in the first chapter,

illustrating how studies of lower organisms complicated naturalists' understanding of categorization, generation, and "the surprising nature of life" (74). Here, we learn how naturalist Abraham Trembley discovered that polyps could generate new life through budding as well as regenerate from cuttings he himself performed. Unsure whether to classify the creature as plant or animal, Trembley's experiments — and those of others who replicated his findings — initiated a crisis for the "enterprise of classification" (73) not to mention the debates it ignited about the nature of the soul and the concept of a divine Creator. Schwartz closes the chapter by pointing out the polyp's influence on the works of eighteenth-century literary writers. Forgoing analyses of writers such as Fielding and Voltaire who critiqued or satirized the polyp and what it symbolized, the author focuses instead on Denis Diderot's three-act play, *La Rêve de d'Alembert* (1769), in which "he saw that the material properties of the polyp could be a positive trope with which to reimagine life and the place of humans within it" (107). I particularly appreciated this move in Schwartz's analysis, as she offers a clear demonstration of the polyp's influence on literary minds: we see the transference of Trembley's scientific discoveries into the literary arts.

The final two chapters concentrate on the function of worms in the works of two Romantic writers, William Blake and Mary Shelley. Chapter Four, "'Art Thou but a Worm?' Blake and the Question Concerning Taxonomy," establishes an unmistakable pattern of worminess in his work. Narrowing her focus to two representative pieces, *The Book of Thel* (1789) and "The Sick Rose" (1794), Schwartz contends that "these familiar poems readily employ the worm as a diplopic device, one that envisions the nature of nature as a purposive system of recycling: corruption is always suggestive of renewal, just as generation consistently gives way to decay" (115-16). Blake's engraved images accompany both poems, and Schwartz's reading of text and image are especially striking. So often we see images dropped into a text with no clear sense of their function in light of the analysis. Not so here. The author provides close and detailed readings of Blake's images, indicating how one medium informs the other to build Blake's vermicular exploration of decay, generation, and the process of recycling. Like the preceding chapter, this one is a fun read. That said, Schwartz might have offered more detail regarding what Blake knew of natural historians' studies of worms. While she does note that Blake's poems represent "in lyric the (re)generative properties of insects discovered by Bonnet and Trembley" (137), she does not expand this discussion to suggest which aspects of these experiments, if any, may have been familiar to Blake. I was curious to know what he had read in natural history and the sciences, or what he might have gleaned from other readings and popular culture. Ultimately, the chapter establishes the worm as a key figure in Blake's oeuvre, and Schwartz invites scholars to

consider “the plethora of Blakean worms and worminess” (115) that lay outside the scope of her project.

The culminating chapter, “A Diet of Worms; or, *Frankenstein* and the Matter of a Vile Romanticism,” provided the discussion of Mary Shelley’s scientific reading and background knowledge lacking in the Blake chapter. In outlining which studies and trends in the sciences Shelley followed, Schwartz constructs a compelling case to establish the worm’s influence on the novel. Threads from the previous chapters — the origin of life, the desire to classify life forms (and the species that complicate this), decay and generation — align here in the figure of Frankenstein’s Creature. Schwartz claims that, “worm studies in particular present an untraced opportunity to revise inquiries into ‘the creature’s formation’ from ‘impenetrable’ to comprehensible and to recast our understanding of Shelley’s narrative plan as a whole” (153-54). She locates Victor Frankenstein’s discovery of how to reanimate life in his visits to the decaying bodies in “vaults and charnal houses”: “Using these gothic settings as his needed ‘recourse to death,’ Victor finally ‘examines the causes of life’ by placing himself squarely within the habit of decay — where he can watch precisely ‘how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain’” (164). Readers from HAS might note a glaring oversight here, as Schwartz’s reading of this aspect of the novel is not entirely “untraced”: Philip Armstrong makes this argument in *What Animals Mean*.² It appears that Schwartz wasn’t familiar with Armstrong’s text (she does not cite it in her notes or bibliography), but, given the similarity of their claims, she would have benefited from acknowledging this prior scholarship. Although Schwartz’s text expands on the worm’s function in the novel beyond Armstrong’s reading, there’s a missed opportunity here to engage with an analogous study.

In her conclusion, “Wherefore All This Wormy Circumstance?” Schwartz offers a brief reading of Keats’ *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* (1818) to reinforce her overarching claim that vermicular readings provide a relevant framework for analyzing a broader range of British Romantic literature. Schwartz does not claim to exhaust the possibilities for exploring worm work in these texts, and her study invites future scholarship to investigate its role in other writings. Closing with a glance at Charles Darwin’s “earthworm treatise” reminds us of the worm’s important role “in the history of the world.”

Despite the significance of worm work throughout human history, we find relatively little scholarship on these creatures outside of the natural sciences (the worm is notably absent from Reaktion Books' "Animal" Series, for example). While HAS has considered some of the less "cute" members of the animal world, Janelle Schwartz's text is a very welcome addition to the conversation. Her text turns our gaze down to the lower organisms and challenges us to recast our understanding of their important ecological and cultural work. Schwartz concludes, "No longer should we take for granted the action of worms, in life or in literature" (197) and her text makes a convincing case for this new perspective.

Notes

1. Interestingly, Schwartz closes *Worm Work* by echoing Strauss: "Just as we will become fodder for the worm, so should the worm be recognized as fodder: for us, worms are simply good to think with."

2. Armstrong contends that, "Frankenstein's description of the actual moment at which he discovers the 'principle of life' has nothing to do with electricity or technology, but everything to do with natural organic processes. His discovery comes from days and nights spent in churchyards, vaults, and charnal-houses, where the study of 'bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worms' allows him 'to examine the cause and progress of ...decay'" (72). Armstrong continues, "[Frankenstein] discovers the 'cause of generation and life' by observing the progress of decay. And what he finds relates intimately to other manifestations in the novel of a radical challenge to the rigidity of species boundaries. The phrases 'from life to death, and death to life' in the passage above can only refer to the change from human life to human death, and from human death to non-human animal life — that of the worm and the other living creatures generated in and nourished by the decay of the corpse. The means of 'bestowing animation upon lifeless matter' deduced by Frankenstein from his observations therefore depends on a kind of suspension of the firm species barriers that separate human from other animal life. In its origin — and this is surely part of its horror — Frankenstein's theory of animation involves recognition that in its vital and material substrate, the human is not clearly separable from the animal" (73).

Work Cited

Armstrong, Philip. *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity*. London: Routledge, 2008.