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MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 59, Number 3, Fall 2013, pp. 547-568 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/mfs.2013.0034

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MODERNIST LIFE WRITING AND NONHUMAN LIVES: ECOLOGIES OF EXPERIENCE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S FLUSH

David Herman

As commentators such as Thomas S. W. Lewis, Ray Monk, Christine Reynier, and Max Saunders have suggested, Virginia Woolf's 1933 text *Flush: A Biography* takes its place alongside *Orlando* (1928) as a key modernist experiment with the norms and conventions of life writing, growing out of Woolf's own critical engagement with contemporary biographical practices. Having taken stock of Lytton Strachey's and Harold Nicolson's innovations in this genre, Woolf drew on the resources of modernist narration to broaden the scope of life writing—in part by grafting onto biographical discourse modes of consciousness presentation conventionally associated with fictional narratives, and in part by moving once marginalized experiences to the forefront of biographical attention—whether the experiences in question are those of women categorized as invalids, members of the servant class, or nonhuman animals like Flush. The result, in *Flush*, is a metabiographical text; this is a narrative that in presenting its protagonist's biography explores the consequences for life writing of what Woolf reveals to be an inextricable entanglement not just of male, female, upper-, and lower-class life histories, but also of human and nonhuman ways of encountering the world.

In particular, *Flush* recounts how the life stories of Elizabeth Barrett and the cocker spaniel who was her companion animal came...
to be intertwined, at first in the dark, stifling confines of Barrett's bedroom when she lived as an invalid in her father's house in London and then in the freer, warmer, sun-drenched spaces of Italy after Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning eloped there. The text begins with a tongue-in-cheek genealogy of the spaniel breed, and a mock-etymology of the name spaniel itself, before zooming in on the life history of one specific dog: "All researches have failed to fix with any certainty the exact year of Flush's birth, let alone the month or the day; but it is likely that he was born some time early in the year 1842" (9–10). Basing her account in part on the Brownings' correspondence, Woolf uses the coordinate system established by the Bildungsroman form—a system involving "a biographical narrative, problems of socialization, the influence of mentors and 'instrumental' women, [and] the problem of vocation" (Castle 4)—to map out the many vicissitudes of this dog's life. Thus, after recounting Flush's difficult relocation from a rural cottage near Reading, where he was born, to the Barretts' house on Wimpole Street where "[d]oor after door shut . . . on freedom; on fields; on hares; on grass" (21–22), Woolf traces Flush's initial antipathy to Robert Browning; the harrowing incident of Flush's being held for ransom by dognappers, during which time his "past life and its many scenes . . . faded like snowflakes dissolved in a cauldron" (97); his enjoyment of the "rapture of smell" on the streets of Florence (131); and the sad irony of Flush's last days with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who, having a vision during a séance of an otherworldly hand "as white as snow," loses sight of Flush's own hand when he paws her in an attempt to elicit her recognition and affection (156). Shortly thereafter, it is Browning who fails to be recognized: "she looked at Flush again. But he did not look at her. An extraordinary change had come over him . . . He had been alive; he was now dead" (161).

Serialized in the Atlantic Monthly and also chosen as a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, Flush proved to be an atypically popular work in the context of Woolf's oeuvre. But the reasons for the text's wide appeal remain to be explored, given its intermixing of genres (is it primarily biography or fiction?) as well as its use of the modernist methods of consciousness presentation that Woolf had honed in earlier works such as Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway, and To the Lighthouse. Is it Flush's dog's-eye view of the two poets' famous courtship that generated such strong reader interest—notwithstanding Woolf's characteristically modernist use of multiple voices and perspectives to emphasize the relativity of perceptions, beliefs, and values? Or is it that the narrative's focus on a nonhuman protagonist obscured or defused what readers might otherwise have registered as an off-puttingly experimental profile, confirming Ursula K. Le Guin's
observation (as well as Woolf's own prediction) that texts featuring nonhuman characters tend to be automatically slotted into the category of nonserious literature?  

In addition to other factors that may have contributed to *Flush*'s favorable reception, the text's initial appeal and ongoing relevance stem from the way it is embedded in an evolving network of assumptions and beliefs about nonhuman animals and about their relationship with humans. *Flush* suggests how literary narratives, among other cultural practices, constitute an important resource for ethnozoology, "the study of local knowledge of fauna, and the culturally mediated relationships between communities of people and other animals" (Hunn 83). Narratives such as Woolf's provide routes of access to a culture's way of theorizing about the nature and experiences of nonhuman animals, with particular texts staging modes of theorization in the more localized domains of ethnoornithology, ethnoprimatology, ethnoentomology, and so forth. More than this, however, *Flush*'s self-reflexive engagement with biography's conventions highlights the special relevance of life writing for research on the folk ethologies—the everyday assumptions and beliefs about animals—circulating within a culture. Early-twentieth-century life writing like Woolf's affords important opportunities for investigating such everyday knowledge about the nonhuman, especially since literary modernism overlaps with foundational studies in the field that would become comparative ethology.  

Thus, beyond anticipating the work of Carol Adams, Le Guin, and other ecofeminists who have pointed to interconnections between patriarchal institutions that foster the subordination of women and humans' broader attempts to control nonhuman life forms, *Flush* can be aligned with more recent efforts to rethink the scope and nature of human-nonhuman relationships, including what S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich term multispecies ethnography and what Eduardo Kohn describes as a transspecies anthropology of life. For Kirksey and Helmreich, multispecies ethnography focuses on "contact zones where lines separating nature from culture have broken down, where encounters between *Homo sapiens* and other beings generate mutual ecologies and coproduced niches" (546). As a radically non- or rather anti-anthropocentric enterprise, multispecies ethnography reframes the relationship between the fields of biology and anthropology, in parallel with the way Kohn's transspecies ethnography, or anthropology of life, investigates what Kohn calls an "ecology of selves" (4); like Kirksey's and Helmreich's, Kohn's approach encompasses not just human attitudes toward nonhuman animals but also the webs of interaction that give rise to forms of intersubjectivity cutting across the human-nonhuman boundary. Narratives that engage with nonhu-
man lives provide a route of access to the strategies for imagining human-nonhuman relationships that are central to multispecies ethnography, transspecies anthropology, and other emergent frameworks for inquiry—even as those new frameworks promise to shed light on the genre of life narrative itself. In other words, texts like Woolf’s can both illuminate and be illuminated by a focus on ways in which life histories criss-cross human and nonhuman worlds. In turn, to broach issues that I discuss in my concluding section, research on narratives about nonhuman lives can promote "transdisciplinary" convergence among fields within the biosciences, social sciences, and humanities.

I explore in more detail below how Flush grew out of Woolf’s broader engagement with the theory and practice of life writing. I then examine how she presents Flush’s ways of experiencing events in the storyworld, that is, the world that Woolf’s textual designs enable interpreters of Flush to co-construct and imaginatively inhabit. Woolf’s use of a nonhuman protagonist as an internal focalizer or reflector creates a hybrid discourse, in which narrative techniques conventionally associated both with fiction and with nonfiction cross-pollinate. I situate this genre-bending or -blending exploration of nonhuman phenomenology within its broader modernist mindscape, or the larger ecology of mental experiences for which authors like Woolf developed distinctive methods of presentation. I suggest how Woolf’s treatment of Flush reveals links between modernist writing methods and the concept of the Umwelt developed in the early twentieth century by one of the pioneers of modern-day ethology, Jakob von Uexküll. I conclude by indicating how a focus on modernist strategies for narrating nonhuman lives fits within—necessitates the development of—a new, transdisciplinary paradigm for narrative inquiry.

Flush, Fictionality, and "The New Biography"

Evidence from her correspondence, diaries, critical essays, and reviews suggests that Woolf designed Flush as something of a spoof or parody—in particular, a send up of Lytton Strachey’s biographical methods, including his tendency to speculate on his subjects’ unexpressed thoughts, memories, and impressions, as when he hypothesizes, at the end of his best-selling 1921 biography of Queen Victoria, about what the Queen may have been thinking on her deathbed. In Flush, Woolf extrapolates from Strachey’s methods to detail perceptions, memories, inferences, and emotions that cannot be (dis)confirmed via cross-comparison with other evidentiary sources—in this case, not just because those experiences in fact remained unverbalized and hence unattested, but also because Flush could not have
articulated his experiences in human language. But Woolf extends Strachey’s methods in another way as well. Specifically, as Ray Monk has discussed, Strachey was careful to use hedges such as "perhaps" and "possibly" to indicate where he was diverging from the norms of nonfictional (because potentially falsifiable) discourse, and instead providing a plausible conjecture about the way events may have unfolded. Monk notes that in Strachey’s hypothetical foray into Queen Victoria’s last thoughts, "[t]he repeated use of the word 'perhaps' . . . serves to establish that this is biography and not fiction, and to make it clear to the reader that Strachey does not claim to know these to have been Victoria’s dying thoughts" (23). By contrast, although it does feature some hedged constructions, as I discuss below, Woolf’s account largely lacks these modalizing expressions, and with them one of the generic markers associated with nonfictional discourse. The net effect is to destabilize generic categories, in particular the distinction between life writing and fiction. Within the frame of a biographical narrative about historically attested personages, situations, and events, Woolf recounts Flush’s perceptions, memories, and emotions without evidentiary backing, and also without overtly marking these reports as hypothetical or conjectural.

Woolf’s biographical practices in Flush were also shaped by Harold Nicolson’s radical experiments with the conventions of life writing in his 1927 book Some People. In the Author’s Note that prefaces the original edition, Nicolson writes: "Many of the following sketches are purely imaginary. Such truths as they may contain are only half-truths" (vii). Nicolson expands on this comment in the introduction to the second edition, remarking that "although the central characters [of the sketches] are often composite or even fictional, the minor characters, the episodes, and the incidents are real" (xi). Woolf keys in on the difficulty of reconciling the two propositions contained in Nicolson’s further elaboration of his method—namely, that some of the people in Some People are made up, and that the "facts and descriptions" featured in the sketches are not (xi)—in her 1927 review essay on "The New Biography." In a striking turn of phrase, Woolf suggests that "Some People is not fiction because it has the substance, the reality of truth. It is not biography because it has the freedom, the artistry of fiction" (98). She also remarks that by using "a method of writing about people and about himself as though they were at once real and imaginary" (97–98), Nicolson "has succeeded remarkably, if not entirely, at making the best of both worlds" (98). Woolf later explains her caveat ("if not entirely"), arguing that when fictional characters are intermixed with historical personages, at least under the banner of biography, the irreality of fiction casts suspicion on the truth status of claims about the life histories of the
real-world individuals. Or as Woolf puts it: "Let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction; the imagination will not serve under two masters simultaneously" (100).

As commentators like Lewis and Max Saunders have discussed, however, modernist writers, including Woolf herself in *Orlando* as well as *Flush*, sought to create just this sort of hybrid of fiction and nonfiction by grafting aspects of fictional narration onto practices of life writing, or vice versa. Saunders uses "autobiografiction" as a cover term for modernist experimentation along these lines, describing *Flush* and *Orlando* as fictional parodies of the earlier biographical conventions that Woolf had critiqued in "The New Biography" (442). Significantly, by limiting the extension of the term "autobiografiction" to "fictional works in auto/biographical form" (9), Saunders' account pre-decides the generic status of works that, like *Flush*, combine fictional and nonfictional elements—to the point where the overall generic identity of the text becomes destabilized, and perhaps indeterminate. Is *Flush* a fictional narrative that takes the form of a biography in order to parody the conventions of biography itself, or is it an instance of life writing that interweaves elements of biographical and fictional narration in order to suggest how biographical methods might need to be modified to accommodate nonhuman lives? Howard Finn, for his part, leaves room for both ways of interpreting texts like *Flush*. Focusing on modernist women writers, Finn argues that these authors at once avowed and disavowed autobiographical impulses in their texts, leveraging fictional discourse to work through contradictions arising from the sense of unfulfilled potential that haunted their own life histories (191–92).

Not every assessment of the fusion of fictional and nonfictional discourse in modernist life writing has been so positive, however. Monk interprets Woolf's account of the new biography and her reassessment of the possibilities and limits of life writing as an unfortunate result of her own vested interest in ascribing to fictional narrative knowledge-yielding powers superior to those of nonfictional discourse. For Monk, only *Some People*, and not early-twentieth-century life writing practices more generally, exemplifies the kind of hybrid genre that Woolf associates with then-contemporary biography. At the same time, Monk mines Woolf's writings for evidence that she viewed "life, real life (as she often puts it), [as] essentially internal and therefore (as facts are essentially external) beyond the reach of nonfiction" (6). This view is, according to Monk, Woolf's "most pernicious legacy for the theory of biography" (28), since an internalist approach of this sort entails that "the self can be truthfully described only in fiction" (29). His argument, in short, runs as follows: rather than mixing fictional and nonfictional discourse in metabiographical fashion, Woolf in both
her theory and practice of life writing effectively subsumes nonfiction under fiction, because for Woolf the truth of self is internal and only fiction provides unfettered access to the inner life that constitutes true subjectivity.

In previous work, I have disputed key assumptions on which Monk’s argument rests—both with respect to Woolf’s and other modernists’ writing practices and with respect to the relationship between fictional minds and everyday minds more generally. I argue that, whatever Woolf’s stated views on the nature of the mental or on the goals of narrative fiction (as expressed in essays such as "Modern Fiction"), her fictional practice foregrounds the way conscious experiences arise from the interplay between embodied intelligent agents and their surrounding cultural, social, and material environments. Thus, in contrast to earlier characterizations of Woolf’s oeuvre and modernism more generally as participating in a broader "inward turn," to used Erich Kahler’s phrase, my claim is that the upshot of modernist experimentation was not to plumb the depths of human psychology, but rather to spread the mind abroad—to suggest how minds have the profile they do because of the way intelligent behavior is interwoven with worldly circumstances. This modernist emphasis on the way conscious experiences arise from agent-environment interactions in turn provides a basis for rethinking claims about fiction as the only means of access to another’s subjectivity. If there is no Cartesian dichotomy between the mind in here and the world out there; if minds are not closed-off, inner spaces but rather lodged in and partly constituted by the social and material structures that scaffold people’s encounters with one another and the world; then access to other subjectivities is no longer uniquely enabled by engagement with fictional narratives. It is not that fictional minds are external and accessible while actual minds are internal and hidden; instead, minds of all sorts can be more or less directly encountered or experienced depending on the circumstances.16

Woolf’s methods for portraying Flush’s experiences highlight the interconnectedness of these issues—that is, the way rejecting internalist models of the mind make it possible to assume that other minds (including nonhuman minds) are accessible, and also to rethink the relationship between modes of mind presentation in fictional and nonfictional discourse. To put the same point another way, Woolf’s modeling of nonhuman phenomenology in Flush, together with the text’s destabilizing of genre distinctions, emerges from a rejection of Cartesian dualism—a rejection that ipso facto reframes accounts of fiction as providing the only means of access to others’ subjectivity. From this perspective, Woolf combines features conventionally associated with life writing and with fictional narrative not to swamp
nonfictional genres with fictional practices, or to imply the epistemological superiority of fiction. Rather, her strategies for portraying Flush’s experiences at once reflect and call into question boundaries that have been drawn between kinds of minds, everyday and fictional, human and nonhuman. Woolf’s work implies that to know another intelligent agent’s mind requires taking stock of that agent’s life history. The text also suggests that if the life history can be studied in enough detail, it becomes possible to engage with the experiences of that subject—human or nonhuman—in ways that bear comparison with fictional modes of engagement.

Writing Animal Lives: Nonhuman Phenomenology in Modernist Mindscapes

Woolf presents Flush’s experiences using narrative methods that she had perfected in previous works, methods in use among fellow modernists such as Henry James, Katherine Mansfield, James Joyce, and Dorothy Richardson. Just as she does in texts like *Mrs. Dalloway*, in *Flush* Woolf uses third person or heterodiegetic narration but filters events through a particular character’s vantage point on the storyworld. Gérard Genette called this narrative technique internal focalization, and F. K. Stanzel, using a different analytic system and descriptive nomenclature, characterized the method as figural narration. He notes that the technique involves both a more or less fully realized teller who is the source of the narration and a reflector or center of consciousness through whose vantage point the narrated events are presented. This technique is on display in the following characteristic passage early in *Flush*, in which the narrative recounts what it was like for Flush when he was taken on walks near the rural cottage where he was born:

As she [Miss Mitford] strode through the long grass, so he [Flush] leapt hither and thither, parting its green curtain. The cool globes of dew or rain broke in showers of iridescent spray about his nose; the earth, here hard, here soft, here hot, here cold, stung, teased and tickled the soft pads of his feet. Then what a variety of smells interwoven in subtlest combination thrilled his nostrils; strong smells of earth, sweet smells of flowers; nameless smells of leaf and bramble; sour smells as they crossed the road; pungent smells as they entered bean-fields. But suddenly down the wind came tearing a smell sharper, stronger, more lacerating than any—a smell that ripped across his brain stirring a thousand instincts, releasing a million memories—the smell of a hare, the smell of a fox. (12)
Or compare the following passage, recounting what goes on in the very different environment in which Flush finds himself in the house on Wimpole Street in London:

So the long hours went by in the back bedroom with nothing to mark them but the sounds of steps passing on the stairs; and the distant sound of the front door shutting, and the sound of a broom tapping, and the sound of the postman knocking. . . . But sometimes the step on the stair did not pass the door; it stopped outside. The handle was seen to spin round; the door actually opened; somebody came in. Then how strangely the furniture changed its look! What extraordinary eddies of sound and smell were at once set in circulation! How they washed round the legs of tables and impinged on the sharp edges of the wardrobe! (39)

Both teller and reflector manifest themselves in these two passages. The teller sets the scene, even as Flush’s vantage point on events shapes the presentation of the experiences that unfold within that scene. Curtains of grass, globes of dew, spinning door handles, and wardrobes constitute elements of the world as experienced and described by humans. But in the first passage Flush’s perceptions organize the account of the earth as “here hard, here soft, here hot, here cold,” while Woolf’s use of free indirect discourse in the second passage—note the exclamation points indexing Flush’s surprised or excited response to the unexpected visitors—likewise marks the presence of an experiencing agent who stands apart from the teller.18

Two significant issues arise from Woolf’s use of internal focalization, or figural narration, in Flush: on the one hand, how her use of the technique bears on the generic classification of the text (biography or fiction?); on the other hand, what it means for Woolf to use a nonhuman reflector as focalizing agent. In connection with the first issue, narrative analysts have drawn attention to a range of hybrid texts that combine features conventionally associated with fiction and nonfiction. Relevant here are counterfactual histories, which trace out the consequences of events that might have happened but did not.19 Relevant, too, are nonfiction novels or instances of faction (for example, accounts affiliated with the new journalism or literary journalism), with narratives like Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood and Norman Mailer’s The Armies of the Night depicting “actual contemporary events . . . using the styles and techniques of fictional discourse”; such accounts typically include “dialogues and dramatic scenes . . . from the point of view of the people involved (rather than from an objective, distant point of view)” (Zipfel 397). Grounding itself in the historical record of the Brownings’ courtship and subsequent life in
Italy even as it creates "an immersive context in which the narration of actual events is as lively as the presentation of fictional worlds" (Zipfel 397), *Flush* is a forerunner of the generic experimentation found in the nonfiction novel. For example, in recounting key incidents the text resorts extensively to scenic methods of presentation, as opposed to the summarizing methods used in biography proper. Thus when Flush and Elizabeth Barrett encounter one another for the first time, "Each was surprised. Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett's face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush's face; his eyes, too, were large and bright: his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them" (23).

A mixed generic picture also emerges from the way the narrative handles attributions of mental experiences (perceptions, memories, emotions) to Flush. Again using modernist techniques to present extended, unhedged attributions of experiences for which there is no evidentiary backing, the text details what was passing through Flush's mind during his horrible experience of being kidnapped and held for ransom in Whitechapel:

> Was it better to be killed or to stay here? Which was worse—this life or that death? The racket, the hunger and the thirst, the reeking smells of the place . . . were fast obliterating any clear image, any single desire. Fragments of old memories began turning in his head. Was that the voice of old Mitford shouting in the field [near the cottage where he grew up]? . . . There was a rattling in the room and he thought he heard Miss Mitford tying up a bunch of geraniums. But it was only the wind—for it was stormy today—battering at the brown paper in the broken window pane. It was only some drunken voice raving in the gutter. . . . He had been forgotten and deserted. No help was coming. (88)

Such extended reports about Flush's mental life violate the criterion of falsifiability that normatively distinguishes nonfictional genres such as biography from fictional narratives—as Monk emphasizes in his discussion of Strachey's life writing practices. Yet the narrative also features hedged reports of Flush's experiences, in a manner characteristic of more straightforward biographies. Thus, in recounting Flush's arrival at the house on Wimpole Street, the biographer-narrator speculates that "the effect on Flush must have been overwhelming in the extreme" (17; emphasis added). Or again, in a passage focusing on the importance of Flush's sense of smell when it comes to navigating Italy, Woolf writes: "the biographer must perforce come to a
pause. Where two or three thousand words are insufficient for what we see . . . there are no more than two words and perhaps one-half for what we smell" (129). Accordingly, to "describe [Flush's] simplest experience with the daily chop or biscuit is beyond our power" (130).

As this last passage suggests, the generic hybridity of Woolf's life writing methods in *Flush* needs to be considered alongside the narrative's focus on nonhuman lives. More than just intermixing techniques associated with both fictional and nonfictional genres, Woolf's text is distinctive for its use of a nonhuman focalizer as a vantage point on storyworld events. In texts like *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf employs multiple focalizers to suggest intraspecies differences in ways of experiencing the world. At issue is how intelligent agents of the same basic kind will experience a shared environment in different ways, because of their contrasting life histories. Septimus Smith, Rezia Smith, and Peter Walsh all converge on Regent's Park in the same moment; but the park affords very different modes of encounter for each of them, because of Septimus's psychological trauma from the war, Rezia's feelings of loneliness and cultural displacement, and Peter's preoccupation with events from his and Clarissa Dalloway's past. By contrast, in the situational frame elaborated by the human teller in *Flush*, Woolf uses a nonhuman reflector to suggest interspecies differences in ways of encountering the world—including dogs' greater acuity of, and reliance on, their sense of smell, as compared with humans.20

By including extensive reports of Flush's unverbalized thoughts and perceptions in a text that also affiliates itself with biographical narratives, Woolf registers these cross-species contrasts. She also leaves open the question of how far the stretches of figural narration included in the text are meant to be read under the rubric of fiction, and how far they constitute ascriptions to Flush of mental experiences he might plausibly have had, hypothesized attributions of perceptions, feelings, and other responses to which Flush's organismic make-up, coupled with the circumstances he encounters, might have given rise. Under this second interpretation, rather than endorsing the fictionalizing and anthropomorphizing of animal others, in the manner suggested by Jutta Ittner, *Flush* gives scope to nonhuman ways of experiencing the world. The techniques of modernist narrative are being leveraged as an imaginative aid or modeling tool—that is, as a resource for modeling how the biophysical structure as well as the life histories of nonhuman agents might impinge on their ways of engaging with environments inhabited, in other ways, by human agents.21

This approach to Woolf's text, allowing her narrative to be read as non- or anti-anthropocentric, can also be uncoupled from approaches based on the premise that modernist writers extended or
radicalized an ongoing inward turn. In his biography of Virginia Woolf, Quentin Bell says that the overall aim of Woolf’s biography of Flush is "to describe Wimpole Street, Whitechapel, and Italy from a dog’s point of view, to create a canine world of smells, fidelities, and lusts" (qtd. in Smith 352). But to draw again on the research mentioned in the previous section, I suggest that these narrative methods lead not to a tunneling down into the inner recesses of canine consciousness, but rather to an effort to ground a dog’s way of experiencing the world in that creature’s biophysical attributes as well as his specific life history. In the process, Woolf’s text underscores the fundamental continuity between human and nonhuman experiences: members of different species (and different members of the same species) encounter the world in ways that may differ in their quality but not their basic structure. Conscious experiences, by their nature, arise from agent-environment interactions that depend on the sensorimotor capacities of the agent, the configuration of the environment, and the history of the specific interactions between them.

Rather than inscribing a hierarchy of kinds of minds, in which human modes of consciousness take precedence over nonhuman modes (in the manner outlined by Mark Turner), Woolf works in a more horizontal way, suggesting how human experiences unfold in the context of a wider ecology of minds. The passage quoted earlier, about how dogs’ acute sense of smell affords perceptions to which humans do not have access, evokes an ecology of this sort. So too do other contrasts that Woolf draws between canine and human ways of experiencing the world, by using Flush as a reflector enabling her to model what it is or may be like to be a dog. On the one hand, in her account of Flush’s observation of Elizabeth Barrett at work on her writing, Woolf emphasizes Flush’s inability to grasp the purpose of writing implements, or the symbolic functions of writing itself:  

There she would lie hour after hour passing her hand over a white page with a black stick; and her eyes would suddenly fill with tears; but why? . . . Then again Miss Barrett, still agitating her stick, burst out laughing. . . . What was there to laugh at in the black smudge that she held out for Flush to look at? He could smell nothing; he could hear nothing. There was nobody in the room with them. (37)

On the other hand, however, Flush displays remarkable, literally superhuman sensitivity to tone of voice, thanks to which he can track changes in the two poets’ conversations during their courtship:

Flush lay there with his eyes wide open, listening. Though he could make no sense of the little words that hurtled over
his head from two-thirty to four-thirty sometimes three times a week, he could detect with terrible accuracy that the tone of the words was changing. Miss Barrett’s voice had been forced and unnaturally lively at first. Now it had gained a warmth and an ease that he had never heard in it before. And every time the man came, some new sound came into their voices—now they made a grotesque chattering; now they skimmed over him like birds flying widely; now they cooed and clucked, as if they were two birds settled in a nest. (60)

This passage suggests not only an ecology of minds, because of which a dog can glean in its own, species-specific manner information about the trajectory of human relationships, but also the way minds of all sorts work ecologically. Thus the bird comparisons imply that Flush makes sense of what is going on by drawing analogies between the two poets’ conduct and other behavioral patterns with which he is already familiar from his native environment.

More generally, Woolf’s use of internal focalization—in Flush as well as other texts—allows her to experiment with the relativity of perspective in ways that resonate with the concept of the Umwelt being developed around the same time by the German-Estonian philosopher-biologist Jakob von Uexküll. As Evan Thompson explains, “An Umwelt is [a human or nonhuman] animal’s environment in the sense of its lived, phenomenal world, the world as it presents itself to that animal thanks to its sensorimotor repertoire” (Thompson 59). As Uexküll put it in his Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans, originally published in 1934: “The animal’s environment [or Umwelt] . . . is only a piece cut out of its surroundings, which we see stretching out on all sides around the animal—and these surroundings are nothing else but our own human environment. The first task of research on such environments consists in seeking out the animal’s perception signs and, with them, to construct the animal’s environment” (53). Uexküll goes on to write: "With the number of actions available to an animal, the number of objects in its environment also increases. It increases as well in the individual life of any animal capable of accumulating experiences, for each new experience conditions a new attitude toward new impressions" (96).

Like Woolf, Uexküll was interested in both intra- and inter-species variation in Umwelten. One sequence of illustrations in his study contrasts how the knot in an oak tree may be encountered by a frightened child, who sees the knot as a monstrous face, versus a forester, who calculates how much wood the tree might yield with the knot factored in. Here Septimus’s, Rezia’s, and Peter’s different
Ecologies of Experience in Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*

ways of engaging with Regent's Park, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, come to mind. As a biologist and a pioneer of the field of ethology, however, Uexküll’s particular concern was with the way *Umwelten* vary across species; hence his inclusion of a sequence of images illustrating how the oak tree provides different affordances for a fox, owl, ant, bark beetle, and wasp.

Analogously, given its use of a nonhuman reflector, *Flush* can be viewed as a thought experiment that explores interspecies differences in ways of being-in-the-world. But I would put this point more strongly: texts like *Flush* give lie to Heidegger’s characterization of nonhuman animals as poor in world, replacing the evaluative hierarchy that underwrites Heidegger’s account with an ecological approach foregrounding the plurality and diversity of ways of world-making across as well as within species.

**Coda: Life Writing/Writing Life: Toward a Zoonarratology**

Woolf’s reflexive engagement with biographical methods in *Flush* harmonizes with ongoing efforts to retool ethnographic and life history research to accommodate nonhuman ways of living, as well as complex intersections among human and nonhuman lives. Her intermixing of techniques for mind-presentation—techniques associated with both fiction and nonfiction—play a central role in this reframing and recontextualizing of life writing practices. By mobilizing extensive reports of Flush’s unverbalized thoughts, Woolf implies not that fiction trumps biography when it comes to capturing the truth of the self, but rather that whatever makes the self what it is cannot be captured via Cartesian models of mind, according to which perceptions, memories, emotions, and other experiences remain locked up inside impervious bodies that contain or enclose them. Instead, situating Flush in a richly detailed life history, Woolf uses modernist methods for presenting minds to model how nonhuman as well as human ways of being-in-the-world acquire their distinctive characteristics because of the manner in which they unfold over time and across space.

In the process, she suggests how stories can be viewed as key instruments for developing the ecological approach to conscious life outlined by the philosopher Alva Noë. Noë, like Woolf in a different register of discourse, suggests that nonhuman and human experiences occupy not different levels within a hierarchy of kinds of minds, but rather different niches within intersecting cognitive ecosystems—with stories providing means for mapping out relationships among
these ecosystems. But whereas Noë only states the relevance of narrative, Woolf demonstrates its power when it comes to modeling organisms’ environment-bound life histories. In particular, Flush’s reflexive engagement with the conventions of biography, along with its detailed modeling of nonhuman phenomenology, underscores that methods of mind presentation in narrative have scope beyond the domain of fiction. The text’s hybrid generic status suggests how resources for presenting minds that are built into narrative can serve as a vehicle for Umwelt exploration, not just in fictional works, but across a variety of discourse contexts and investigative settings.

Woolf thus uses modernist methods of narration to resituate the practice of biography in a transspecies context, revealing the extent to which life writing necessarily becomes entangled with the broader endeavor of writing life—the endeavor of documenting and engaging with nonhuman as well as human ways of encountering the world. Its intermixture of genres mirroring the complexity of human–nonhuman relationships, Woolf’s text places Flush’s, Elizabeth Barrett’s, and other intelligent agents' experiences within a broader ecology of creatural life. In this respect, it is no accident that the author of A Room of One’s Own also wrote Flush. In her earlier text Woolf began from the premise of a basic continuity—a difference without hierarchical separation—between men’s and women’s minds. Flush extends this difference-without-hierarchy model from questions of gender to questions of species. In turn, by emphasizing the entanglement of human and nonhuman experiences—by suggesting how all experiences emerge from agent–environment interactions that may differ in their history and distinctive qualities but not their basic structure—Woolf’s text counters the logic of what earlier epochs had figured as a Great Chain of Being. Stretching back to Aristotle’s Scale of Nature, this linear, hierarchical model projected a horizontal axis of morphological difference onto a vertical or hierarchical model of ontological status—with the different sorts of beings located at different levels of the model (for example, God, angels, male humans, female humans, nonhuman animals, inanimate matter) assigned different degrees of moral worth. By contrast, by making Flush a reflector, Woolf uses modernist methods of narration to underscore fundamental continuities across human and nonhuman ways of negotiating the world; she thereby models a form of life writing that resists conferring special status on human lives in particular.

Woolf’s transspecies approach to lived experience in Flush has far-reaching implications for the study of life writing and for the study of narrative more generally. Accordingly, in developing my analysis of Woolf’s text I have been simultaneously pursuing a larger goal: suggesting how modernist (and other) engagements with nonhu-
man lives can be investigated from what I refer to elsewhere as a zoonarratological perspective. Exploring how storytelling practices and strategies for narrative interpretation relate to wider assumptions concerning the nature, experiences, and status of animals, zoonarratology exemplifies the transdisciplinary mode of inquiry that I mentioned earlier in this essay. As Woolf’s writing of a dog’s life indicates, nonhuman experiences give rise to questions that cut across established boundaries between domains of scholarly and creative practice. Nonhuman ways of being-in-the-world cannot be exhaustively characterized by the arts and humanities, by the social sciences, or by the natural sciences taken alone; hence genuine dialogue and exchange across these fields of endeavor, rather than unidirectional borrowing from a particular field that thereby becomes dominant, will be required to address the issues of nonhuman phenomenology broached so compellingly in Flush. The broader aim of zoonarratology is to formulate ways of asking questions about narrative engagements with the nonhuman—engagements that have unfolded in multiple genres, media, and epochs—in a manner that promotes transdisciplinary convergence. The more specific aim of the present essay has been to suggest how modernist life writing like Woolf’s helped create the conditions for such convergence, by using narrative to model transspecies ecologies of mind.

Notes

1. In an extended endnote concerning Lily Wilson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s housemaid, Woolf suggests the need to widen the scope of biography to include subjects from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds (168–74).
2. See also Boes 231–33.
3. With the book selling 30,000 copies in the UK and the US in the first six months after publication, Woolf herself had mixed feelings about Flush’s success (see Briggs 300; Lewis 308).
4. As Craig Smith notes, until recently critics have tended to read Flush as secondary to or even an embarrassing departure from “Woolf’s ‘serious’ fiction” (359).
5. Texts by literary authors who have acquired specialist knowledge of particular life forms would need to be placed in a different category. Relevant here are Nabokov’s contributions to lepidoptery, as well as the research on nineteenth-century theories of social insects that informs A. S. Byatt’s 1992 novella Morpho Eugenia.
6. See Hunn 83–84; Brown; Herman, "Zoonarratology"; McHugh 211–19.

7. Frisch's *The Dancing Bees* and Uexküll's *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, among other studies, laid important groundwork for ethological research.

8. See also Ingold 220–25.

9. Another relevant development is what Louis van den Hengel, drawing on the ideas of Giorgio Agamben, Bruno Latour, and others, terms *zoography*, or "a mode of writing life that is not indexed on the traditional notion of *bios*—the discursive, social, and political life appropriate to human beings—but [rather] centers on the generative vitality of *zoe*, an inhuman, impersonal, and inorganic force which ... is not specific to human lifeworlds, but cuts across humans, animals, technologies, and things" (2).

10. For more on the concept of storyworlds, see Herman, *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* 103–12.

11. For more on Strachey's influence on Woolf, see Goldman 76–77; Lewis 304–5 and 311–12; and Snaith 618.

12. For a different interpretation of Strachey's life writing practices, see Abbott 149–50; for a discussion of ascriptions of mental states in fictional versus nonfictional context, see Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* 117–23. For his part, Monk argues that though Strachey emphasized "brevity, style, irreverence and an interest in character" in his life writing practices, he did not equate fiction with biography. On the contrary, in seeking to "strip away the pieties of the Victorian age in order to reveal the reality that lay underneath," Strachey aimed "to sharpen, not blur, the distinction between truth and illusion, fact and fiction" (3–4).

13. The converse proposition does not hold: the inclusion of historical characters in fictional discourse does not undercut a narrative's overall status as fiction. Thus, when Abraham Lincoln appears in a 1969 episode of the television series *Star Trek*, titled "The Savage Curtain," his presence does not compromise or diminish the fictionality of the episode. The same goes for any number of historical novels or films that feature actual individuals (Gore Vidal's *Aaron Burr* [1973], Ismail Merchant's and James Ivory's *Jefferson in Paris* [1995]) but do not purport to offer falsifiable accounts of their actions or life histories. For further discussion of these and related issues, see Abbott 151–52, 158–59.

14. At the beginning of her review, however, Woolf suggests that this fault line between fact and fiction, rather than being a defect specific to Nicolson's book, is endemic to the project of modern biography, which fails to unite the "granite-like solidity" of truth with the "rainbow-like intangibility" of personality (95).
15. The following statement from Woolf’s essay on "The New Biography" seems to lend support to Monk’s claim: "too many biographers have relied upon external facts as a substitute for knowledge of the inner life. The external skeleton cannot stand in place of life" (298).

16. In *The Inward Turn*, Kahler argues that the evolution of literary discourse has been marked by a progressive internalization of events, a movement away from environments for acting and interacting to the domain of the mental or psychological, characterized as an interior space separated from external material reality. Although the historical trajectory traced in Kahler's study ends before the modernist period, his discussion resonates with (and may have been influenced by) accounts of early-twentieth-century fiction by modernist writers themselves (for example, Woolf’s "Modern Fiction") and by commentators such as Leon Edel and Georg Lukács. By contrast, in "Re-minding Modernism," I argue that modernist writers staged how conscious experiences arise from a functional coupling between intelligent agents and their surrounding environments, in parallel with recent post- or rather anti-Cartesian accounts of embodied, situated minds in fields ranging from phenomenology and the philosophy of mind to cognitive linguistics and social psychology. Analysts working in these fields have developed versions of a hypothesis stated as follows by Alva Noë: "Consciousness isn't something that happens inside us: it is something that we do, actively, in our dynamic interaction with the world around us" (*Out of Our Heads* 24). See also Andy Clark, *Being There* and *Supersizing*; Noë, *Action in Perception*; Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life*; and Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*. Finally, see Herman, *The Emergence of Mind* 7–18 for a further critique of Käte Hamburger's claim that only "epic fiction," or third-person or heterodiegetic fictional narration, provides access to the I-originarity of another, such that "third-person figures can be spoken of not, or not only[,] as objects, but also as subjects" (122)—a claim further elaborated by Cohn in *Transparent Minds* 7–8.

17. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, as discussed below, Woolf uses many different focalizing agents or reflectors, yielding the techniques that Genette described as variable and multiple focalization. In *Flush*, by contrast, the focalization is largely fixed: Flush is the main focalizer.

18. My remarks concerning free indirect discourse reflect the "dual-voice hypothesis" about this mode—as discussed by Roy Pascal and, in somewhat different parlance, Dorrit Cohn, in *Transparent Minds*. According to this hypothesis, free indirect discourse represents a fusion of a narrator’s and a character’s discourse, in a broad sense of "discourse" that includes not just patterns of expression but also ways of evaluating and understanding the world. See Ann Banfield for a very different account of the structure and functions of free indirect discourse.

19. In *Virtual History*, Ferguson develops a comprehensive account of the structure and functions of counterfactual histories.
20. Bear, Connors, and Paradiso note that the size of the olfactory epithelium [which is a "thin sheet of cells high up in the nasal cavity"] provides one indicator of acuity of smell, and that whereas the surface area of this structure is about 10 cm$^2$ in humans it is about 170 cm$^2$ in some dogs (265). Further, "dogs have over 100 times more receptors in each square centimeter than humans. By sniffing the aromatic air above the ground, dogs can detect the few molecules left by someone walking there hours before. Humans may only be able to smell the dog when he licks their face" (265).

21. Ittner claims that in Flush "animal existence is diminished to an anthropomorphized caricature—animal alterity turned into a literary device . . . Since the mind behind the animal gaze differs from human consciousness only in what it perceives, not in how it perceives and processes experience, the radical potential of the animal perspective remains untapped" (189). By contrast, I argue that Woolf does in fact seek to model what it might be like to perceive and process experience as a nonhuman agent. By the same token, Woolf’s methods in Flush provide grounds for disputing Thomas Nagel’s claim that nonhuman Umwelten remain inaccessible to the human imagination (439). These methods suggest how narrative constitutes a resource for mapping out pathways to nonhuman worlds (see also Coetzee 34–35). Quentin Bell makes a similar point when he remarks that "Flush is not so much a book by a dog lover as a book by someone who would love to be a dog" (qtd. in Smith 352–53).

22. In a later passage recounting Flush’s explorations of Florence, however, Woolf suggests how Flush’s powerful senses of smell and touch in effect allow him to read the world itself as a text—a text that is orthogonal to, but in no way less information-rich than, the texts generated by human languages. Through "the rapture of smell" and by taking "the clear stamp of Latin inscriptions . . . upon the infinitely sensitive pads of his feet," he "knew Florence in its marmoreal smoothness and in its gritty and cobbled roughness" (131–32).

23. As Agamben discusses (49–56), Heidegger held that nonhuman animals are "poor in world" (weltarm), in contrast with "worldless" (weltlos) inanimate objects such as stones, at one end of the spectrum, and "world-forming" (weltbildend) humans, at the other end (see Heidegger 176–77; see also Buchanan 65–114).

24. See Noë, Out of Our Heads 40–41

25. See Hutchins for more on the concept of cognitive systems.

26. See Pick’s Creaturely Poetics for a discussion of the idea of creatural life and an argument that bodily vulnerability is its defining feature.

27. A. O. Lovejoy provides a foundational account of the metaphysical assumptions, cultural imagery, and value schemes associated with the Great Chain of Being.

28. See Herman, Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind for further discussion of the idea of transdisciplinarity. Also, for more on the project of zoonarratology, see Herman, "Toward a Zoonarratology."
Works Cited


