

US, and the possibility that this dominant “way of reading / writing texts perpetuates patriarchal forces and bourgeois economics”. Potentially, according to Adam Koehler and the critics he cites, a “monolithic” kind of writing results, produced by graduates who are “cogs in a capitalistic wheel”: “writers merely trying to hawk their goods in a market that has decided literary realism is the only important aesthetic project”.

His solution is to map out places where creative writing, composition and emerging digital technologies might overlap and transform one another, challenging internalized doctrines and assumptions. This “particular triangulation”, he argues, opens up the possibility of “new practices – nonlinearity, intertextuality, genre shifting, appropriation” – and overcomes institutional obstacles to have an ultimately “transformative effect”. For example, he talks of Kenneth Goldsmith’s work on (so-called) “Uncreative Writing”, which seeks to resist “clichéd notions of what it means to be ‘creative’”, resorting to “digital writing practices” instead, including “code writing, collage writing and performance art”. As part of the project, Goldsmith runs a course at the University of Pennsylvania in Uncreative Writing, where “students are penalised for showing any shred of originality and creativity. Instead, they are rewarded for plagiarism, identity theft, repurposing papers, patchwriting, sampling, plundering and stealing”. The course, that is, could be said to tackle directly many of the clichés and assumptions which Reckwitz finds in modern institutionalized creativity.

Inspired by Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, McCann’s *Letters to a Young Writer* seems close to Figgis’s work, at first, and is similarly ambivalent in its attitude towards commercial institutions. On the one hand, it includes chapters on “How to Get an Agent”, “Blurbs” and MFAs. As Reckwitz might expect, it shares with Figgis’s book the same direct address, the same “creative imperative” for the reader, instructing – even ordering – him or her to create: “just keep your arse in the chair. Arse in the chair. Arse in the chair”. Again like Figgis, McCann’s book simultaneously asks writers to know the rules of writing and to “break the rules” – and also to “embrace these contradictions”.

On the other hand, McCann goes much further than Mike Figgis in embracing these contradictions, and passionately espousing a transformative ideal of creativity. While admitting that much contemporary writing has been “devalued in favour of comfort”, he demands an oppositional, uncomfortable writing which is “the freedom to articulate yourself against power”. Writing, for Colum McCann,

is a form of nonviolent engagement and civil disobedience. You have to stand outside society, beyond coercion, intimidation, cruelty, duress . . . . Become more dangerous . . . . Good sentences have the ability to shock, seduce, and drag us out of our stupor . . . . Transform what has been seen . . . . Oppose the cruelties. Break the silence.

Here, perhaps, is a dream of writing that reaches beyond the commercial and social institutions of creativity – one that could revivify the counter-cultural radicalism Andreas Reckwitz reckons was left behind in the 1960s. As he tentatively suggests at the end of *The Invention of Creativity*, there are perhaps other possibilities, “alternative aesthetic practices . . . countervailing forces”, even in 2018.

# Insect + courtesy = ant

## Arguing for the use of nature in the humanities

ADRIAN WOOLFSON

Edward O. Wilson

THE ORIGINS OF CREATIVITY

243pp. Allen Lane. £20.

978 0 241 30920 9

**I** am ready”, Edward O. Wilson informs us in the type of nuanced, disarming, confident and candid revelation reserved for those at the peak of their intellectual strength, “to nominate the ant as one of the most beautiful creatures in the world.” Indeed, who else would have the sensitivity and imagination to lovingly describe the blackened coat of these humble and often unwelcome beasts as “chitinous armor . . . glistening blackish brown, with a feel to it of colorized polished metal”? And in so doing, and without premeditated intent, Wilson draws us directly and inexorably into the heart of his latest enterprise.

Using creativity as a synonym for human nature, he explores the inextricable and frequently overlooked interdependence between the humanities and the sciences. The result is a brilliant and unprecedented rallying cry for a radically different approach to the utility of the humanities. It is also the outline of a bold manifesto for the deciphering of human nature.

Wilson asserts that the humanities, previously committed to detached observation and personal insights, must focus their attention on human nature. Rather than being marginalized by science and forced to the periphery of modern intellectual endeavour, the humanities in their protean forms must emerge from the deep penumbra of the natural sciences to reassert their importance. Restored to their rightful place at the table, they will inevitably become both an essential adjunct to the natural sciences, and an organic part of them. But Wilson’s synthesis is also a critique of the humanities, in particular of their narrow, anthropocentric focus on the sensorial phenomena of our own species. In this way they marginalize the plethora of invisible information that defines the corporeal world inhabited by the greater majority of natural phenomena and beings, merely scratching the surface of possibility. While capturing the screech of a parrot, they are agnostic about the “rumbling conversations of elephants”, and the acrobatic operas of bats, rehearsed at frequencies undetected by our imperfect sensory apparatus.

Wilson’s boyish fascination with ants, including their multifarious species and differentiated social behaviour, which, unlike the more malleable behaviour of humans, is programmed exclusively by genes, provided the impetus for his career. It led him in the 1960s to formulate a simplistic theory of human and animal nature based on population genetics. Put simply, his formulation, known as “sociobiology”, attempted to explain social behaviour through the kinship of individuals. Whereas you might risk your life by jumping into a lake to save your first cousin, you might be less inclined to do so for a third cousin once removed – or, indeed, a total stranger.

Striking an almost confessional tone and



Black garden ant (*Lasius niger*)

showing significant humility, Wilson backtracks from his earlier work, disarmingly dismissing the sociobiological theory that the youthful version of himself created. He replaces this with a more complex, historical and holistic approach to the often paradoxical collection of culturally acquired and instinctive traits that define human nature. The mistakes leading to the emergence of sociobiology are

attributed, among other things, to an incorrect mathematical analysis. Human nature itself arises from the fact that Darwinian evolution operates simultaneously at two levels. Whereas individual selection promotes selfishness, selection at the level of groups promotes altruism and co-operation, leaving humans “enmeshed in perpetual conflict”.

Human nature, as we know it, is inevitable. But it is the mixture of our ancient, flawed and lumbering biology dating back to the Pliocene and beyond, along with the imperfections and “ancient feeling and values” it encodes, and the cutting-edge extragenetic cultural information of the modern age, which keeps us “indelibly human”.

In his now famous monograph of 1934, *Stalking Ants, Savage and Civilized*, the biologist W. M. Mann informed us how the Japanese word for “ant” is formed from the conjunction of the character for “insect” with that for “unselfishness, justice, and courtesy”. He also ominously reminded us, however, that ants may be as “savage and ruthless as the ancient Huns or Moguls”.

Edward O. Wilson warns us that if human-like life is found elsewhere in the universe, we should not expect it to be benign. At this unique moment in human history, when we are for the first time able to contemplate editing and even rewriting ourselves at the genomic level, to transcend natural biology and extend its reach, the enterprise focused on deconstructing the elements that define the dark matter of human nature has never been more urgent.

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