the miniaturists • *Barbara Browning*

the miniaturists

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DUKE

the miniaturists

Barbara Browning

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CONT

contents

oibles of Ins

ENTS

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foibles of insects and men

It all began as a question of feminist methodology.

A friend of mine had written a book about archiving. In it, she mentioned a fellow student in graduate school who had told her about "vaginal libraries"—this, in reference to Argentine women imprisoned during the dictatorship, who hid dissident texts in their private parts. My friend had extended this figure to consider various ways in which women store certain information in their bodies. I was trying to come up with a word for this messy, interesting process, which I wanted to term *gynarchivism*. So first I Googled *gynarchy*, which literally means government by women but is most frequently used to refer to insect societies dominated by females.

I was quickly directed to a seemingly obscure text by William Morton Wheeler titled *Social Life among the Insects* (1923). The brief passage that popped up was weirdly captivating. In it, Wheeler notes that certain species have succeeded in "reducing the male to a mere episode in the life of the female."

During the singular act of mating in these insects—a prodigious one-night stand—sperm is deposited in the female's spermatheca, "a small muscular sac" that supplies glandular secretions that can preserve the sperm, alive, indefinitely. "According to a generally accepted theory," Wheeler writes, "the female can voluntarily contract the wall of her spermatheca and thus permit sperm to leave it and fertilize the eggs as they are passing its orifice on their way to being laid, or she can keep the orifice closed and thus lay unfertilized eggs." That is, she can perform birth control just by clenching her spermatheca when she's ovulating. In fact, she can even determine the sex of her offspring, as her unfertilized eggs can still produce males if she wants them. "We are justified," Wheeler continues, "in regarding the female parasitoid, wasp, bee or ant, after she has appropriated and stored in her spermatheca all the essential elements of the male [!!!], as a potential hermaphrodite" (47–48).

At this point, Wheeler waxes poetic—or, to be more accurate, his account begins to sound something like a Hitchcock film: "In the solitary wasps the male is a nonentity, although in a few species he may hang around and try to guard the nest. But in the bees, ants and social wasps he has not even the status of a loafing policeman, and all the activities of the community are carried on by the females, and mostly by widows, debutantes and spinsters." He concludes the passage: "The facts certainly compel even those who, like myself, are neither feminists nor vegetarians, to confess that the whole trend of evolution in the most interesting of social insects is towards an ever increasing matriarchy, or gynarchy and vegetarianism" (48).

Needless to say, I immediately ordered the book on interlibrary loan.

* * *

I should pause here to tell you that I live with an amateur naturalist. This was not an obvious turn of events in my life. We met when I was in my fifties, he in his sixties, and when he first invited me to visit his little cottage in the countryside of Normandy, I warned him that I was something like the Eva Gabor character in the old sitcom *Green Acres.* Being French, he had no idea what I was talking about. Actually, if you're not of my vintage, perhaps that will also go over your head. *Green Acres* was the zany tale of a Manhattan lawyer who decided to give up the rat race of city life and live in the country. His glamorous Eastern European wife was trying to give it a go, but under protest. In the opening credits, she'd habitually remind her hubby:

> New York is where I'd rather stay
> I get allergic smelling hay
> I just adore a penthouse view
> Dah-ling, I love you, but give me Park Avenue

Well, I'm neither Eastern European nor particularly glamorous, and expensive apartments on Park Avenue tend to make me very uncomfortable, but it was true that I'd been residing happily in New York for over a quarter of a century and didn't have much experience with—or appetite for—country living.

S, on the other hand, was born in Paris and lived there for most of his life, with occasional sojourns in other parts of the

world. He wasn't a lawyer—far from it. He was a hand-to-mouth singer/songwriter and freelance screenwriter. But like Eva Gabor's TV husband, he abandoned urbanity in his forties and decamped to what I sometimes call his Hobbit House in a little hamlet called Pourry. When I went there, I was charmed. In the daylight hours, the birds sang and the breeze whistled through the trees, but at night it was utterly silent. I found myself sleeping eleven hours at a stretch. There was a forest nearby, where S would forage for baby toads and salamander larvae, which he tended to in a couple of large glass boxes in the house, furnishing them with moss, muck, beetles, and slugs.

Once we decided to cohabitate, our time was mostly spent at the New York apartment, where each of us had a workspace for writing. But whenever my teaching schedule allowed it, we'd hightail it to the house in Normandy. In the country, we maintained a similar schedule of solitary writing days, punctuated by meals and occasional walks together. But we slept more. I should say, we sleep more. I'm writing this from the garden in Pourry.

* * *

When I received my copy of *Social Life among the Insects*, there were more surprises. On the very first page, Wheeler salutes "Prince Kropotkin"! That won't come as such a surprise to you if you know that Kropotkin was also a naturalist, but in citing his observations regarding "mutual aid" in nature, as a necessary corrective or at least complement to Darwinian theory, Wheeler goes on to argue for the postwar impulse "towards ever greater solidarity, of general disarmament, of a drawing

together not only of men to men, but of nations to nations throughout the world, of a recasting and refinement of all our economic, political, social, educational and religious activities for the purposes of greater mutual helpfulness" (5).

As for that disavowal of his own feminism, I wondered about his sincerity. In snooping around some more on the internet, I discovered that he appeared to return habitually in his writings (which were copious) to what he called "the problem of the male." In a 1933 address to the American Society of Naturalists (published in the *Scientific Monthly* in 1934), he noted "the high degree of integration and stability of the insect society and the extraordinarily harmonious and self-sacrificing cooperation of its individual members, as contrasted with the mobility, instability, and mutual aggressiveness so conspicuous among the members of our own society." Among many species, including our own, Wheeler claimed that his own sex might be "properly called the antisocial sex" (292–93).

The disavowal of vegetarianism, however, appeared to be true—and yet, again, it followed the logic of many insects.

Regarding the life of the female, things really came to a head in a passage of *Social Life* in which Wheeler presented the parable of the *Sphex* wasps, as he put it,

> in the form of a tragic drama in three acts, with the following brief synopsis:
>
> Act I. A sandy country with sparse vegetation inhabited by caterpillars and other insects. Time, a hot, sunny day in early August. Scene 1. Miss Sphex arrayed in all the charm of maidenhood being courted by Mr. Sphex. Wedding among the flowers. Scene 2. Mrs. Sphex, deserted by her scatter-brained

spouse, settles down and excavates a kind of cyclone-cellar. She closes its door and leaves the stage.

Act II. Scene 1. Same as in Act I. Mrs. Sphex, hunting in the vegetation, finds a caterpillar, struggles with it, stings it and gnaws its neck till it lies motionless. Scene 2. She drags it into the cellar and placing her offspring on it behind the scenes, returns and at once leaves the stage after locking the door, amid a storm of applause.

Act III. Scene 1. Interior of Mrs. Sphex's cellar. Baby Sphex slowly devouring caterpillar till only its skin remains. Scene 2. Baby Sphex, now a large, buxom lass, weaves an elaborate nightgown for herself and goes to bed as the curtain falls. (56)

Despite its electrifying plot and *mise-en-scène,* Wheeler himself declares this drama "defective" in Aristotelian terms because the climax comes too soon, with the heroine abandoning the stage to her "drowsy offspring" in the third act. So he proposes a revision, in which the third act replaces the first, with the first and second acts becoming the second and third. Thus, the daughter becomes the central figure, and we follow her gradual transformation from infancy, through a troubled marriage and desertion, to her heroic excavation of the cellar, and concluding with "the thrilling chase, stinging and entombment of the hereditary victim in the third act" (57).

Medea, anyone?

Wheeler admits to having committed the "unpardonable sin" of anthropomorphizing the wasp but asks for a little more patience from his reader as he proceeds to "vespize" the human being: "Suppose that the human mother were in the habit of carefully tying her new-born baby to the arm-pit of

a paralyzed elephant which she had locked in a huge cellar." Um, okay.

> The baby—we must, of course, suppose that it is a girl baby—is armless, legless and blind but has been born with powerful jaws and teeth and an insatiable appetite. Under the circumstances she would have to eat the elephant or die. Supposing now that she fed on the elephant day after day between naps till only its tough hide and hard skeleton were left, and that she then took an unusually long nap and awoke as a magnificent, winged, strong-limbed amazon, with a marvelously keen sense of smell and superb eyes, clad in burnished armor and with a poisoned lance in her hand. With such attractions and equipment we could hardly expect her to stay long in a cellar. She would at once break through the soil into the daylight. Now suppose she happened to emerge, with a great and natural appetite, in a zoological garden, should we be astonished to see her make straight for the elephant house? Why, she would recognize the faintest odor of elephant borne to her on the breeze. She would herself be, in a sense, merely a metabolized elephant. Of course, we should be startled to see her leap on the elephant's back, plunge her lance into its armpit, drag it several miles over the ground, hide it in a cellar, and tie her offspring to its hide. (57–58)

All of this is ostensibly laid out in order to illustrate an argument regarding larval "memory," though it seems to me entirely suited for the making of an action film or a Marvel comic.

* * *

I should mention yet another reason I was drawn to William Morton Wheeler—although at this point you may be wondering who wouldn't be. I was at the time (and in fact still am) directing the dissertation of a young woman who was writing on anarcha-feminism, and she had proposed a chapter on "anarchist beekeeping" as a case study. Actually, the beekeeper in question would refute that term, since he didn't "keep" bees but cohabitated with them, never seeking to organize their behavior, since they seemed to have their own perfectly functional way of doing things. In fact, he didn't even call them "bees" but rather "apian beings." It perhaps goes without saying that this nomenclature was an effort to not privilege human ontology over that of the insects. It perhaps also goes without saying that he was something of an outlier in the world of bee enthusiasts. I'm not sure if he considered himself an anarcha-feminist, though my student did. Actually, I have a feeling that he was the kind of person who avoided all manners of isms, which is also true of S. Somewhat like my student, I have the perhaps irritating habit of ignoring his disavowals, just as I was ignoring those of William Morton Wheeler.

You may also be wondering about the political efficacy or wisdom of doing this. I assure you that the question has crossed my mind as well.

* * *

After devouring *Social Life among the Insects*, I ordered a few more books. My appetite was something like that of a strong-limbed amazon catching a whiff of succulent elephant. Still, there was no question of consuming Wheeler's entire oeuvre, colossal as it was, and most of it out of print. The first vintage

volume to arrive was actually not a book by him but a biography of Wheeler published by Harvard University Press in 1970. It was authored by Mary Alice Evans and Howard Ensign Evans, the latter being an esteemed entomologist himself. Apparently, Howard was the scientific fact-checker, and his wife, Mary Alice, was responsible for much of the personal narrative in the book. The picture that began to emerge in this account of Wheeler's life was a little confusing.

His early life was simultaneously predictable and exceptional: he was born in Milwaukee (I was also born in Wisconsin!) in 1865, and he displayed an early fascination with bugs. His parents sent him to a German academy (according to him, on account of his "bad behavior"), where he learned to read not only German, but also French, Spanish, Italian, Greek, and Latin (his writings are jam-packed with epigraphs and citations from classical literature, all in the original languages). He worked as a specimen handler in a natural science museum in upstate New York, returned briefly to Milwaukee, and then went to Clark University, where he wrote a doctoral dissertation on insect embryology. He held a number of positions at different academic institutions and major museums, finally settling at Harvard, and several of his students would go on to achieve renown—among them, interestingly, Alfred Kinsey.

There were some discreet references in this biography to Wheeler's intimate life. He was betrothed to a childhood sweetheart who apparently dumped him. Then he got engaged to her sister. That also didn't work out (no clue as to why), but Wheeler maintained good relations with both the sisters, and years later he visited them with his wife, Dora.

In the passages regarding his relations with his colleagues and students, Wheeler sometimes appeared affable and fatherly, sometimes shy. But occasionally he sounded like a pedantic bully. I was intrigued by the number of female, African American, and Asian scholars whom he both trained and worked with, but when I followed the leads on some of these connections, they were disconcerting. One of his female students went on to work for a eugenicist organization. Of course, one can't always hold the teacher responsible for the student's proclivities.

Wheeler's wife, Dora Wheeler, née Emerson, was politically active in food distribution, and she campaigned for Herbert Hoover. I also found this a little disconcerting, though it seems her enthusiasm was based on Hoover's own activities in international food aid during the war, when he was considered a progressive. Dora's interest in food distribution appears to have been linked to Wheeler's study of the phenomenon among ants.

I was curious about the relationship between Mary Alice and Howard Evans. I paused in my reading of their book and found this in a memorial penned by a student of Howard's, Mary Jane West-Eberhard, after his death:

> Howard Evans and Mary Alice Dietrich were married in 1954, soon after Mary Alice had finished her Ph.D. in science education at Cornell and not long after Howard had returned to work there as assistant professor of entomology in 1952.... Mary Alice was the daughter of the Cornell entomologist Henry Dietrich, who had "warned his daughters to stay away from entomologists, who were likely to be impecunious and

> little appreciated by society." "Fortunately," Howard wrote, "Mary Alice failed to take his advice." (123)

When I mentioned this to S, he asked me if I knew Donovan's "Song of the Naturalist's Wife." He played it for me. It's a gentle song, in which a wife wonders if it's her husband she sees toddling toward her from his day by the sea. "Do I see your buckets full / Buckets full of shells?" She thinks she recognizes him from afar, with his "weary weave," his slow, distracted way of meandering home.

S doesn't go to the seaside for his collecting. He has a mucky pond in the forest that he likes to visit with a bucket and a net. But, indeed, when he's coming back from his excursions, slightly bent under his straw hat, you might describe his gait as a weary weave.

* * *

Although it was the story of Ms. Sphex that really hooked me, most of Wheeler's monographs are in the subfield of myrmecology—the study of ants. Ants are the focus of the second half of *Social Life among the Insects,* and again, Wheeler doesn't hesitate to compare their social behavior to our own. In a chapter on parasitism, he comes up with a colorful list of terms to describe the different ways in which ants act as both parasites and hosts. In the former category, he offers alternative names for the Latinate ones employed by most myrmecologists (cleptobiosis, lestobiosis, plesiobiosis, parabiosis, xenobiosis, and dulosis): brigandage, thievery, neighborliness, tutelage, hospitality, and "slavery" (there is no indication of why this last term is put in scare quotes). In the latter category,

the scientific designations (synechthrans, synoeketes, commensals, and symphiles) are rendered: persecuted intruders, indifferently tolerated guests, messmates, and true guests.

It's another classic case of anthropomorphizing, of course, but predictably, Wheeler flips things around to consider the human species, which "furnishes the most striking illustrations of the case with which both the parasitic and host rôles may be assumed by a social animal":

> Our bodies, our domestic animals and food plants, dwellings, stored foods, clothing and refuse support such numbers of greedy organisms, and we parasitize on one another to such an extent that the biologist marvels how the race can survive. We not only tolerate but even foster in our midst whole parasitic trades, institutions, castes and nations, hordes of bureaucrats, grafting politicians, middlemen, profiteers and usurers, a vast and varied assortment of criminals, hoboes, defectives, prostitutes, white-slavers and other purveyors to antisocial proclivities, in a word so many non-productive, food-consuming and space-occupying parasites that their support absorbs nearly all the energy of the independent members of society. This condition is, of course, responsible for the small amount of free creative activity in many nations. (197–98)

While you might find the general thrust of the passage to have some validity, perhaps you, like me, will balk at some of the names on Wheeler's list. I don't think I need to say which ones or why. Indeed, at the end of the passage, Wheeler himself says (this chapter was originally delivered as a public lecture): "I have expressed myself somewhat drastically on human para-

sitism. If I attempted to utter all my opinions on the subject I should probably not be permitted to survive till the next lecture, even in so tolerant a community as Boston" (198).

He does go on to tell a story about the relations between ants and the minuscule mites they sometimes host in their colonies. It seems the tiny mite might have certain "glandular attractions" that can "induce the ants to adopt, feed and care for it and thus become a member of the colony, just as an attractive and apparently well-behaved foreigner can secure naturalization and nourishment in any human community" (221). Well, would that that were so, but I continue:

> Perhaps we can best appreciate the relations of the ants to the mites if we fancy ourselves blind, condemned to live in dark cellars, and continually occupied with pasturing and milking fat, sluggish cows, yielding quantities of strained honey instead of milk. Then let us suppose that, occasionally, there alighted on our cheeks or backs small creatures which, by placing themselves in positions symmetrical to the median longitudinal axis of our bodies, took great care not to annoy us and stretched forth to us from time to time small, soft hands, like those of our friends, begging for a little honey, should we not, under the circumstances, treat these little Old Men of the Sea with much lenity and even with something akin to affection? (227)

The scenario was touching. Still, I must say that there were several moments in my reading of *Social Life among the Insects* that left me ill at ease.

* * *

Perhaps you're wondering about that anarcha-feminist student of mine. Her name is Sarah. She took a little time off from writing about the bee enthusiast to do some organizing work in Greece. She's currently living in a semipublic artists' space, helping to set up a free-form feminist library for other anarchists and migrants. Well, if I said that one can't always hold the teacher responsible for a student's unsavory proclivities, I should also note that a teacher really can't take credit for the savory ones. Still, I can't help feeling a little proud.

* * *

S has been pleased to see me sitting in the garden these past few days working on this story about an entomologist. Yesterday, he came outside with two of his favorite childhood books to show me. Odette Vincent-Fumet wrote and illustrated them, and they were published in Montreal in 1942. They were part of a series of three volumes: *Pluck—ses aventures, Pluck—chez les fourmis,* and *Pluck—chez les abeilles.* S had only the second and third volumes. These books are fairly obscure, and he's not sure where his parents found them. Even my vigorous internet research yielded little information on the series and their author. They were printed on a letterpress, with the words in blue ink and the illustrations in red. Since we're missing the first volume, I'm not sure exactly how Pluck, a miniature boy in striped leggings and a matching stocking cap, ended up having all these adventures with the ants and bees. There's a didactic premise to the series, as the insects instruct Pluck in their ways of doing things. But there's also a love story woven throughout: Pluck encounters a miniature girl named Fleurette who was kidnapped by the ants in her infancy, and

he aims to get her back home. They lose each other at various points as Pluck does battle with spiders and various other predators, but at the end of *Pluck—chez les abeilles* he finds her again, back home with her family, *"bien grandie et embellie*," "all grown up and beautified." She says she's missed him while he was gone, and she asks him not to go on any more adventures with the insects. He doesn't want to make any promises but tells her that if he does go, she should wait for him. Then he says, *"Alors, si vous vouliez, quand je serai fixé ici définitivement, nous nous marierons?*" "So, if you want, when I'm permanently installed here, we'll get married?" (45). Fleurette answers by throwing herself into his arms.

* * *

Apparently, William Morton Wheeler also believed in romantic love. In that chapter on ant parasitism, he quotes L. T. Hobhouse, an early proponent of social liberalism, on the topic: "After all, is an ant-nourishing parasite that destroys its young guilty of a greater absurdity than, say a mother promoting her daughter's happiness by selling her to a rich husband . . . ? The mother really desires her daughter's happiness, but her conception of the means thereto is confused, and rendered self-contradictory by worldly ambitions" (23).

Hobhouse was basing his argument on the research of Erich Wasmann, an entomologist and Jesuit priest. In a lengthy endnote on this citation, Wheeler says that Wasmann

> has recently published an elaborate résumé of his 35 years of investigation of Lomechusini and other myrmecophiles, largely as a criticism of and counterblast to my paper on the study of

> ant larvae (1918). As a study in Jesuit psychology the work may be recommended to biologists who can spare the time for its perusal from more important occupations. He has to admit the facts cited in my paper and much of my interpretation of them, but by adroit perversion of my statements, hairsplitting definitions and subtleties and by the production of voluminous smoke-screens of Thomistic argumentation he seeks to conceal the real scientific weakness of his contentions. (344n10)

The note goes on with a few more zingers about Wasmann's shortcomings, largely attributed to his religious inclinations, but also to his commitment to genetics.

Erich Wasmann once wrote a book celebrating the contributions of Hildegard von Bingen to the natural sciences.

The indexer of *Social Life among the Insects* confused Erich Wasmann with August Weismann, also cited extensively by Wheeler. August Weismann was the Jewish evolutionary biologist who developed germ plasm theory. Germ plasm theory counters the Lamarckian thesis that an organism can pass on characteristics that it has acquired through use or disuse during its lifetime to its offspring. Weismann disproved this theory by cutting off the tails of mice for twenty-two successive generations, with no change in inheritance. Isaac Asimov later pointed out that the circumcision of Jewish boys over many more generations than that should have made the experiment moot.

But I was talking about romantic love. Wheeler didn't mind citing Hobhouse citing Wasmann in that little passage about why mothers shouldn't marry off their beloved daughters to rich men in hopes of making them happy.

I don't think Mary Alice Evans's father was serious when he tried to warn her and her sister off marrying an impecunious entomologist.

* * *

For the last two nights, S and I have tiptoed out of the house to watch a hedgehog nibbling at the dinner scraps we left by the front door. I'd never seen a hedgehog up close. It was adorable. S gently poured some milk into a saucer and placed it nearby. In the morning, the milk was gone. Same thing the second night. S is happy like a ten-year-old kid.

* * *

William Morton Wheeler had little patience for the "rose-colored psychologies of the academic type," which he felt "confine[d their] attention to the head and upper extremities and drape[d] or ignore[d] the other parts" (cited in Evans and Evans, 226). Real psychoanalysts, however, were, to his mind, "getting down to brass tacks." Sigmund Freud and his more committed followers, he said,

> have had the courage to dig up the subconscious, that hotbed of all the egotism, greed, lust, pugnacity, cowardice, sloth, hate, and envy which every single one of us carries about as his inheritance from the animal world. These are all ethically and aesthetically very unpleasant phenomena but they are just as real and fundamental as our entrails, blood, and reproductive organs. In this matter, I am glad to admit, the theologians, with their doctrine of total depravity, seem to me to be nearer

> the truth than the psychologists. I should say, however, that our depravity is only about 85 to 90%.

Wheeler said this in an address to the Royce Club in May 1917. He went on:

> If Freud told us, as he probably would if he were here, that all of us who have been smoking this evening have merely been exhibiting a surviving nutritional infantilism with the substitution of cigars for our mothers' breasts, we should, of course, exclaim, like some New England farmer confronted with a wildly improbable statement, *Gosh!* But after all, is the substitution by a man of a roll of dried *Nicotiana* leaves for a woman's breast any more preposterous than the Empidid's substitution of a balloon of salivary bubbles for a juicy fly . . . ? (227–28)

In preparation for this talk, or at least in thinking through the question of "instincts," Wheeler claims to have "read some twenty volumes of psychoanalytic literature comprising the works of [Sigmund] Freud, [Carl] Jung, [Abraham] Brill, [Alfred] Adler, Ernest Jones, [Sándor] Ferenczi, [Poul] Bjerre, and W. A. White, with the result that I feel as if I had been taking a course of swimming lessons in a veritable cesspool of learning" (226).

S also loves Ferenczi, particularly *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality* (1924), which argues that coitus represents a kind of phylogenetic nostalgia for the sea life from which man emerged. He (S, that is) was in psychoanalysis for years, and I don't think he regrets it, though it didn't prevent a later episode of depression. But of course that's not really what psychoanalysis is for.

* * *

In 1925, Wheeler wrote another scathing appraisal of what he considered the lightweight, "rose-colored" behaviorist psychology of John B. Watson, an "obstreperous youngster" who "has been so frequently spanked that he has by this time undoubtedly developed ischial callosities of some thickness" (cited in Evans and Evans, 229). This review was published in Raymond Pearl's *Quarterly Review of Biology*. Pearl, a friend, urged Wheeler to meet his buddy H. L. Mencken, who he said could "really write," and who hosted unforgettable evenings in Philadelphia at something called the Saturday Night Club. "We meet together at eight o'clock each Saturday night and play symphonies until ten. Then we drink beer, eat and converse upon sundry subjects until midnight or later. I think you will not find anywhere now in existence a more highly 'he' group than this, nor one in which Rabelaisian conversation reaches such genuinely high flights" (cited in Evans and Evans, 247).

Mencken, indeed, could write. He was an ardent fan of Nietzsche and an early proponent of the work of Ayn Rand. He was also a vicious racist, though in his private journals he noted that it was in bad taste to talk about that kind of thing in public. Presumably it was okay at his weekly salon.

I wondered if Mencken made Wheeler consider "the problem of the male," but the Evanses' biography went on: "Over the years Wheeler attended a number of meetings of the Saturday Night Club, for Wheeler greatly admired Mencken and may have been influenced by Mencken's free-swinging style and his iconoclastic views" (248). When I read this, of course, my heart sank.

Some forty pages later in the biography, there's a strange paragraph:

> Wheeler's activities for the year 1925 . . . had two unexpected consequences: the discovery in Paris of an unpublished manuscript of Réaumur on ants (subsequently published), and a "slight mental breakdown," as he called it. The latter did not come at once, but in early 1926 Wheeler did not feel well, and during February and March he was at a mental hospital near New York City. In between coppersmithing and the like, however, he read [the] proof[s] of his French book, *Les Sociétés d'Insectes.* From April first through the summer he spent most of his days at Colebrook [his country home] relaxing. (286)

Despite my increasing discomfort in reading the biography, I was moved by the Evanses' discretion on this episode.

* * *

Over our picnic lunch today by an algae-covered pond, S got a dreamy look in his eyes and said, "A raw egg he would also appreciate." It took me a minute to realize he was talking about the hedgehog.

* * *

Although most of his books were highly specialized and published by academic presses, through his association with Mencken, Wheeler was invited to publish one volume of collected essays and lectures with Alfred A. Knopf. I received my copy of *Foibles of Insects and Men*, Wheeler's crossover book, before finishing the biography, and I decided to pause in my reading of *William Morton Wheeler, Biologist* to take a look

at what Knopf thought might be of interest to a lay reader. The Evanses had hinted that the last essay in the volume was a humdinger, and indeed it was. But I'll get to that later. For now, I'll say that in general, I didn't actually find *Foibles* any more or less absorbing than what I'd already read. That is, the essays are mostly comprised of Wheeler's characteristic mix of detailed entomological observation, highfalutin literary references, and action-packed cross-species parables. I found all that equally compelling, but I'm not sure how well the book sold. I just checked the current Amazon ranking: number 10,173,328 in books. Hm, that made me feel a little better about the current ranking of my last novel: number 981,739. Anyway, there was one essay I thought might be of particular interest to S, a lecture originally delivered to the American Association for the Advancement of Science on the occasion of Wheeler's retirement from the chairmanship of Section F (Zoological Sciences) of that organization in 1920. The lecture was titled "The Organization of Research," but Wheeler began his paper with a "confession":

> I find myself in a somewhat unpleasant predicament, for when I began [the paper] and even after sending its title to Professor Allee I was of the opinion that research might, perhaps, be amenable to organization, but after thinking the matter over I was compelled to reverse my opinion, with the result that what I shall say may strike some of you as painfully reactionary. Still I encouraged myself with the reflection that many others have written papers with misleading titles and that I might perhaps put much of the blame for the results on my confrères of Section F for conferring so signal an honor as

> its chairmanship on one of its tired old bisons from the taxonomic menagerie instead of on one of its fresh young bulls from the Mendelian byre. (169)

He goes on to disparage the trendy fixation on the term *organization*, which he notes had only recently usurped the late Victorian fascination with "progress." "The mediaeval high-brow words were 'chivalry,' and 'honor,'" which he compares to the Greek notion of *aidos* and the Japanese ideal of Bushido, the samurai code of honor. "All of these conceptions—progress, organization, chivalry, aidos, bushido—seem to start among the intellectual aristocracy and all imply a certain 'noblesse-oblige,' for there is no fun in continually exhorting others to progress unless you can keep up with the procession, or organizing others unless you yearn to be organized yourself, just as there is no fun in getting up a dueling or bushido code unless you are willing to fight duels or commit hara-kiri whenever it is required by the rules of the game" (169–70).

Wheeler's more interested in foraging, and in the work of amateurs. He derides the reverence of professionalism in the sciences and dreams of a future commonwealth in which "the communal furnace-man, after his four-hour day, is conducting elaborate investigations in paleo-botany, and… the communal laundress is an acknowledged authority in colloidal chemistry" (177–78).

I tried reading this passage out loud to S. He's a committed amateur, and he's profoundly disorganized, in the best sense of the term. He finds it befuddling that I tend to write from an outline. His experiments breeding toads and salamanders in our house have been surprisingly successful, given that his

methods are entirely improvised. But as I read aloud from *Foibles*, I noticed that S had the faraway look he sometimes gets when I try to turn him on to some book or film or piece of music. I think he was probably trying to come up with some new delicacy to offer the hedgehog.

* * *

Sarah just wrote me from Athens. She said, "i've spent about a month reading everything kropotkin ever wrote, and then almost everything cedric robinson ever wrote, and then rereading them both while taking scrupulous notes." She was in a funk because of Robinson's critique of anarchism in relation to false notions of "order." But she was beginning to see a glimmer of hope in resolving the conundrum. In other news, the library is slowly taking shape. Sarah and a comrade just located a "recent divorcée who runs a bookshop," and in dividing the marital assets, this woman got custody of a thirty-year collection of Greek queer feminist zines. "she doesn't have a place to store them and we're hoping she leaves them with us!"

* * *

I have my own confession to make. Like Wheeler, and unlike my friend the gynarchivist and my anarchist student, I am not a vegetarian. I was, for many years, but when I got pregnant at the age of thirty, I found myself having irresistible cravings for meat. I figured my body was telling me what I needed, so I listened, and I never really turned back. If I try to take stock of my political flaws, I usually find that my major failing is my anthropocentrism. Of course, even if you're anthropocentric, that's not much of an excuse since a plant-based diet is bene-

ficial for humanity as well as for other animals. But it feels to me like eating meat is part of my animal nature.

Even S, who obviously loves critters with a passion, eats them. A while ago, he rescued an injured pheasant from a cat who'd attacked it. He's been keeping the pheasant in a little coop at the back of the garden. It's a male, and it's now fully recovered, fat, with beautiful tail feathers. He thought about releasing it, but he's worried it won't survive after being domesticated. My son is coming to visit us in a couple of days, and S, though clearly ambivalent, suggested that maybe we should eat the pheasant together. I think it's a good idea. I always told my son that if you're going to eat meat, it's better to really grapple with the fact of what you're doing, and witness, if possible, the slaughter, rather than just picking up a plastic-wrapped package of chicken legs at the grocery store. S knows very well how to kill, pluck, and clean a fowl. He also likes to crunch, occasionally, on some dried ants that he brought back in a bag after a trip to Korea. He's even eaten hedgehog. He told me the Romani cook hedgehog by encasing it in clay and roasting it in hot ashes. It seems that when you break open the clay case, the quills all come out.

S's mother was from Romania, though she wasn't Romani. She was Jewish, and during the war, she and her mother were smuggled out of Cluj (then under Hungarian rule) by S's father, who was French. Most of her family was less fortunate.

* * *

As I said, there were some things I appreciated about the Evanses' biography of Wheeler, including their discretion about his mental illness. But the day I finished the book, I wanted to

throw it across the room. I couldn't believe what they'd done. In the last few pages, they tried to come up with some sort of honest reckoning of his qualities, both good and bad.

> His incessant energy took its toll on his nervous system, and he had neurotic tendencies throughout his life. His diaries and letters contain many references to the state of his health, and from time to time he had periods of depression, the worst being his collapse in 1926. But, as we have shown, even in the hospital he could not completely escape his absorption in his writing. . . . Wheeler was an incessant smoker, preferring a pipe but sometimes using cigars or even cigarettes when he ran out of pipe tobacco. (217)

Naturally, that made me remember his quip about the maternal breast in addressing the Royce Club in 1917. It also made me think of S. He smoked for nearly fifty years, until his doctor finally convinced him, recently, to switch to an electronic cigarette. He refers to it as his *tétine,* "his pacifier."

The Evanses went on a bit about Wheeler's penchant for card playing, noting that he was "not always the best loser," and described him as a basically shy person, but one who was capable of lively storytelling, not all of it appropriate for "polite society." And then, the bombshell: "In informal gatherings he was often the center of attention, and it was here that his numerous prejudices came to the surface: geneticists, psychologists, and even Jews (whom he enjoyed citing as examples of social parasitism)" (317).

Here, there was a paragraph break. But the cracking I felt wasn't that of the paragraph. It was the breaking of my heart. I was on page 317, in a book of 319 pages.

The Evanses went on to give a sort of lame apologia that begins, "His streak of antisemitism is curious, for one of Wheeler's closest friends at the German-English Seminary and during the years immediately following was a Jewish boy named Adolph Bernhard. . . ." Wheeler had maintained a correspondence with this friend, although only Bernhard's letters survived. According to the Evanses, in their correspondence, Wheeler and Bernhard "exchanged confidences about the future of the world, thoughts on women, on professors, on being Jewish, and on other subjects common to most friends age twenty" (317–18). Needless to say, this provided little balm for my distress.

In truth, my uneasy feelings had begun long before, when I encountered that list of human parasites. "Criminals, hoboes, defectives, prostitutes, white-slavers"—all of those were obviously troubling. But I was perturbed by another term, perhaps all the more pernicious because it seemed to me a code word: *usurers*.

When I told S about this, he smiled grimly and agreed.

* * *

I know that S loves me, and he's generally very tolerant of my way of making a living, though he's resisted academicism all his life and is, as you will have surmised, a confirmed autodidact. He's also been surprised by the generosity and cordiality of many of my colleagues, whom he now counts as friends—which is especially remarkable given his constitutional solitary ways. But when I regale him with stories of departmental politics, he can't help expressing bewilderment. Or maybe detachment is the word. Sometimes I feel defensive, but mostly I think he's right.

Despite his lengthy and celebrated career as a professor, William Morton Wheeler was also pretty grumpy about academicism. The penultimate essay in *Foibles of Insects and Men* is a rant addressed to the American Society of Naturalists in 1923. It's called "The Dry-Rot of Our Academic Biology." It opens with a series of scathing epigraphs—among them, Schiller citing William James: *"The natural enemy of any subject is the professor thereof!"* (188). Wheeler then begins his paper by apologizing for his state of exhaustion, saying he's just "laid" a volume of 1,100 pages on ants. "This racking oviposition leaves me reduced to a mere blob of *corpora lutea* and so feeble that I can only crawl. . . ." (189). Still, he manages to attain an astonishing pitch of vituperation, skewering his colleagues for feeding their students with "pedagogical pabulum." He elaborates:

> To us gerontic schoolmarms in trousers, who have flown from reality and have slowly succumbed to autistic thinking, with defective eyesight, doughy musculature, brittle ossifications, demoralized intestines, decayed autonomic nervous systems, and atrophied interstitials, there comes every year a small army of freshmen—very properly so called—in their late teens and early twenties, burning for impact with reality, with exquisite sense-organs, superb bones, muscles and alimentary tracts, mirific endocrine and autonomic apparatus, and a mentality of nine to fourteen years or thereabouts—and what do we give them? (196–97)

Dry rot. That's what we do with the freshmen. As for our graduate students, we try to turn them "into mere vehicles of our own interests" (197). I had a moment of self-consciousness

reading that but then assuaged myself a little by remembering that it's usually my graduate students who turn me on to things, like Sarah and her anarchist, bee-loving friend.

At the end of his address, Wheeler makes another a plea for amateurism and ends up sounding like he wished he'd carried out his career here in the garden in Pourry rather than hunkering down in the classrooms of Harvard.

> It quite saddens me to think that when I cross the Styx, I may find myself among so many professional biologists, condemned to keep on trying to solve problems, and that Pluto, or whoever is in charge down there now, may condemn me to sit forever trying to identify specimens from my own specific and generic diagnoses, while the amateur entomologists, who have not been damned professors, are permitted to roam at will among the fragrant asphodels of the Elysian meadows, netting gorgeous, ghostly butterflies until the end of time. (204)

* * *

In some floundering attempt to recover from those last pages of the biography, I did something perhaps as useless as the Evanses' "some of his best friends were Jews." I went back to look at more of his essays on parasitism, hoping maybe to find some redeeming flip-flopping Wheelerism. I know, I know. But for what it's worth.

"Insect Parasitism and Its Peculiarities" has two epigraphs. The first, from Emerson (Ralph Waldo, not Dora, nor her father, Ralph E.): "Whoever looks at the insect world, at flies, aphids, gnats and innumerable parasites, and even at the in-

fant mammals, must have remarked the extreme content they take in suction, which constitutes the main business of their life. If we go into a library or news-room, we see the same function on a higher plane, performed with like ardor, with equal impatience of interruption, indicating the sweetness of the act" (47).

I liked that image of sucking up written language. S and I begin each day with a half hour or so of this kind of activity over coffee. He's currently deep into Wilhelm Bölsche, whom he discovered through Ferenczi. I don't need to tell you what I've been slurping on.

Wheeler's second epigraph is from J. H. Fabre's *Souvenirs Entomologiques*, volume 3, in which he finds man *"le grand parasite,"* today the eater, tomorrow the eaten. Early in his paper, Wheeler illustrates the phenomenon of human parasitism in a compressed little life story:

> As an embryo he is always entoparasitic, using his allantois in a manner that vividly suggests the root-system of a Sacculina attached to a crab. At birth he becomes a kind of ectoparasite on his mother or nurse, and throughout his childhood and youth he is commonly what might be called a family parasite, depending for his sustenance on his parents, brothers and sisters or remoter relations. At maturity, in addition to the possibility of becoming parasitic on his wife, he has a choice of many kinds of social parasitism. As a member of a trust, political party or legislative body, not to mention many other organizations and institutions [obviously including universities], he may graft successfully on the community at large or on some particularly lucrative portion of it, and should he fail through these activ-

> ities to store up a sufficient *corpus adiposum* in the form of a bank-account, he may parasitize, with advancing years and till the end of his days, on his own offspring. (47)

It's interesting that Wheeler's exemplary human parasite is a boy. I would never call my son "parasitic," although he did breastfeed for nearly three years. But that may have had as much to do with my enthusiasm about breastfeeding as it did with his appetite for it. I also loved being pregnant.

My mother, like me, raised her children on her own, and she always encouraged us to be independent. She said: "I'll help pay for your education, but once you turn twenty-one, you're on your own. Don't come asking for money. And by the same token, I'm saving up for my old age so I'll never have to come knocking on your door." It's true, she managed to squirrel enough away so she could pay for her own nursing home, though of course my sister and I gladly would have helped if she'd needed it. It was only when I had my own child that I realized that her policy on family money was a little extreme. Still, I must have passed something of this on to my son, as he takes a great deal of pride in his independence.

The bulk of the rest of Wheeler's essay is a detailed account of various entomological parasitic and para-parasitic tendencies such as hypermetamorphosis among the Proctotrypids, Chalcidids, Hymenoptera, Mantispa, Strepsiptera, and Coleoptera; hyperparasitism among the caterpillars; and viviparity among the larviparous Tachinidae and Sarcophagidae, the nymphiparous Hippoboscidae, Nycteribidae, and plant lice. It's hard to believe Knopf took this on. Mencken must have pulled a lot of strings.

* * *

My son arrived yesterday. Over the past few weeks, he's been traveling around Europe taking photographs, and he scheduled this visit in between Paris and Amsterdam. He seems enchanted by the little camp site we fixed up for him next to the forest. Today at lunch, S asked us if we thought it was time to bump off the pheasant. It seems it's best to let the meat rest for a day or two before cooking it, and Leo's only here for two more nights. Leo seemed curious, and, as I said, I approved of the plan. But you could see in S's demeanor that he was nervous about it. He told Leo that in his youth he'd shared his father's "hunter spirit" and had trapped and shot all manner of game. He'd also spent a period in the Arctic, and he much admired the Inuit approach to wildlife, which was simultaneously reverential and highly utilitarian. They use every part of the seal they hunt. But he also told us that, after all these years, he found it harder and harder to deal with the moment of slaughter. Maybe he'd just seen enough death.

I said I'd offer to do it myself, but having no experience, I worried I'd cause the pheasant unnecessary pain if I bungled things. Leo pulled out his phone to look up a YouTube video on "humane slaughter of chickens." He asked, "Do you have an axe?" S shook his head at our clearly naive attempts to be of use. He marched over to the coop with resignation. Leo held the bird by the legs while S whacked it on the head with a big stick. It was over in seconds.

The pheasant flapped for a bit, and then its eyes closed. It was so beautiful. Leo and I stayed with it for a while in silence, just holding our hands on its warm, quiet body. It took us a

while to realize that S had left. He was taking a walk, alone. He'd found that very difficult.

* * *

I've been holding off on telling you about the last essay in *Foibles of Insects and Men.* It's called "The Termitodoxa, or Biology and Society." It's held by many to be Wheeler's most fanciful, indeed eccentric, piece of writing. In it, he claims to have been inspired by recent tales of animal intelligence, such as the "Elberfield stallions" who, just before World War I, were reportedly trained to solve arithmetic problems, read, spell, and answer basic questions. (Unfortunately, they were conscripted as "draft horses" during the war and disappeared.) Wheeler says that based on these stories, he decided to attempt some "animal correspondence." Worried about the flood of mail he might receive if he tried too many species, he opted to "proceed with caution and confine myself at first to a single letter to the most wonderful of all insects, the queen of the West African *Termes bellicosus.*" A purported missionary friend offered to serve as the intermediary but reminded Wheeler that, unlike his beloved ants, the termites had a king as well as a queen, though "the *bellicosus* king was so accustomed to being overlooked, even by his own offspring, that he not only pardoned my discourtesy but condescended to answer my letter" (207).

The rest of the essay is entirely, or nearly entirely, comprised of the letter from the king, who begins by explaining why he's answering a missive that had been addressed to the queen. "Her majesty, being extremely busy with oviposition—she has laid an egg every three minutes for the past four years—and

fearing that an interruption of even twenty minutes might seriously upset the exquisitely balanced routine of the termitarium," has requested that the king handle Wheeler's queries, which were evidently based on some "anxiety" regarding the comparative social blundering of his own species (207–8).

The king presents himself as an avid student of termite society. "As you know, the conditions under which I live are most conducive to sustained research. I am carefully fed, have all the leisure in the world, and the royal chamber is not only kept absolutely dark and at a constant and agreeable temperature even during the hottest days of the Ethiopian summer, but free from all noises except the gentle rhythmic dropping of her majesty's eggs and the soft footfalls of the workers on the cement floor as they carry away the germs of future populations to the royal nurseries." The king also claims some familiarity with Wheeler's society, having belonged in his youth to a colony that "devoured and digested a well-selected library" belonging to a bookish missionary. He hesitates to recommend that Wheeler's species strictly follow the termites' example but imagines his observations may be of interest, since "you and your fellow human beings are after all only animals like myself" (208–9).

The letter covers traditions developed since the time of the ancestors in early Cretaceous times. They hit a snag in the middle of the Cretaceous Period, when rampant reproduction was accompanied by social degeneration.

> The priests, pedagogues, politicians and journalists having bored their way up to the highest stratum of the society undertook to influence or control all the activities of its members.

> The priests tried to convince the people that if they would only give up indulging in the social hormones and confine themselves to a diet of pure mud, they would in a future life eat nothing but rose-wood and mahogany, and the pedagogues insisted that every young termite must thoroughly saturate himself with the culture and languages of the Upper Carboniferous cockroaches.... The politicians and the journalists—well, were it not that profanity has been considered to be very bad form in termite society since the Miocene, I might make a few comments on *their* activities.... Meanwhile in the very foundations of the commonwealth anarchists, syndicalists, IWW and bolsheviki were busy boring holes and filling them with dynamite, while the remainder of society was largely composed of profiteers, grafters, shysters, drug-fiends and criminals of all sizes interspersed with beautifully graduated series of wowsers, morons, feeble-minded, idiots and insane. (210)

"Wowsers," the king explains in a note, is a term invented by Australian termites, later taken up by humans of that region, to refer to what we might call bozos. He praises the intervention of his predecessor, King Wuf-wuf IV, of the 529th dynasty, who initiated a series of social reforms, displaying "the statesmanship of a Hammurabi, Moses, Solomon, Solon and Pericles rolled into one." In his "moments of relaxation he was a delightful blend of Aristophanes, Lucian, Rabelais, Anatole France and Bernard Shaw." Fortunately, termite society was "ambisexual throughout, so that, unlike the ants, we have male as well as female soldiers and workers." They took in certain beetles and flies, caring for them "till they developed exudate

organs" that spiced up the hormonal situation in the colonies. But they had to limit the numbers of these rousing guests "for the same reason that your society would find it advisable to restrict the cattle industry if your animal breeders had succeeded in producing breeds of cows that yielded highballs and cocktails instead of milk" (210–12).

There was another social reform, a "very effective method of dealing with any termite that attempted to depart from the standards of the most perfect social behavior." Basically, the culprit's usefulness was reduced to "the amount of fat and proteins in his constitution. He was then led forth into the general assembly, dismembered and devoured by his fellows." The king realizes that this system might seem harsh from Wheeler's perspective, but he makes a case for it: "To the perfectly socialized termite nothing can be more blissful or exalted than feeling the precious fats and proteins which he has amassed with so much labor, melting, without the slightest loss of their vital values, into the constitutions of his more vigorous and socially more efficient fellow beings" (211–12). Needless to say, this applies not only to social deviants but also to those who are declining with age.

He finds human attempts to form classes "purely superficial," with only three "spurious castes" in operation:

> The young, the mature and the aged. These, of course, resemble our castes only in number and in consisting of individuals of both sexes. They are peculiar in being rather poorly defined, temporary portions of the life-cycle, so that a single individual may belong to all of them in succession, and in the fact that only one of them, comprising the mature individuals,

> is of any great economic value to society and therefore actually functions as the host of the two others, which are, biologically speaking, parasitic. To avoid shocking your human sensibilities, I am willing to admit that both these castes may be worth all the care that is bestowed on them, the young on account of their promise and the old on account of past services. (215)

But, he continues, he finds it perplexing that our species coddles the elderly to the extent that we do, allowing them to maintain positions of authority—even those who "combine with a surprising physical vigor a certain sadistic obstinacy" that gets in the way of any social advancement. The king recommends, in such cases, the administration of chloroform, or maybe even "some more vigorous insecticide, such as hydrocyanic acid gas." He signs his letter, "Yours truly, Wee-Wee, 43rd Neotenic King, of the 8,429th Dynasty of the Bellicose Termites" (215–17).

Wheeler closes his lecture:

> On reperusing this letter before deciding, after many misgivings, to read it to so serious a body of naturalists, I notice a great number of inaccuracies and exaggerations, attributable, no doubt, to his majesty's misinterpretation of his own and very superficial acquaintance with our society. His remarks on old age strike me as particularly inept and offensive. He seems not to be aware of the fact that at least a few of our old men have almost attained to the idealism of the superannuated termite, a fact attested by such Freudian confessions as the following, taken from a letter recently received by one of my colleagues from a gentleman in New Hampshire:

I do not understand how it is that an insect so small as to be invisible is able to worry my dog and also at times sharply to bite myself. A vet. friend of mine in Boston advised lard and kerosene for the dog. This seemed to check them for a time, but what I need is extermination, for I am in my eighty-fourth year. (217)