

THE POETICAL LIFE OF INSECTS:  
A MEDITATION ON THE MINIATURE AND MODERNITY

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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## Abstract

### THE POETICAL LIFE OF INSECTS: A MEDITATION ON THE MINIATURE AND MODERNITY

by

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Readers might be surprised to learn that the bug in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, however strange and peculiarly of its time, partakes of a long tradition. Research uncovers, unexpectedly, an enduring artistic fascination with the possibilities of expressing the human condition in terms of the lives of these tiny, cut-into, and exoskeletal creatures. My dissertation identifies this tradition, tracing its arc from antiquity and mapping its premonitions of the hero's reduction in modern literature. Although this study is partly a survey of exemplary literary cases from different historical eras—the alienated Modern, pictorial Victorian, taxonomic Augustan, and miniaturizing Renaissance—it does not adopt an overtly historical approach or attempt to trace the insect's 'flight' through all periods. My approach is analytic, poetic and philosophical, in order to get at the special properties of the insect miniature.

The question, 'What is a miniature?' has been explored by phenomenological critics Gaston Bachelard in *Poetics of Space* (1964) and Susan Stewart in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993), and by the

historical critic Patricia Fumerton in *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (1991). Social scientists like Yi-Fu Tuan, in *Segmented Worlds and Self: Group Life and Individual Consciousness* (1982), describe the relation of spatial segmentation to developing consciousness, ideas of self, and communal ideals. Miniaturization, segmentation, and exornation of surfaces, are key topics in my own project, which probes a related critical question: ‘What is an insect?’ My book is a study of aesthetics, written to help the reader understand the whole problem of the ‘in-sect’ in literature. It asks such questions as: What does the miniature mean? What is segmentation? In what sense are some narratives exoskeletal? In answering these questions, my study refers to fundamentals of expression such as the figures of speech, the nature of wit, and the invention of fables. My dissertation assumes that the literary critic shares the scientist’s desire to clarify the figural, to examine how things are made.

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## Preface

### *A Brief History*

My entire dissertation project began, curiously enough, with a dream. It was a cold afternoon on December 20, 1998; the fall semester was over and I had just finished a seminar in which we read the whole of Edmund Spenser's enormous *The Faerie Queene*. The feeling was bittersweet. After months of wandering in that labyrinth of poetry, my journey had come to an end. I felt riddled with strange longings. I decided to extend the Elizabethan pleasure and read *Elizabeth and Essex* by Lytton Strachey. I do not know if it was the effect of his belletristic prose or merely New York City steam heat, but I soon fell fast asleep and found myself in a lovely garden of gorgeous, scented flowers. The flowers were so tall that they towered above me. Suddenly, my attention was drawn to the buzzing flight of a bee. It rose up from the far end of the garden and made its way to within three feet of me. After hovering for an instant it veered unexpectedly, making a spiral above my head before disappearing. I awoke with a start, amazed by what I had seen. Riding on the bee's back was a tiny, very much alive Queen Elizabeth, clutching its furry armor, flashing me a look of wild glee.

One might regard this scene, a figment or fragment arising from the realm of dream, as nonsense, or at best a parody of my waking exploration of *The Faerie Queene*. I was moved, however, and struck by a feeling that its playful exuberance masked a secret or insight inaccessible by any other means. Unlike many dreams, this one refused to leave but set me on a quest to explicate its meaning. A few days later I shared it with a friend who informed me that Spenser himself had written two poems about similarly minute creatures. This seemed like the clue that I had been seeking. I read them with a

kind of zeal. Far from providing me with an answer, however, they only intensified my curiosity. I began poring over anthologies, hunting down insect imagery among Spenser's contemporaries. I had opened a rich vein. Renaissance poets were fascinated by the insect and by miniatures in general. Moreover, as I cast my net more widely to collect specimens from later periods, I realized that, far from being a passing fancy, the insect had reawakened in new forms from century to century. Recalling the work of Franz Kafka, for instance, I was jolted into seeing how the bug actually opened a window on modernity. The reduction of the hero in his work focuses on what we might call 'the politics of the insect in the twentieth century.' In this way, gradually, what began as a dream took shape as my dissertation: "The Poetical Life of Insects: A Meditation on the Miniature and Modernity."

#### *The Insect Topic as Litmus Test*

Naturally, my topic has raised some eyebrows. Sometimes I feel as if I am administering a litmus test for a whole range of human reactions from animus to sympathy. There is, for instance, what I call the 'Little Miss Moffet' reaction: "*Bugs? Ugh! You mean you actually like cockroaches and spiders?*" For allegedly loving the creepy crawlers, I am regarded as a boy who never grew up. The flip side of such disgust, I learned, is a kindly sort of pity. For assigning bugs such undue importance, I am smiled upon as if I had professed a belief in the Tooth Fairy; my topic is viewed as cute, naïve, charming. A more exotic variety is what I refer to as the 'Joyce-Nabokov-Buyatt' reaction. This involves a curious form of creative mishearing: "Incest? Really?! That's fascinating." As I watch the face grow flush and pupils dilate, I reflect how my

dissertation topic is really subliminally sexy. Somewhat opposite is the reaction of the ‘Literalist,’ the one who hears but does not listen. To their mind, I am like a radical ecotnik passing out bumper stickers with slogans like ‘Save the Mosquito.’ I recall once discussing my interest with a scholar as we wandered in his enormous garden. No matter how often I explained I was interested in insect *figures*, he still felt the need to apologize each time he plucked a worm from one of his prize roses or pinched an aphid between his fingers. On other occasions, too, well-meaning academics have wondered aloud whether my topic does not belong in a department of entomology rather than of English literature.

I wish to nip this last misconception in the bud. For this reason, I devote most of this preface to a survey of exemplary literary cases from different historical periods, beginning with examples from the modern era and then moving backwards to reflect upon the pictorial Victorian period, the taxonomic Augustan age, and lastly, the Renaissance flowering of the insect. At the very least, these examples shall serve to illustrate the intensity and extent of my literary interest. For an overtly historical approach, this thumbnail sketch must suffice. It would have been folly to try in my dissertation to tell the whole story, to trace the ‘flight’ of the insect through all the periods. For one thing, insects are legion. For another, an encyclopedia would not be very useful to the reader. Instead, I have adopted in my dissertation a somewhat philosophical approach in an effort to trace a poetics of the insect figure.

Consequently, this preface concludes with a description of my theoretical interest in the special properties of the insect miniature. The question, ‘What is a miniature?’ has been explored by such phenomenological critics as Gaston Bachelard in *Poetics of Space* (1964) and Susan Stewart in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the*

*Souvenir, the Collection* (1993), and historical critics like Patricia Fumerton in *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (1991). Social scientists like Yi-Fu Tuan, in *Segmented Worlds and Self: Group Life and Individual Consciousness* (1982), have described the relation of spatial segmentation to developing consciousness, the idea of self, and communal ideals. Miniaturization, segmentation, and the exornation of surfaces, are all key topics in my own dissertation, which probes a related critical question: ‘What is an insect?’

### *Politics and the Modern Insect*

When modern readers think about the use of animals as characters in allegorical fiction, probably what first leaps to their minds is George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. They might actually be surprised to learn that not all such fables are about horses and pigs and sheep. Indeed, some of the most interesting ones ever written are about insects. My research has uncovered, unexpectedly, an enduring artistic fascination with the possibilities of expressing the human condition in terms of the lives of these tiny, cut-into, and exoskeletal creatures.

Nor are all of these fables, like the insect itself, obscure, known only to the specialist. There are scholars, for instance, who will be able to tell you that the fourth of Virgil’s *Georgics* is devoted to the society of bees, or that Edmund Spenser, author of the longest English poem, also wrote the *Muiopotmos*, the most perfect little poem about a butterfly and spider. But there are many other, quite famous, insects in literature that are not just known to scholars and bookworms. Far from being a weird antiquarian

obsession, insect lore is widespread and shows up in some major places. Some of these fables are still very much with us.

A case in point is *The Insect Play* (1922) by Karel and Josef Capek. Karel Capek is one of the most important anti-fascist fable makers of the last century. He is perhaps best known for his apocalyptic novel *War With the Newts* (1936) and *R.U.R.* (1921), the science-fiction play that gave the word ‘robot’ to the English language. Karel lived to see Hitler march over from Austria and brother Josef die in a concentration camp. His work shows how modern totalitarian governments reduce and insectify the cultures they wish to dominate. In *The Insect Play*, the Capek brothers train their toy vision on the mechanisms by which bureaucracy, tyranny, and consumerism reduce us to butterflies, ants and beetles. Their work offers a particularly graphic example of how the insect figure can be used to shed light on other sorts of literature. The insect, after all, is another version of the robot.

Another example is the great humorist writings of Dom Marquis. In *Archy and Mehitobel* (1927), a collection of jaunty sketches the columnist wrote for *The Evening Sun*, Archy is a cockroach with the soul of a poet. By turns funny and philosophical, Archy jumps up and down on his typewriter keys, composing lowercase *verse libre*. Marquis’ work reminds us that the tradition of the insect poem has a sportive aspect. Artists have long intuited that there is something inherently comical about mechanical creatures. The talking insect-typewriter in William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* (1959) is as funny as it is grotesque. Other authors who follow in Marquis’ footsteps are Daniel Weiss’ *The Roaches Have No King* (1994) and Victor Pelevin’s *The Life of Insects* (1995). Offering up cocktails of crude realism and thoughtful fantasy, their works extend

the insect fable to novel length and prove that the central metaphor of bug-human can be a goad rather than a hindrance to invention.

The most famous insect in literary history, however, is a full-blown nightmare. One of the great stories of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) is not just about an insect, but about a man who becomes one. By reducing the vast storyline of his novels and interiorizing the figure, Kafka creates a kind of uncanny inner theater. We enter inside Gregor's armor-plated body and are made privy to the thoughts of a soul under siege. The dead end reached by his protagonist is an imaginative triumph of the author, who forges a continuously metaphoric link between the bug-man's body, consciousness, and crowded world. Kafka gives a kind of epic grandeur to my whole project because he really does explore what it would feel like to be an insect. Reduced in size, in-sected and exoskeletal, Gregor Samsa prophetically reflects the tragic absurdity, self-consciousness, and fragmentariness of modern life.

In science, too, the only way some thinkers have felt they could express the social dynamic was to use the life of insects. It is no accident that the best-known generalist of biological survival today is Edward O. Wilson, whose first and most important work, *The Insect Societies* (1971), was done with ants. Many readers, shocked by *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975) and the correlations he implies between human and insect societies, have considered Wilson to be a voice for authoritarianism. Yet more recently, speaking on behalf of conservation and bio-diversity in books like *The Future of Life* (2002), he has even been compared with Henry David Thoreau. How does someone who spent his life around anthills continually manage to create such a stir? Wilson thinks ants are speaking to him because they have an obvious social life. They may be hard to relate

to as individuals, but as a society they are clearly going about some important business. Size makes their regimented system perfectly visible. As to why people listen to Wilson, the reason is probably not a love of ants. As when they read about Kafka's hero, or about Winston in Orwell's *1984*, they probably fear that they are *becoming* them.

### *The Insect in the Big Picture*

One does not need a magnifying glass, however, to see that the loss of perspective that is central to writers like Kafka and Orwell is bound up with reduction of the hero. In the ancient world, as in traditional culture of the West generally, 'heroic' always meant larger than life. Looking over the whole of Western literary history, it is plain that the hero gets weaker and weaker as we approach the modern period (Frye *Anatomy* 34). Size and perspective both relate to power, so this material often becomes overtly political. Any child can tell you that he can squish an insect with his left hand, but what if that insect is modern man? This tragic idea is already the burden of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, as Gloucester reminds us: "As flies to wanton boys/ Are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport" (4.1.37-38), but in the modern era authors begin to explore this problem in great detail. "I never even managed to become anything... neither a hero nor an insect" (7), complains the narrator of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, "[but] I'll tell you solemnly that I wanted many times to become an insect" (8). My dissertation on the insect in literature shows how, in one curious perspective, you can see the meaning of the modern world.

Marshall McLuhan once wrote in *Understanding Media* of art as a kind of "radar [that] acts as 'an early alarm system,' as it were, enabling us to discover social and

psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them. This concept of the arts as prophetic, contrasts with the popular idea of them as mere self-expression” (x). A similar notion is voiced by Ezra Pound in his *ABC of Reading*:

‘Artists are the antennae of the race.’ ...Artists and poets undoubtedly get excited and ‘over-excited’ about things long before the general public... Before deciding whether a man is a fool or a good artist, it would be well to ask, not only: ‘is he excited unduly,’ but: ‘does he see something we don’t?’ Is his curious behavior due to his feeling an oncoming earthquake, or smelling a forest fire which we do not yet feel or smell? (81-83)

When, we are tempted to ask, did artists first start picking up signals that the individual in society was being reduced to the status of an insect?

No doubt we are well on our way to the reduction of the hero the minute that Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire and others start saying that man is lost in the crowd. Seventy-five years before Gregor awakens late for work and finds himself trapped in insect armor, Karl Marx is analyzing the alienation of workers in *Economic and Political Manuscripts* (1844) and Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat” (1842) shows the civil servant lost in a maze of bureaucracy. Since time also plays a significant role in comparisons between human and insect life, we note that the pace of life and rate of change speeds up in the early industrial age. In the theories of Charles Lyell in *Principles of Geology* (1830) and Charles Darwin in *Origin of Species* (1859), human history shrinks to a tick on the cosmic clock. When a utilitarian like Thomas Love Peacock declares poetry to be obsolete in “The Four Ages of Poetry” (1820), he is speaking to an age of growing mechanism, faith in microscopes and experimental science. As Emily Dickinson writes:

“Faith” is a fine invention  
When Gentlemen can see—  
But *Microscopes* are prudent  
In an Emergency. (1-4)

The invention of the photograph no doubt adds to the demand for exactitude, raising the stakes for the imagination in an age of mechanical reproduction. In such a climate, one wonders how insects were able to maintain a poetical existence.

*Insects in Fairy Painting: A Victorian Interlude*

Interestingly, the insects make a psychological retreat, leaving poetry in the middle of the nineteenth century to enter the fanciful world of book illustration and fairy painting. It is hard to imagine Lewis Carroll and John Tenniel creating the Alice books, for instance, if they had not to some degree reflected on the world of the insect. The land of fairies, delineated in meticulous detail, becomes the natural new home for insects. During the long period while Queen Victoria is on the throne, in fact, the little people get to be a bigger and bigger item, as if the repression of irrational fantasy and sexuality cannot help issuing in a lush and fey erotica, a mania for spiritualism. Bug-like figures appear in “The Goblin Market” (1859), Christina Rossetti’s ballad-like fantasy about incest and oral sex, and in “The Fairy-Feller’s Master Stroke” (1864), a weirdly crowded mindscape painted by patricide Richard Dadd in the solitude of the asylum. Like other contemporary artists, the introspective Rossetti and mad Richard Dadd turn their gaze inwards and pull the spectator in eerily close. Cutting into the psyche, they generate an imaginary populace and turn the mind into a mansion of many rooms, exposing its creepy

attics and Gothic interiors. “One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted— /One need not be a House—” writes Emily Dickinson, “The Brain has Corridors—surpassing/ Material Place” (1-4). In the Victorian period, domesticity and decorum cohabited with buggy perversion. Ostensibly trifles written for children, these works by Rossetti and Carroll provoke us to ask, as Bernardo asks Horatio about the ghost in *Hamlet*: “Is not this something more than fantasy?” (1.1.54). Sigmund Freud is on the horizon and new attitudes towards sex are stirring.

It comes as no surprise when butterflies, caterpillars, and ants figure so prominently in modern re-creations of the Victorian world like A.S. Byatt’s *Angels and Insects* (1990). In one interview, Byatt describes her novel as having originated in a simple metaphor, a comparison between an “ant heap” and a “Victorian mansion” with its “sexless female servants.” The chief character is “a Darwinian and a determinist,” a man “who wanted to marry a butterfly and found he had married the queen of the ants by mistake” (1). The anagram ‘insect/incest/scient’ appears in Byatt’s novel, as it does in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969). This anagram seems like a key to the narcissistic, doubling, Victorian domestic fable that wants to be told.

### *The Insect in an Augustan Age of Taxonomy*

The impulse to miniaturize appears strong even when, generally speaking, the intellectual climate is not the sort that one would expect to favor insects. That is to say, neoclassic writers in the eighteenth century tend to dislike insected creatures because their bodies lack a sufficient normal wholeness of appearance. Fairy art in the nineteenth century allows for grotesquery, while neoclassical art favors structure and balance. If

Victorian artists enjoy portraying the idiosyncrasies of the individual, the Augustans embrace a concept of general nature. This is the great age of encyclopedias and taxonomies that Michel Foucault sought to denominate, when poets strive to examine not the individual but the species. “The business of a poet,” as Samuel Johnson writes in *Rasselas* (1759), “is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest” (43). How different this sentiment from that of the later Victorian artists who, hungry for variety, seem obsessive in their zeal to render all in great detail!

Even so, Pope and Swift seem to be fascinated by the miniaturizing of normalized natural forms. Like many of their contemporaries, they feel they cannot write an epic unless it is a parody. Alexander Pope understands that the foliate, butterfly-like sylphs he introduces in *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) must be inset into a highly structured parody of society. Another example is Jonathan Swift’s literally foliate *The Battle of the Books* (1704), a mock epic in which the author insets an Aesopian fable of a debate between a spider and a bee. In *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), Swift shows that mankind is the victim of minute creatures in large numbers. The hero Gulliver may be giant in Lilliput, but what does bigness really mean if he can be tied down by tiny little people? The Lilliput nation compels our gaze not merely because it is small, but because it is subject to sociological analysis. As Swift cuts into and takes the measure of Lilliputian culture, we draw parallels between their world and ours. C.S. Lewis once noted that *Gulliver’s Travels* is one of the earliest works in which an author takes pains to draw everything to scale (*The Discarded Image* 101-02). Enlightenment poetics, as well as

rhetoric, mirrors the society. Insects are significant partly because size and number matter in an age ruled by mathematics, from Sir Isaac Newton's theories of gravity to Pope's light and lawful heroic couplet. The rainbow, fractured during the Renaissance, is reconstituted as beams of pure light.

### *Fable and Microscopy in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*

The Augustan preoccupation with ethos or character did not spring up overnight. A century before Swift, the insect gets special treatment from the great master of fables Jean de La Fontaine, whose *Fables Choisies Mises En Vers* (1668) is widely regarded as the model of French lyric poetry. La Fontaine takes the dry old narratives of Aesop and gives them a shiny new coat that is as witty as it is opaque, as risqué as it is realistic. A host of translators have paid homage to his verse, including the American poet Marianne Moore. La Fontaine's comparison of society to a beehive spurs Bernard de Mandeville to pen *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), one of the most widely known and discussed satires of the eighteenth century. Mandeville's paradoxical doctrines were even credited by Adam Smith and John Maynard Keynes as having deeply influenced their economic theories. At the very least, the case of La Fontaine proves that the use of insects to envision humanity *en masse* is not an invention of the Augustans.

Besides fable, the development of microscopy in the seventeenth century had a major impact on representations of the insect. The instant Robert Hooke in England puts a flea under his microscope and makes a graphic picture of it for his *Micrographia* (1665), there are consequences for human culture as well as for the insect. One might piously distrust the shifting impressions shaped by one's 'fallen' senses while trusting the

‘insights’ granted by the new artificial instruments. The favored instrument of Hooke and Jan Swammerdam intensifies the drive for measurement that we associate with the birth of modern science. If it is true, as often asserted, that every move that is major in this history involves the translation of the warm-blooded world we live in into a cold-blooded mathematical system, then the invention of the microscope had as large an impact as the telescope, as scholars from Marjorie Nicholson in *Science and Imagination* (1956) to Mary Baine Campbell in *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe* (2002) have argued. Galileo may point towards the spacious sublimity of *Paradise Lost*, with feelings of transcendence and awe to inspire later romantics, but Hooke’s flea offers an alternate lens through which to view the satirical reaction in the increasingly *secular* eighteenth century.

In its reification of the playful and imitative exuberance of art, such parody may be seen as part of an effort to battle against the myopia, jargon and pretensions of the new ‘virtuosi.’ Those who parody the moderns enlist the ancients, particularly classical texts that embrace a human-centered scale and standards of decorum. The disjunctive effect of superimposing ancient human over modern microscopic preoccupations is akin to making an elephant out of a mouse, or mistaking a gnat for a lion. Scale, shape, and tone allow satirists to engage with the problem of the reduction of spectators to images that the new technology has enhanced. Epic, an idealized monument to heroic action, which situates the hero in a national if not a cosmic context, provides an index against which to measure the modern ‘decline’ to novelistic portraits of individuals with an inner life, as well as the vagaries of ‘real life.’ The very large and the very small are both manipulated to mirror the vanities of the middle class. From an even larger perspective, then, Hooke’s flea

looks beyond the Augustans and the Romantics to the Victorian fascination with picturing and the birth of the ‘little man.’

### *The Renaissance Flowering*

Long before the tyranny of the visual takes hold, however, the Renaissance invents perspective and Gutenberg’s press ushers in a culture of print. An ambivalence about this paradigm shift may be noted in the wariness of court poets with regard to the ‘stigma of print.’ In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart says the allure of miniatures is in part a nostalgia for the uniqueness and intimacy, as well as precious exclusivity, of texts which the powerful, new, and democratic technology threatened to stamp out. Around 1600 in England there arises a passion for tiny collectibles, from the artificial sonnets of Sir Philip Sidney to the precious miniatures that Nicholas Hilliard limned for the aristocrats of Elizabeth’s court. At the same time, humanoid insects and insectal humans are delineated with loving care in such miniatures as Edmund Spenser’s *Muiopotmos: or The Fate of the Butterflie* (1591) and Michael Drayton’s *Nymphidia, The Court of Fayrie* (1627).

The parodic nature of these poems, which are in fact reduced epitomes of larger classical forms, has hindered modern appreciation. Early twentieth century critics like J.R.R. Tolkien and Northrop Frye, noting they were not strong Swiftian satire, treated them as so much froufrou. Historical criticism has tended to excise the issue of poetics and reduce such narratives to allegories of court politics. Patricia Fumerton’s *Cultural Aesthetics*, on the other hand, traces the poetic resemblances between minute visual and verbal artifacts to help us see the cultural and historical values encoded in miniatures per

se. Like the aristocrats at court, these miniatures are at once secretive and ostentatious, their rhetoric gesturing to a private ‘self’ and to a very public set of conventions. They are covered with ornament that seems as mazy and deeply etched as decorative and superficial.

Something important is obviously going on in these models or experiments, in which practically everything of importance can fit inside the hand or be crushed underfoot. Surely they are evidence that the idea of the heroic is put into question well before John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), but they are also fascinating because they show poets adopting a systemic approach. On a macrocosmic scale, Spenser divides and marries the rivers in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene* (1596) while Drayton anatomizes England as a system of rivers in *Polyolbion* (1611). On a microcosmic scale, their insect miniatures are also a kind of taxonomical poetry. They dissect bodies and adorn their parts with medals wrought of natural fragments, over a century before Carolus Linnaeus’ *Systema Naturae* (1758) organizes nature through the classification of living species by body parts.

Not that Elizabethans are ready to join the Royal Society and trade their beloved metaphors for metonymies. As the insectal fairies in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* show, nature is steeped in folklore. We may be tempted to see ourselves mirrored in the early modern period until we remind ourselves, as Kitty Scholar declared in *Natural Magic: Studies in the Presentation of Nature in English Poetry from Spenser to Marvell* (1965), that belief in a kind of natural magic prevailed. If Spenser’s and Drayton’s artificial miniatures of nature reify a primitive microcosmic faith in the face of civil unrest and political uncertainty, then they also gesture towards a natural historical or

environmental consciousness. Such “luxurious bric-a-brac,” writes Fumerton, “was one with a cosmos in which even central historical configurations seemed broken apart and marginalized in incoherence, and where self was thus fixed in fracture” (1). Miniaturists inscribe cosmic value in natural objects at a moment when mutability threatens to loosen hierarchy. As early modern animations, they mock merely material enumeration even as they multiply the ornaments or insignias of soul that adorn ostensibly trivial objects.

The standard view of the English Renaissance is that the drama is the most important literary form and we doubtless do tend to see ourselves mirrored more in characters on the stage. By comparison, the insect miniatures seem at once more trivial in content and more schematic and mechanical in form. They are strange metaphorical creatures: parodic, yet also in earnest; fragmentary, yet always alluding to wholes; superficial yet also deep. This last feature deserves our attention. By necessity, miniature ornament is all *on the surface*. Paradoxically, in their subtle refinement of perspective and other techniques of picturing, these minutely crafted and jeweled texts share the Shakespearean preoccupation with representing *inwardness*. They remind us, too, that as the so-called ‘Gutenberg Galaxy’ expanded, the size of an action that spectators would be able to identify with was *shrinking*.

### *A Poetics of the Insect*

Clearly, there are important moments when great authors have stepped into this genre that I call ‘the insect poem.’ The challenge for the critic is to understand what this mythology is all about. One might begin by surveying the fable lore, the tradition that La Fontaine draws upon and which is already incredibly rich by the time of ancient Greek

and Roman authors like Aesop, Phaedrus and Babrius. We could look at all the old-fashioned critical commentary about fables and their use of all the different creatures. Right away we would be confronted by an embarrassment of riches. The problem with such an approach is that it would not help us distinguish what is special about insects.

Insects *are* special in the universe that we inhabit, a universe that is here and, hopefully, will still be around when we are all through with it. For one thing, they outnumber us and are going to outlive us. For a long time it did not get said in literary studies very much, but over the past twenty-five years or so an increasing number of critics have voiced concern that these naturalistic components of our existence are the most important ones we can possibly begin to think about. The intellectual climate has surely changed since C.P. Snow's claim in 1959 that the 'two cultures' (art and science) did not mix. Ecocriticism, for instance, which studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment, is a growing field.<sup>1</sup> Some of these writers are clearly motivated by a sense of crisis. People like E.O. Wilson, for instance, warn that if we do not understand that these large questions of the animate and inanimate world we live in are the central ones, then we are in deep trouble. But, laying that aside, insects are inherently very interesting. They are special *per se*.

Say the word "special" in relation to insects and you are likely to get directed to the department of Entomology. My dissertation, however, is a study of aesthetics, written to help the reader understand the whole problem of the 'in-sect' in literature. It

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<sup>1</sup> See C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures: and A Second Look* (1965), and William H. Davenport, *The One Culture* (1970). Some works by eco-critics include: Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (1977), Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), John Elder's *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (1985), and Gary Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild* (1990). For an extensive bibliography, see *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm.

asks such questions as: What does the miniature mean? What is segmentation? In what sense are some narratives exoskeletal? In answering these questions, my study refers to fundamentals of expression such as the figures of speech, the nature of wit, and the invention of fables. My dissertation assumes that the literary critic shares the scientist's desire to clarify the figural, to examine how things are made.

In the case of insects, such clarification is necessary because it would normally be assumed that insects are small. As Aristotle says in the *Poetics* when discussing 'proper magnitude,' this presents a problem of size. Both the leviathan and the insect are beyond scale for us humans. We can understand this aesthetic problem in a general way. How can a poet represent protagonists that are less than half a man's foot size, or so minute sometimes as to be almost invisible? What do we need in terms of an action that we can identify with? Can we indeed identify with little creatures? Did poets find that they were extraordinarily important if looked at as social aggregates? Can the tiny sometimes prove, like atoms and nano-computers, enormously powerful? Clearly, this is about more than just size. The miniature involves us in thinking about scale, the *meaning* of size.

But insects are also special because their bodies are segmented. Segmentation is, indeed, almost the most defining property of the insect. Here again Aristotle deserves credit for coining the Greek word *entomon* ("cut-in"), which the Roman Pliny the Elder translated into Latin as *insecta*. In the Graeco-Roman tradition of scientific-philosophic analysis, you analyze the human condition by cutting things into pieces. If you cut something up and re-assemble it, then, as Aristotle points out in his *Rhetoric*, you get a metaphor—or, in our terms, an 'in-sect' figure.

The idea that a metaphor or a simile is a kind of insect structure is fascinating, but we can look into this matter more deeply. For instance, asking what segmentation is about allows us to go from simile with its type of segmentation to story with its potential similarities. The elements in a simile are attached to, depend or hang onto, other things. The same could also be said, however, of the elements in fable. Like similes, fables have a way of reducing. It turns out that there is a quite natural reason why some essential fables had to be about insects: They needed the correct protagonist and the fable was already an 'in-sect,' so to speak.

But fables are insect-like for another important reason: They are exoskeletal. Aesop's ant, for example, says, "I work" and his grasshopper says, "I sing." Everything is 'on the outside' in fable. Compare Aesop's fable with a play by Shakespeare, a novel by Tolstoy, or Melville's *Moby Dick*, for instance. Those literary forms are enormous, feel very deep and endoskeletal, whereas the bones of fable are all on the surface. Fable is exoskeletal and causes us immediately to ask: What is the structure?

Our inquiry is by no means purely intellectual, for there are emotions associated with such forms. Indeed, an insect is scary from most people's point of view because it lacks a proper (i.e., whole, pliable) body. Bugs horrify, particularly when they are made big like the mutated ants in Gordon Douglas' movie *Them* (1954), or the morphing 'man-sect' in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986). But what happens if you do a real cut-up? The more obviously the poet cuts up and glues his pieces back together, the more he flaunts his human-as-insect. The whole point, in other words, is to crack us up. This has a humorous aspect, to be sure, but the motive may also be dead-serious, as in the novels of Burroughs or the paintings of surrealists and cubists. Although some of the effects

seem cartoonish, their cut-up approach clearly is a serious attempt to puncture the surface of language and consciousness (what Freud called the “manifest dream-content”) to arrive at some deeper insight. The result is a work more dreamlike, yet also, like a fable.

Consider, in this regard, a large dramatic form like the Old Comedy of Aristophanes. His plays are most peculiar insofar as they feel remarkably like fables. As F.M. Cornford shows in his classic work, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1934), Aristophanic comedy provides an analysis of Attic culture. For Aristophanes, the correct literary genre through which to understand society is comedy because, unlike tragedy, comedy is all about structure. By studying a play like Aristophanes’ *The Clouds*, in particular, we see how these highly structuralist aspects are the native home for showing the hyper-articulation of insects.

Scale in the miniature compels us to consider not just structure, but the life cycle and questions of time. After all, almost our main sense of the insect world—of the individual, if not the species—is that it is not going to last. In miniatures like those collected in *The Greek Anthology* and others attributed to Anacreon, the insect expresses quintessential poetic motifs like the shortness of human life and desire’s potency in the face of extinction. Here the insect is neither robot nor pest, neither the butt of satire nor repugnant terrorist of our farms, gardens and cities. In poignant epigrams and delicate lyrics, the cicada is the precious singer of all that is small and sensitive, evanescent and ephemeral. As a heavenly daemon with a distinctly erotic charge, the bee figures the intensity and introversion of desire. The insect lyric calls us back to our native home.

My goal in this dissertation is to express my pleasure in the world of the miniature, to praise both the material and poetic approach. My demonstration of how

different writers encounter the miniature leads directly to the heart of the matter; namely, that for me the miniature is embodied in what we call ‘insects,’ i.e., creatures whose bodies are ‘cut-in.’ This means that their body character is rather different from the human body, for example, or the body of a tree or a whale. Thus, my praise or my reading of this particular art is a commentary on an aspect of metaphor, since metaphor assumes the intersection of whole or complete bodies of different things. The idea of the insect body, however small or strange, offers a very important point of perspective upon much larger and more ordinary poetic domains.

Philosophically, literature from my point of view is divided into four sections: epic similes, fables by Aesop and others, Aristophanic comedy, and lyrics like Anacreon’s. Those are what you might call the archetypal examples or exemplary cases for this purpose. Mostly my dissertation is concerned with the classical period where the primary characteristics were laid out. I should say, however, that this is not a work intending to produce a linguistic account of the issues. The moment words from Greek or Latin or French or German are translated, we begin to see all sorts of subtle differences. Although in the course of my analysis I do sometimes point out that the emphasis of the language appears to be on this or that aspect (e.g., *entomon* in Greek, *insecta* in Latin, *bug* in English), this is not a philological treatise. This is an account broadly drawn, which concentrates on the idea of the bug and the insect-as-such. I am thinking about insects generally, the way a philosopher might do. My hope throughout is that this phenomenology will serve more recent literature in some important way. Not that this is the whole story at all. But if we have this long background in mind as to what is involved, then we can understand any insect literature that we are likely to come across.

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## Chapter 1    The Mystique of the Bug

“Praise, again, may be serious or frivolous; nor is it always of a human or divine being but often of inanimate things, or of the humblest of the lower animals.”

Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (1366a)

Lovers of the bug are rare enough. At one extreme they tend to be mad—residents of the ‘bughouse’ like Renfield, the fly-munching vampire apprentice in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*—at the other, they are angelical, unearthly and sensitive souls, like the fair and innocent Psyche of Lucius Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*, who is aided by a swarm of ants when the jealous goddess Venus sets her an impossible task.

These are, however, fictional characters and not real people. We feel genuinely startled to be in the presence of a flesh-and-blood entomophile. That is part of the strangeness in meeting someone like the poet John Clare. Although Clare was himself a long-suffering inmate who saw his share of hell in this life, he was yet moved to write of common houseflies:

These little indoor dwellers, in cottages and halls, were always entertaining to me; after dancing in the window all day from sunrise to sunset they would sip of the tea, drink of the beer, and eat of the sugar, and be welcome all summer long. They look like things of mind or fairies, and seem pleased or dull as the weather permits. In many clean cottages and genteel houses, they are allowed every liberty to creep, fly, or do as they like; and seldom or ever do wrong. In fact they are the small or dwarfish portion of our own family, and so many fairy familiars that we know and treat as one of ourselves. (427)

Clare is a special case, a poet who seems like the most natural of historians. Clare's description moves us to feel what William Wordsworth meant with proverbs like: "Sweet is the lore that nature brings."<sup>2</sup>

Another poet gifted, like Clare, with a microscopic eye, is Emily Dickinson. In a more plaintive mood, she compares the fly's enviable freedom to feast or flee with the sluggishness and dependency of an infant:

It would have starved a Gnat—

To live so small as I—

And yet I was a living Child—

With Food's necessity

Upon me—like a Claw—

I could no more remove

Than I could coax a Leech away—

Or make a Dragon—move—

Nor like the Gnat—had I—

The privilege to fly

And seek a Dinner for myself—

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<sup>2</sup> "The Tables Turned" (25). An uncommon, if childlike, sympathy animates the passage describing Clare's bibulous houseguests. The whole is suffused with the sensitive poet's pleasure in the act of reading Nature. A comparable humor is at work in the opening paragraph of a late essay of Ralph Waldo Emerson's, "Quotation and Originality," with its delightful coupling of insects and bibliophiles: "Whoever looks at the insect world, at flies, aphides, gnats, and innumerable parasites, and even at the infant 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. In the highest civilization the book is still the highest delight (178).

How mightier He—than I—

Nor like Himself—the Art

Upon the Window Pane

To gad my little Being out—

And not begin—again— (1-16)

By contrast with these sensitive observers of the miniature world, most of us feel such repugnance towards the insect—be it a mosquito, wasp, cockroach or spider—that we would as soon kill as be near one. From our days in the nursery we are taught:

Little Miss Muffet sat on a toffet

Eating her curds and whey.

Along came a spider who sat down beside her

And frightened Miss Muffet away.

Insects annoy us with their buzzing, terrify us with their stinging, disgust and fill us with a dread of disease.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, they show an unforgivable hubris in taking up residence in our abodes. There is plenty of room for the little lodgers, but our animus knows no bounds. As Emily Dickinson writes:

Size circumscribes—it has no room

For petty furniture—

The Giant tolerates no Gnat

For ease of Gianture—

Repudiates it, all the more—

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<sup>3</sup> One wonders whether the vast literature about fleas written from the medieval to the early modern period would have been of such a humorous nature had people known then, as we know now, that the Black Death (*Y. pestis*, or bubonic plague) was spread by the fleas carried on rats.

Because intrinsic size  
Ignores the possibility  
Of Calumnies—or Flies. (1-8)

Sometimes we are struck by their impudence, like the speaker in Robert Burns's "To a Louse" who sees a louse crawling on the bonnet of a lady in church:

HA! whare ye gaun, ye crowlin' ferlie?  
Your impudence protects you sairly:  
I canna say but ye strunt rarely,  
Owre gauze and lace (1-6)

The insect's presence amounts to a kind of blasphemy and calls forth an execration:

Ye ugly, creepin', blastit wonner,  
Detested, shunn'd, by saunt and sinner,  
How dare ye set your fit upon her,  
Sae fine a lady! (7-10)

When name-calling fails, the poet threatens to exorcise the little devil with a hearty dose of:

...some rank, mercurial rozet,  
Or fell, red smeddum.  
I'd gie you sic a hearty dose o't,  
Wad dress your droddum! (27-30)

At last, however, the speaker regards the lady herself who, in her vanity, is oblivious to the insectal desecration:

O *Jenny*, dinna toss your head,

An' set your beauties a' abroad!

Ye little ken what cursed speed

The blastie's makin'! (37-40)

The louse may even prove to be an agent sent from God, as the poet admits in the poem's concluding ethical observation:

O wad some pow'r the giftie gie us

*To see oursels as others see us!*

It wad frae monie a blunder free us

An' foolish notion:

What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,

And e'en devotion! (43-48).

If the animus awakened by the insect sometimes serves to chasten our pride, then other times the apparition feels positively uncanny. Dickinson has written one of the most uncanny insect poems of the domestic variety:

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—

The Stillness in the Room

Was like the Stillness in the Air—

Between the Heaves of Storm— (1-4)

As those around the deathbed await the presence of “the King” and the speaker wills her keepsakes away (“What portion of me be/ Assignable—”), there “interposed a Fly—”

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—

Between the light—and me—

And then the Windows failed—and then

I could not see to see— (13-16)

The uncanny feeling arises only in special cases, however.<sup>4</sup> When we are not disgusted, afraid, or moved by crisis to see the extraordinary in the familiar, we are usually indifferent. Our lack of sympathy is reflected in the answer that Alice gives to the Gnat in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*.

“What sort of insects do you rejoice in, where *you* come from?” the Gnat inquired.

“I don't *rejoice* in insects at all,” Alice explained, “because I'm rather afraid of them—at least the large kinds. But I can tell you the names of some of them.” (173)

Alice's knowledge of the names here is interesting. Especially those who “rejoice in insects” seem to relish this business of naming. As the lepidopterist in the prologue to the Capeks' *The Insect Play* exclaims: “There they go, there they go! Fine specimens! *Apatura Iris*—light-blue butterflies and the Painted Lady” (109). Here the names range from flat-footed description (“light-blue butterflies”) to taxonomic identification (“*Apatura Iris*”). The personification of “Painted Lady” suggests the makeup of a courtesan, whereas the latinate Linnaean designation has an almost liturgical ring. It is as

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<sup>4</sup> The word Freud uses in his essay on “The ‘Uncanny’” (*unheimlich*, “unhomely”) ambiguously refers to its opposite (i.e., “what is familiar and agreeable” and “what is concealed and out of sight”). In his study of E.T.A. Hoffman's “The Sand-Man,” Freud relates the uncanny to the “double,” a figure with which a hero identifies, allowing for “substitution,” “dividing and interchanging of the self.” The double, Freud believes, originally served as “insurance against the destruction of the ego,” but appears in a later (cultural and psychic) stage as “the uncanny harbinger of death” (235). Able to “stand over the rest of the ego,” it is a kind of conscience, a “special agency” with the function of “observing and criticizing the self,” “exercising a censorship within the mind” (235). House-flies concern Freud in his essay on Jensen's *Gradiva*, whose hero regards them as “the incarnation of all that is absolutely evil and unnecessary” (15).

The Indian film director Satyajit Ray makes use of a fly in the opening scene of *The Music Room* (*Jalsaghar*), when the gaze of the protagonist, a fallen aristocrat, lands upon a fly buzzing about the roof of his dilapidated palatial estate. The impudent fly foreshadows the central conflict between the decaying aristocracy and the rising merchant class of ‘insignificant commoners,’ an ironic harbinger of the aristocrat's humiliation and death.

if by fastening upon the name or names the butterfly-lover might better fix the insect's identity. For the lepidopterist, as for the magician and medicine man, the name is a potent means of controlling the little winged devils. Curiously, even the most technical of these terms contains a name ("*Iris*") that itself suggests the Greek's mythical personification of the rainbow as a goddess, a messenger of the gods.<sup>5</sup>

In general, however, we note a mood of detachment even among entomologists, those whom we would expect to be most prone to entomophilia. Fixation may be managed by other means besides naming, of course, and most of these are lacking in the kind of care that Clare shows his creatures. We must first detach the creature from nature, as the speaker in Dickinson's poem describes:

Whereas I took the Butterfly  
Aforetime in my hat—  
He sits erect in "Cabinets"—  
The Clover bells forgot. (13-16)

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<sup>5</sup> If the lepidopterist Capek mocks would reduce a living soul to a name, then poets like Edmund Spenser animate a name with myth, a more-than-natural history. Both reductive and animating movements are observable in *Muiopotmos: or The Fate of the Butterfly*, a miniature epic which correlates naming with picture-making. The identity of the protagonist, a butterfly named Clarion, is given by means of a myth showing his relation to a nymph named *Psyche* (Greek for "soul" and "butterfly"), a character in *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius' 2<sup>nd</sup> century picaresque novel. A second myth relates how Clarion's nemesis, the spider Aragnoll, descends from *Arachne* (Greek for "spider," and also, the name of the envious weaver whom Minerva punishes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). The effect of the first myth is to make the butterfly seem novelistic, like a character possessed of a soul, a story, a love life. The effect of the second is to reduce the spider to a cartoon character, a caricature or essentialization of envy-weaving itself. He is rendered less human and more abstract, like Arachne at the moment of her defeat at Minerva's hand: "She stood astonished long, ne ought gainsaid,/ And with fast fixed eyes on her did stare,/ And by her silence, signe of one *dismaid*" (339-41). Arachne the human woman is "dismaid" or unmade, much as Malbecco in *The Faerie Queene* is unmade after seeing his wife copulate with a satyr nine times in one night: "Hatefull both to him selfe, and every wight;/ Where he through privy grieffe, and horroure vaine,/ Is woxen so deformed, that he has quight/ Forgot he was a man, and *Gelosy* is hight" (3.10.60.6-9). Like the envious Arachne/Aragnoll, jealous Malbecco is turned into the name itself, becoming the very picture of jealousy.

Before we can allow the wild things to sit erect in our cabinets, however, we must sanitize them, our scientific operations serving as a prophylactic against decay and disease.<sup>6</sup> Again, Capek:

Lepidopterist: What shall I do? Well, each insect must be identified, recorded and assigned a place in my collection. The butterfly must be carefully killed, and then carefully pinned, and properly dried, and care must be taken that the powder is not rubbed off. And it must be protected against dust and draught. A little cyanide of potassium.

Tramp: And what's it all for?

Lepidopterist: Love of nature... (110)

The method by which Capek's lepidopterist, through meticulous labor, turns the "Painted Lady" into an enduring monument is exactly opposite that of Pygmalion, the mythical sculptor, whose love turned a work of art into a living thing. If the butterfly, child, lover and poet would all play, then Capek's lepidopterist would analyze and systematize. The

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<sup>6</sup> The preservation of the captured, and captivating, elusive woman is a common topos in the sonnet (< Ital. *sonetto*, "little song"), the miniature verse cabinet fashioned by Renaissance poets to house their pretty loved ones. With its stanzaic or roomlike partitioning, logical and metrical structure, the sonnet proved perfect for framing or fixing the image of the beloved's soul in a sensuous form. Of course, the sonnet frequently reveals the poet himself as the one fixated, caught within a paralyzing emotional ambivalence. An example of such fixation amid the play of contraries is Petrarch's "Come talora al caldo tempo sole" (*Rime* xcli), which compares the fatal fascination of the lover for the beloved to that of a butterfly's (*farfalla*) for the light: "Look, how in summer the poor moth is fain/ To reach the light, and in his fondness flies,/ The simple creature, in some person's eyes,/ Where death he must receive and carry pain./ So haste I to that sun, which is my bane,/ Whence cometh to me such delight— those eyes/ Which make Love Reason's bridle to despise,/ And judgment to contend with will in vain./ And well I know that me they must eschew,/ And feel that hereby unto death I'm borne,/ For to withstand this trial I've no force;/ And yet so sweetly dazzleth Love my view,/ That not my doom, but others' hurt I mourn,/ And my prone heart accepts this deadly course" (Cayley 1-14).

process by which he displays his so-called “love of nature” is one of fixation, capture and detachment.<sup>7</sup> He, to quote Wordsworth again, would “murder to dissect” (28).<sup>8</sup>

We rarely approach anything like pity for the insect’s condition unless we, like the drunken Tramp in Capek’s play or Prufrock in T. S. Eliot’s poem, have been subjected to a similar treatment:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume? (14-15)

The mindset of primitive peoples seems particularly alien from our own, therefore, since they often regarded the insect with sympathy and empathy. Our difficulty understanding this felt relation is due to our loss of the close, even mystical, relationship to the natural

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<sup>7</sup> “Detachment” is a curious word to apply to the mental state of Capek’s butterfly collector, which a Freudian might analyze in terms of displacement and projection. Chided by the drunken Tramp for trying to “catch them when they’re all so ‘appy playing,” he replies: “Playing, you call it. I’m afraid you haven’t the scientific mind, my friend. It’s the overture to the natural system by which Nature keeps up the balance of the population—that’s what you call ‘playing.’ The male pursues the female; the female allures, avoids—selects—the eternal round of sex!” (110). The scientist’s banal jargon seems compensatory of an underlying prurient interest, his manic pursuit and anatomy of butterflies a sublimation of sexual desire.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Dissecting to love,’ by contrast, describes the action of the *blazon*, a device by means of which a poet anatomizes, to praise thoroughly, the beloved. The isolation of each body part, which may have a fetishistic effect, lends itself to allegorical interpretation, as in the case of the *Song of Songs*. The sixteenth century ushers in a flurry of *blazons* devoted to tiny creatures written by French poets, members of the Pleiade. In *Animal Poetry*, A. Lytton Sells describes these *petites inventions* as “dainty trifles, adorned with mythological reference and brightened on occasion by really happy verses” (61). An example is Remi Belleau’s “Le Papillon”: “Gentil Papillon tremblotant... Grivole de cent mille sortes,/ En cent mille habits que tu portes,/ Au petit mufle elephantin,/ Lors que de fleur en fleur sautelles,/ Couplant et recouplant tes oelles,/ Pour tirer des plus belle fleurs/ L’email et les bonnes odeurs” (qtd. in Sells 61).

world that native peoples enjoyed.<sup>9</sup> To them, the visible physical world was animated with invisible spiritual powers and life was revered in all its forms. According to Joanne Lauck, the Hopi tribe of southwestern United States and neighboring Pueblo tribes like the Zuni, Shoshone, and Tiwa “communicated routinely with the spirit essence of everything that existed in the physical world, calling them ‘tihu’ or ‘kachinas.’ By invoking these spiritual entities through paint, symbol, actions, costumes, and rituals, these people encouraged interaction between the two worlds (29). As spiritual guide or messenger, an intermediary between the Creator and human beings, an insect pointed to a sacred presence in the world. We normally view our encounters with insects as haphazard or accidental, but primitive peoples saw such meetings as pregnant with meaning and intention, opportunities for gaining insight or wisdom, a natural magic. As Dickinson writes:

The Murmur of a Bee  
A Witchcraft—yieldeth me—  
If any ask me why—  
‘Twere easier to die—  
Than tell— (1-5)

In the words of Black Elk: “One should pay attention to even the smallest crawling creatures, for these too may have a valuable lesson to teach us, and even the smallest ant

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<sup>9</sup> In *A Separate Reality*, Carlos Castaneda imagines the culture gap between a Western anthropologist and a Mexican Yaqui Indian *brujo*. As part of his effort to learn the shaman’s art of ‘seeing,’ Castaneda partakes of Don Juan’s ‘medicine,’ a potent psychotropic plant he calls “little smoke.” In his first attempt to ‘see,’ Castaneda is terrified by a one-hundred-foot-tall gnat, with a long drooling muzzle, “bulgy” eyes, and a body covered “with tufts of black hair” (117). Don Juan later explains to the bewildered academic that he has merely seen “the guardian, the keeper, the sentry of the other world” (119). Of his second encounter with the gnat guardian, Castaneda writes: “I had a strange thought; looking at the guardian’s body I felt that every single part of it was independently alive, as the eyes of men are alive. I realized then for the first time in my life that the eyes were the only part of a man that could show, to me, whether or not he was alive. The guardian, on the other hand, had a million ‘eyes’” (129).

may wish to communicate with a person.” And, as Dickinson signs off at the end of “The Gentian weaves her fringes”:

In the name of the Bee—  
And of the Butterfly—  
And of the Breeze—Amen! (17-19)

For Black Elk as for Emily Dickinson, apparently, there is no correlation between large size and the significance of messages carried by divine agents.<sup>10</sup>

Of the various forms of human-insect identification known to primitive man, probably the most intense is totemic. We divide human society geo-politically into countries or nations, ethnocentrically into races, or into religions according to theological beliefs. Tribal cultures divided their society totemically. In the totemic system, an animal, plant or other natural object is regarded as a kindred tutelary spirit if not an actual family relation. As totems, the ancestral relation or guardian of a tribe or clan, insects were greatly valued and respected, even adored. The entire society observed prohibitions or taboos that kept totemic creatures from the gratuitous violence of individuals. Although today city-dwellers and suburban homeowners exorcise insect pests with toxic chemicals or zap them with glowing pillars, Native Americans cared for them and carved their emblems on totem poles. In contrast to our animus towards the insect and exclusive preference for larger animals, they granted a relatively high status to insect entities:

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<sup>10</sup> Nor has loud volume any bearing on the efficacy of prayer, despite the booming and foot stamping of some preachers. Kabir, a fifteenth century Hindu-Sufi mystic, writes: “I don’t know what sort of a God we have been talking about. The caller calls in a loud voice to the Holy One at dusk. Why? Surely the Holy One is not deaf. He hears the delicate anklets that ring on the feet of an insect as it walks” (2).

Even the Puritan Jonathan Edwards, whose sermon “Sinners in the hands of an Angry God” depicts the sinner as a spider dangling over hell-fire, is said to have read quietly and in a steady monotone, letting the congregation’s experience of his ideas do the work of conversion.

Insects had considerable influence and occupied as important a position as other animals in the tribe's pantheon of spirits. Each insect had some power or attribute associated with it that made it an essential kachina. Throughout the territory kachinas like *Kokopelli* or Assassin Fly, Butterfly Girl and man (*Poli Mana*, and *Poli Taka*), Hornet (*Tatangaya*), Cricket (*Susopa*) and Scorpion (*Puchkofmok' Taka*) were represented more on altars and in ceremonies than the animal kachinas that we might presume to have more influence. (Lauck 29-30)

More than messengers and totem guides, however, insects played the role of creators in many tribal mythologies. Lauck catalogues several of these creation myths:

In a Sumatran creation myth, Butterfly laid three eggs from which the first three people were born, and Butterfly is a form of the Creator as well as a totem for the Pima tribes of southwestern United States.... [For] the South African Bushmen, Mantis (praying mantis) was the primary creator and representative of God, the "voice of the infinite in the small." Spiders were also cast in the role of Creator. In the mythology of the tribes inhabiting Nauru Island in the South Pacific, for instance, the world was created by Areop-Enap, or Ancient Spider. Spider Woman was also an early creatrix for the Hopi, and in other Native American traditions Spider's Man's web connected Heaven with Earth. In Navajo myths Spider Woman joined Spider Man to instruct the newly created Earth people in the art of weaving, while Cornbeetle Girl gave these people their voices. (32-33)

In our culture, personifications such as these can hardly be found outside of certain comic books, games, movies, and songs. Most are, moreover, designed to amuse children:

Ladybug, Ladybug,  
Fly away home!  
Your house is on fire  
And your children all gone.

A vestige of animistic thinking may be observed in the names and emblems we give to some of our sports teams, but this is a distant echo of the felt relations traceable in creation myths of totemic cultures. We think insects lack soul. For the scientific-minded Westerner, as for those who believe that life began with the imposition of a male Logos upon matter, these tribal myths seem like old wives' tales, superstitions, childish notions bred of wild and uncivilized peoples.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, strikingly similar habits of mind are found in the historical record of ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Hebraic civilizations. Around 3100 B.C. in ancient Egypt, for instance, the hornet was adopted as the emblem of King Menes of the first dynasty, probably to strike fear into the hearts of his minions. The hieroglyph of a fly stood for audacity and courage and was used to decorate military bravery. The sacred scarab, ubiquitous on amulets and seals, was associated both with the sun god Re and the scarab-headed god Kheper. Best known for its curious habit of rolling around a growing ball of dung, the scarab was a potent symbol of regeneration and rebirth. The metamorphosis of the dung beetle from a mummy-like pupa was particularly suggestive to the Egyptians,

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<sup>11</sup> In *Insects and Greek Poetry*, Lafcadio Hearn conjectures that the loss of aesthetic appreciation for insects in the Western world was due not due to a want of feeling, but an "inability to consider nature in the largest and best way, because of the restraints that the Christian religion long placed upon Western thought. Christianity gave souls only to men—not to animals or to insects" (14-15).

who believed in a life and a judgment after death. According to Isaac Harpaz, the Egyptians saw in the life cycle of the beetle, which lays its eggs in the ball of dung, “a microcosmos of the cyclical processes of nature”:

The magical power attached to the scarab is demonstrated by the funerary practice of replacing the heart of the dead person with a scarab prior to mummification. This was taken as an apotropaic measure intended to secure favorable results in the Osirian judgement (also known as the ‘weighing of the heart’) which every noble Egyptian was believed to face after death (23).<sup>12</sup>

In ancient Greece, meanwhile, one of the oldest and most beautiful of artifacts uncovered is the famous gold Mallia pendant (2000-1700 B.C.), which displays two bees or wasps encircling a small golden globe. Dangling from their wings are sockets for precious stones or jewels. Bees, butterflies, dragonflies and other insects have been found on many artifacts that belonged to the civilization of Minoan Crete. *Psyche*, the Greek name for “soul,” was also the name given to the winged being that we call “butterfly.”

Although there are few literary references, there are numerous instances in the visual and

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<sup>12</sup> Parodying ancient Egypt’s reverence for the scarab beetle, the Capek brothers associate dung with the selfish accumulation of wealth in capitalistic society. As the middle class beetle couple contemplates their ball of dirt: “Mr. Beetle: It’s all right, isn’t it?/ Mrs. Beetle: I’m all of a tremble./ Mr. B.: Our capital—that’s what it is—our lovely capital—careful—careful./ Mrs. B.: Can’t be too careful with our capital—our little pile./ Mr. B.: How we’ve saved and scraped and toiled and moiled to come by it./ Mrs. B.: Night and morning, toiled and moiled and saved and scraped./ Mr. B.: And we’ve seen it grow and grow, haven’t we, bit by bit—our little ball of blessedness./ Mrs. B.: Our very own it is./ Mr. B.: Our very own./ Mrs. B.: Our life’s work./ Mr. B.: Smell it, old woman—pinch it—feel the weight of it. Ours—ours./ Mrs. B.: A godsend” (130-31).

In the symbolism set forth by psychoanalytic theory, money equals feces. But if the orderliness, stubbornness, and parsimony of Capek’s dung beetles fit Freud’s definition of the “anal character,” then they also tally with the sociological type of the capitalist that Max Weber describes. For a discussion of how the doctrine of justification by faith—the fundamental axiom of the Protestant Reformation—came to Luther during an epiphany he had while pondering God’s justice on the privy, see Norman O. Brown’s studies of anality in *Life Against Death*, especially “The Excremental Vision” (179-201), “The Protestant Era” (202-33), and “Filthy Lucre” (234-304).

plastic arts that exploit the linguistic ambivalence.<sup>13</sup> As Samuel Coleridge says in “Psyche”:

The Butterfly the ancient Grecians made  
The soul’s fair emblem, and its only name—  
But of the soul, escaped the slavish trade  
Of earthly life!—For in this mortal frame  
Our’s is the reptile’s lot, much toil, much blame,  
Manifold motions making little speed,  
And to deform and kill the things whereon we feed. (1-7)<sup>14</sup>

As with the Egyptian scarab, the butterfly’s emergence from a pupa (Greek *nekydallos*, ‘little corpse’) no doubt contributed to the force of this metaphor of butterfly/soul. The

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<sup>13</sup> D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson speculates about the silence in *The Legacy of Greece*: “I think the Greeks found something ominous or uncanny, something not to be lightly spoken of, in that all but disembodied spirit which we call butterfly, and they called by the name of *psyche*, the Soul” (153). Davies and Kathirithamby agree, explaining the ancient Greek reticence “in the light of the general principle of a taboo on names of those animals conceived as having human intelligence” (101).

The butterfly has appeared in Christian literature as a figure for the soul’s resurrection through the agency of the Logos or Christ. In his *Purgatorio* Dante Alighieri uses the butterfly to describe the angelical goal of beatitude following the purgation, writes Mandelbaum (330), of the soul’s vermiculate qualities: “O Christians, arrogant, exhausted, wretched,/ whose intellects are sick and cannot see,/ who place your confidence in backward steps,/ do you not know that we are worms and born/ to form the angelic butterfly that soars,/ without defenses, to confront His judgment?/ Why does your mind presume to flight when you are still like the imperfect grub, the worm before it has attained its final form?” (10.121-29).

<sup>14</sup> Coleridge’s poem evokes the romantic sentiment of Wordsworth’s poem “The World is Too Much With Us,” as well as the sensibility of Owen Warland, the alienated artist of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story, “The Artist of the Beautiful.” A watchmaker with an “irregular genius,” a “microscopic” mind and a “delicate ingenuity,” Warland looks “with singular distaste at the stiff and regular processes of ordinary machinery” and seeks to imitate the “beautiful movements of nature” in an exquisitely wrought, mechanical butterfly, imbued with a “finer, more ethereal power” and “completely refined of all utilitarian coarseness.” After five years devoted to this effort to “spiritualize machinery,” Warland’s butterfly “fluttered forth, and, alighting on [Annie’s] finger’s tip, sat waving the ample magnificence of its purple and gold-speckled wings, as if in prelude to a flight.” The narrator remarks, “It is impossible to express by words the glory, the splendor, the delicate gorgeousness which were softened into the beauty of this object. Nature’s ideal butterfly was here realized in all its perfections; not in the pattern of such faded insects as flit among earthly flowers, but of those which hover across the meads of paradise for child-angels and the spirits of departed infants to disport themselves with. The rich down was visible upon its wings; the luster of its eyes seemed instinct with spirit”(1153). Falling into the grasp of the cynical Hovendon’s grandchild, however, Warland’s talisman of the soul’s beauty is swiftly turned into “a small heap of glittering fragments” (1156).

butterfly or moth is often associated with liberation from the tomb of the body and ideas of resurrection.<sup>15</sup> The butterfly figure quite literally fascinated the ancients, who often employed it, in the form of a phallic-shaped amulet, as either a fertility or an apotropaic device.<sup>16</sup> The phallic association is reinforced by depictions linking the butterfly with the god Hermes and ejaculate. Davies and Jathirithamby find much evidence of the pairing of the butterfly and phallus in ancient Greece:

Hermes, a deity variously associated with the soul... has a butterfly at his shoulder on an Etruscan gem... Hermes is also associated with the phallus and therefore gives his name to the herm (a squared pillar with his head at top and genital organs, including erect phallus, in middle)... a Roman gem shows one such from whose penis emerges a curving jet at the crest of which flutters a butterfly... (104-05)

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<sup>15</sup> Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* begins with a man transformed into a bug and ends with a girl emerging from her cocoon-like existence, like a butterfly: "While they were thus conversing, it struck both Mr. And Mrs. Samsa, almost at the same moment, as they became aware of their daughter's increasing vivacity, that in spite of all the sorrow of recent times, which had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure. They grew quieter and half unconsciously exchanged glances of complete agreement, having come to the conclusion that it would soon be time to find a good husband for her. And it was like a confirmation of their new dreams and excellent intentions that at the end of their journey their daughter sprang to her feet first and stretched her young body" (Nabokov 282). Following the sacrifice of Gregor, the family scapegoat, is Greta's sexual birth, as if the tale were the performance of a fertility ritual.

The butterfly-as-soul image appears in "The Moths," Helena Maria Viramontes' tale of a fourteen-year-old girl alienated from everyone save her grandmother Abuelita. At the end of the tale, as the girl lovingly bathes the body of her grandmother, recently deceased, she envisions her soul's release: "Then the moths came. Small, gray ones that came from her soul and out through her mouth fluttering to light, circling the single dull light bulb of the bathroom. Dying is lonely and I wanted to go to where the moths were, stay with her and plant chayotes whose vines would crawl up her fingers and into the clouds; I wanted to rest my head on her chest with her stroking my hair, telling me about the moths that lay within the soul and slowly eat the soul up; I wanted to return to the waters of the womb with her so that we would never be alone again" (1352).

<sup>16</sup> F.M. Cornford, in *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, writes: "The magical potency of the phallus is well illustrated by the supposed connection of the words [Latin] *fascinus* and [Greek] *baskanos*, regarded by Kretschmer (*Einleitung*, 248) as borrowed from Illyrian or Thracian speech... Phallic objects are, of course, used to avert the evil eye" (49).

Strengthening this juxtaposition of semen and butterfly is the fact that “some modern European names for this insect similarly connect it with liquid *vel sim* that possesses nutritive power (English butter-fly, German *Molkendieb* (whey-thief)” (106). Scholarly opinion differs, however, as to the gender being symbolized by the butterfly thus sexualized.<sup>17</sup> Fossing thinks “the butterfly is attracted by the phallus ‘as a female being,’” but Cook “suggests a pun on phallus and *phalle*. ‘the flying *psyche*” (107).<sup>18</sup>

More chaste representations of the insect can also be found in the Bible and in the writings of biblical commentators. Usually, in the wisdom tradition, they represent ethical models for human beings to follow. Around 1000 B.C. Solomon, regarded as the wisest man of his time, is recorded as saying:

Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise:  
Which, having no guide, overseer, or ruler,  
Provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest.

(*Proverbs* 6:6-8)

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<sup>17</sup> The metamorphosed caterpillar in Dickinson’s “A fuzzy fellow, without feet” suggests a transvestite or transsexual: “Then, finer than a Lady,/ Emerges in the spring!/ A Feather on each shoulder!/ You’d scarce recognize him!” (13-16). The poem ends, self-referentially, in a riddle of gender: “By Men, yclept Caterpillar!/ By me! But who am I,/ To tell the pretty secret/ Of the Butterfly!” (17-20).

<sup>18</sup> “The Butterflies,” the first act of the Capek Brothers’ *The Insect Play*, is dominated by the theme of sexual attraction. The winged poet Felix is a type of suffering courtly lover whose notions of women are too ideal and abstract to satisfy the all-too-human needs of Iris, his lustful and flighty beloved. Although Felix rhapsodizes (recalling Petrarch’s *farfalla*): “I shall have tasted of bliss,/ I shall have flown where the fire is./ Ah, could we die in a kiss,/ Beautiful exquisite Iris!” (119), he has little hope of competing with his rivals, a haunch-grabbing brute named Otto and a lady-killer named Victor. Victor’s mocking couplets please Iris more, for she senses in them an urgency more phallic and ambrosial: “The rhymes of our little friend Felix/ Are sweet as the honey a bee licks” (122). After Iris flits off with Victor, a melancholy Felix is consoled by another flirt named Clytie (pun on clitoris?), who tries in vain to educate him: “Felix, you don’t know women. Sit here beside me—no, closer. You’ve no idea what they’re like—their minds, their souls, their bodies. You’re so young” (123). Moments later, however, exasperated by Felix’ self-absorbed rhymes, she flies off with Otto in hot pursuit. If art truly is, as Plato alleged, “a dream for wakened minds,” then Felix is shocked awake by the rude realization that we are driven by an instinctive desire for beauty rather than for any lofty moral reasons. In the automatism of Capek’s butterfly insect world, the idealism of Plato is undermined by the determinism of Darwin.

As actors, then, insects are eulogized as models for human behavior.<sup>19</sup> As creatures, insects can be found in pious meditations that magnify Nature as ‘God’s Book,’ where they appear almost like fine print, the most wondrous signs of the Creator’s artistry. An example is St. Augustine’s rhapsody in *The City of God*:

How can I tell of the rest of creation, with all its beauty and utility, which the divine goodness has given to man to please his eye and serve his purposes, condemned though he is, and hurled into these labors and miseries? Shall I speak of the manifold and various loveliness of sky, and earth, and sea; of the plentiful supply and wonderful qualities of the light; of sun, moon, and stars; of the shade of trees; of the colors and perfume of flowers, of the multitude of birds, all differing in plumage and in song; of the variety of animals, of which the smallest in size are often the most wonderful— the works of ants and bees astonishing us more than the huge bodies of whales. (Dods 504)

More typically, however, the insect is the demonic agent of an avenging God. In the form of swarms they function somewhat like a *deus ex machina*, overcoming some impasse in human history. In *Exodus* 7-11, three of the plagues God sent to move the hard-hearted Pharaoh to free his chosen people were insects: lice, flies, and locusts. As John Milton writes in *Paradise Lost*: “Frogs, lice, and flies must all his palace fill/ With loathed intrusion, and fill all the land” (12.177-78). Similarly, in *Revelation*, which

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<sup>19</sup> Ants are “little... but exceeding wise”; though “a people not strong... yet they prepare their meat in the summer...” (30:24-25). Other insects eulogized in *Proverbs*: “The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands; The spider taketh hold with her hands, and is in kings’ palaces” (30:27-28).

This last quotation is the source for the title of Daniel Weiss’ novel *The Roaches Have No King*, a racy, witty, and decidedly irreverent satire about savvy roaches in a New York City apartment who band together to seek vengeance on their hard-hearted human captors. Named according to the titles or authors of books they were born in and nourished on, the roaches are led by a sympathetic narrator known as “Numbers.”

gives an account of humanity's final reckoning, fearsome insectal beings arrive to distribute God's woeful punishment to the lawbreakers:

And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power... And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men. And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions... And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails... (9:3-10)<sup>20</sup>

Whether plagues swept the enemy or oneself, they were interpreted as a scourge sent by God to punish the sinful. The only remedy for such a disaster was to repent and pray, make offerings and perform other rituals.

According to E.P. Evans, *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*, this sort of thinking was rather slower to vanish than one might think.

Throughout the Middle Ages, swarms of devouring insects were assumed to have been sent either "as agents of the Almighty or at the instigation of Satan (*instigante sathana, per maleficium diabolicum*)":

They were denounced and deprecated as snares of the devil and his satellites (*diaboli et ministrorum insidias*)... In either case, whether they were the emissaries of a wicked demon or of a wrathful Deity, the only proper and permissible way of relief was through the offices of the

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<sup>20</sup> Error, Spenser's monster in Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene*, is patterned on the half-female, half-scorpion creatures described in the passage from *Revelation* above. Her "thousand yong" spawn, which molest the knight of Holiness, Redcross, are figured in an epic simile whose images are drawn from pastoral: "As gentle Shepheard in sweete even-tide,/ When ruddy Phoebus gins to welke in west,/ High on an hill, his flocke to vewen wide,/ Markes which do byte their hasty supper best;/ A cloud of cumbrous gnattes do him molest,/ All striving to infixe their feeble stings,/ That from their noyance he no where can rest,/ But with his clownish hands their tender wings/ He brusheth oft, and oft doth mar their murmurings" (1.1.23.1-9).

Church, whose bishops and other clergy were empowered to perform the penances and propitiations necessary to produce this result... The usual method of metaphysical aid was to expel or exterminate the swarm by sacerdotal conjuring and cursing... It was customary to catch several specimens of the culprits and bring them before the seat of justice, and there solemnly put them to death. (3-5)

According to Evans, such legal prosecutions and formal excommunications were common in the seventeenth century and even continued on into the mid 1800s.<sup>21</sup>

Such scriptural passages, as well as the civil and ecclesiastical records, remind us that humans have greatly feared insects either when they are multiple or when they seem to be possessed of a supernatural energy. Although the elegant Latinate term “insect” shall serve our needs throughout most of the present essay, the word is too clinical in tone to do justice to the irrational feelings that the English “bug” alone can inspire. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the word “bug” back to Middle English *bugge* and Welsh *bwg*, words that mean “hobgoblin,” “sprite,” or “terrifying phantom,” a sense that only survives today in dialect. This sense is alive and well, however, in Thomas Nashe’s *The Terrors of the Night* (1594):

What do we talk of one devil? There is not a room in any man’s house but is pestered and close-packed with a camp-royal of devils. Chrisostom saith the air and earth are three parts inhabited with spirits. Hereunto the philosopher alluded when he said nature made no voidness in the whole universal; for no place (be it no bigger than a pockhole in a man’s face)

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<sup>21</sup> For a study of Old English and Old High German ‘swarm charms,’ see Marianne Elsackers’ “The Beekeeper’s Magic” and Martha Dana Rust’s “The Art of Beekeeping Meets the Arts of Grammar.”

but is close thronged with them. Infinite millions of them will hang swarming about a worm-eaten nose. Don Lucifer himself, their grand Capitano, asketh no better throne than a blear eye to set up his state in. Upon a hair they will sit like a nit, and overdredge a bald pate like a white scurf. The wrinkles in old witches' visages they eat out to entrench themselves in... The Druids that dwelt in the Isle of Man, which are famous for great conjurers, are reported to have been lousy with familiars... Tullius Hostilius, who took upon him to conjure up Jove by Numa Pompilius' books, had no sense to quake and tremble at the wagging and shaking of every leaf but that he thought all leaves are full of worms, and those worms are wicked spirits... A flea is but a little beast, yet if she were not possessed with a spirit, she could never leap and skip so as she doth... (212-13)

Etymologists are puzzled by the metamorphosis in the meaning of “bug,” such that a term which once signified an object of terror or numinous being should have become nothing more than a term for bugbears—“but as bugs to fearen babes withal” as Spenser says in *The Faerie Queene* (2.12.25)—and other petty household nuisances.<sup>22</sup> No doubt the reduction of folklore to ‘superstition’ in modern times played a role. In the Renaissance,

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<sup>22</sup> A similar use of the word appears in Hamlet’s description to Horatio of the contents of the letter that Claudius had entrusted to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “an exact command,/ Larded with many several sorts of reasons,/ Importing Denmark’s health, and England’s too,/ With, ho! Such bugs and goblins in my life,/ That on the supervise, no leisure bated,/ No, not to stay the grinding of the axe,/ My head should be struck off” (5.2.19-24). Hamlet uses the word ironically but so does Shakespeare, since throughout the play the hero is truly ‘bugged,’ or haunted, by the command that he has been given by his father’s ghost. The play draws us, if not literally inside the hero’s mind, then into a metaphysically uncertain atmosphere. In this respect *Hamlet* resembles Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, another domestic tragedy which focuses our attention on the consciousness of a hero unable to take action. In both we are compelled to watch “the struggle of the fly in marmalade” (45), to quote Ille in W. B. Yeats’ poem, “Ego Dominus Tuus” (1919).

however, to judge from Nashe's lively catalogue, such spirits simply multiplied as they grew more miniature. In the modern world, which is overrun by PCs and palm-pilots, the word "bug" is likely to conjure thoughts of a bothersome glitch in a computer system.<sup>23</sup>

Keeping both its numinous and trivial meanings in mind, then, "bug" is our choice to translate *sheretz*, the generic Hebrew word in the Bible that is usually translated as "creepers" or "teeming creatures." Insects creep like snakes, although they do so not upon their bellies but by means of an army of limbs.<sup>24</sup> The term *sheretz* hardly makes subtle distinctions between creeping species. Indeed, in scripture, which evaluates the universe from a sublimely monotheistic perspective, "bug" applies to more than insect-

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<sup>23</sup> In this form, the fear of the bug still packs a wallop. If we move the clock hands back to 1999, we may recall the apocalyptic hysteria attending the advent of the "Y2K" or "Millennium" bug. Fueled by the threat of the end of society as we know it, this fear cost consumers and institutions untold billions of dollars worldwide. The Y2K Bug phenomenon was like a greatly magnified and grownup version of the 'Chicken Little' tale we heard as children.

Credit for the original use of the term "bug" for a defect in computer hardware or software has usually been given to Grace Hopper, a scientist who detected an actual moth inside an early computer. As recounted in *Business Month* (Feb.1983): "One day in the 1940s, Harvard's famed Mark I—the precursor of today's computers—failed. When the Harvard scientists looked inside, they found a moth that had lodged in the Mark I's circuits. They removed the moth with a pair of tweezers, and from then on, whenever there was a problem with the Mark I, the scientists said they were looking for bugs. The term has stuck through the years" (qtd. in Shapiro 376).

Despite the tidiness of this etiological tale of a bug, Fred R. Shapiro calls it a "moth myth" and claims that Hopper's use of the term was only "a specialized application of a general engineering term dating from the 1800s" (377). The term already appears, for instance, in a letter that Thomas Edison wrote to Theodore Puskas on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1878: "It has been just so in all my inventions. The first step is an intuition—and comes with a burst, *then* difficulties arise. This thing gives out and then that—'Bugs'—as such little faults and difficulties are called—show themselves and months of anxious watching, study and labor are requisite before commercial success—or failure—is certainly reached" (qtd. in Shapiro 377).

<sup>24</sup> Insects are alien, uncanny, and frightening, much as snakes are, although we may well regard snakes as the opposite of insects. The snake is limbless and meandering in its movement, whereas the insect has too many limbs and seems almost to march forward. One might say that, whereas snakes have a length out of proportion to the rest of their bodies, insects have a multiplicity of parts out of proportion to their length.

Aristotle, in *On the Procession of Animals (De Incessu Animalium)*, explains that the reason why snakes are limbless is "first [because] nature makes nothing without purpose, but always regards what is the best possible for each individual, preserving the peculiar essence of each and its intended character, and secondly the principle we laid down above that no Sanguineous creature can move itself at more than four points. Granting this it is evident that Sanguineous animals like snakes, whose length is out of proportion to the rest of their dimensions, cannot possibly have limbs; for they cannot have more than four (or they would be bloodless), and if they had two or four they would be practically stationary; so slow and unprofitable would their movement necessarily be" (708a).

like creatures. Next to Yahweh, all beings are “bugs” in a certain metaphysical sense. “Bug” implies a descent in the cosmic scale from the Holy to the lowly, the Eternally Pure to the corruptible mortal, the One to multiplicity. Unlike the animistic worldview, monolatry, or, the One God of the Hebrew faith tolerated no other and tended to turn rival deities into demons. For instance, Ba’al Zebub (Hebrew for “lord of the flies”) was originally a god worshipped by the Philistines in the city of Ekron, consulted to divine the progress of a disease (see *II Kings* 1:1-18). In John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, however, “Beelzebub” is the name assigned to the chief devil after Satan. From this perspective, one could say that scripture translates our instinctive animus towards the “bug” into a set of moral and mystical ideas.<sup>25</sup>

The paradigmatic case of the holy-unholy bug in scripture is found in the book of *Job*, which dramatizes this ambivalent attitude through the many cries of its suffering protagonist:

My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust; my skin is broken, and  
become loathsome... (7:5)

[A hypocrite’s] hope shall be cut off and his trust shall be a spider’s  
web... (8:14)

And he, as a rotten thing, consumeth, as a garment that is motheaten...  
(13:28)

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<sup>25</sup> The fly-as-soul image appears in Stephen Vincent Benet’s folktale, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, when one flutters out of the Devil’s black pocketbook: “It was something that looked like a moth, but it wasn’t a moth. And as Jabez Stone stared at it, it seemed to speak to him in a small sort of piping voice, terrible small and thin, but terrible human. ‘Neighbor Stone!’ it squeaked. “Neighbor Stone! Help me! For heaven’s sake, help me!’ But before Jabez Stone could stir hand or foot, the stranger whipped out a big bandana handkerchief, caught the creature in it, just like a butterfly, and started tying up the ends of the bandana.” After the Devil apologizes for the interruption, Stone exclaims that he recognized Miser Stevens’ voice. The Devil replies: “Yes, I really should have transferred him to the collecting box... but there were some rather unusual specimens there and I didn’t want them crowded. Well, well, these little contretemps will occur” (24-25).

I have said to corruption, Thou art my father; to the worm, Thou art my  
mother, and my sister... (17:14)

In the case of Job, we are quite far removed from animistic notions of the insect as friendly and wise spirit guide, potent protector and creator. The insect is parasite and its host a miserable wretch. Geoffrey Chaucer's monk describes the condition:

The wreche of God hym smoot so cruelly,  
That thurgh his body wikked wormes crepte,  
And ther-with-al he stank so horribly  
That noon of al his meynee that hym kepte,  
Wheither so he a-wood or ellis slepte,  
Ne myghte nocht for stynk of hym endure. (2615-20)<sup>26</sup>

In *Job*, we look *down upon* the bug-infested protagonist as a figure of fear and trembling. A dubious 'hero,' he is subject to the whims of God and Devil, a puppet of the deity. Job is a deeply ironic figure in that he is a righteous man. Unlike Adam, he hardly seems to deserve the catastrophe that befalls him. One day Job simply wakes up and finds that his life has been transformed into a living nightmare. His error seems to be simply that he *is* (Frye *Anatomy* 41-42). In this respect, he strikes us as a prototype of Franz Kafka's pathetic hero:

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<sup>26</sup> The monk in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* tells a humorless and fatalistic tale, of a type common to medieval literature, about those who rise and fall on the Wheel of Fortune. In the "Prologue to the Nun's Priest's Tale," the party's host, Harry Bailey, a cheery man who much prefers the whimsical "Nun's Priest's Tale" that follows, derides the monk's talking as "nat worth a boterflye" (2790). Here Chaucer raises a question as to whether all such so-called 'tragic' tales, restricted by the machinery that leads, automatically, to 'bad ends,' are not in fact trivial. Judith Anderson argues, in "*Nat worth a boterflye': Muiopotmos and The Nun's Priest's Tale*", that Bailey's quip was on Spenser's mind during the composition of his *Muiopotmos: or The Fate of the Butterflie*.

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from a troubled dream he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into corrugated segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, flimmered helplessly before his eyes.

(Nabokov 256)

Although the effect of Kafka's tale depends on physical terror—the distortion of scale, the armor-plated exoskeleton and division into corrugated segments, the numerous legs disproportionate to the rest of his body—this terror is in turn so much a nightmare that we cannot help feeling that the plight of Gregor Samsa is metaphysical as well.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Samsa's pained and lonely, existential condition parallels that of modern man. Of the etymology of his name, Stanley Corngold writes: "Doubtless the name Samsa is a cryptogram for Kafka; but beyond this it is probably also a phonetic contraction of the Czech words *sam* ('alone') and *jsem* ('I am') = 'I am alone,' a cry of pain..." (60).

## Chapter 2 Simile: The Insect Image

“Now to call a thing ‘greater’ or ‘more’ or ‘less,’ always implies a comparison of it with one that is ‘smaller’ or ‘less,’ while ‘great’ and ‘small,’ ‘much’ and ‘little,’ are terms used in comparison with normal magnitude. The ‘great’ is that which surpasses the normal, the ‘small’ is that which is surpassed by the normal; and so with ‘many’ and ‘few.’”

Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (1363b)

### *An Insect is Small*

Our poetics might well begin by considering the most obvious thing, physically, about the insect: its extreme smallness of size. As Edmund Burke writes in his treatise on the sublime and the beautiful: “The most obvious point that presents itself to us in examining any object, is its extent or quantity” (113). We may all agree that the insect is small, but just how small is small? Bigger than a fairy? Smaller than a rhinoceros?

According to V.B. Wigglesworth, insects range in length from:

1/5 mm (less than 1/100 inch) in the little parasitic wasp (*Alaptus magnanimous*) one of the ‘fairy flies’ of the family Myrmaridae, which develop in the eggs of other small insects, to 160 mm (6 inches) in the rhinoceros beetle (*Dynastes hercules*). (23)

Scientists like to be as precise in their measurements as they are meticulous about naming, but we usually consider size relative to our own bodies. We might put the matter this way: Most insects fit neatly in the center of one’s palm. Even the biggest is only half as big as a man’s foot.

When we reflect for a moment, we can readily see how practically all of the problems of the insect’s representation in serious art derive from this single basic fact of its tiny size. If the first object of an artist is to satisfy the feelings of taste or give pleasure to the emotions, then being miniature puts the insect at a distinct disadvantage in

an aesthetic sense. A creature this minute would seem unable to gratify any save the most delicate receptivity. We long, as spectators of the sublime, for the massive animal that swims into one's ken, but an insect presents just a tiny blip on a screen, barely visible out of the corner of the eye.<sup>28</sup> The leviathan promises to plunge profound depths and giant redwoods oversee the rise and fall of civilizations. Even as we feel dwarfed in the presence of their greatness, ineffable sensations of power and freedom well up within.

Burke writes of this aesthetic effect:

Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime... Extension is either in length, height or depth. Of these the length strikes least; an hundred yards of even ground will never work such an effect as a tower an hundred yards high, or a rock or mountain of that altitude. I am apt to imagine likewise, that height is less grand than depth... (72)

By contrast, the attempt to confine our minds to a body of naught, as to imagine ourselves granted the life of an instant, we naturally find restrictive.<sup>29</sup> Such limits to sensual perception affect our hearts and minds. A dog, a horse, or even a dolphin may engage our sympathies, for instance, especially whenever their actions show evidence of thought or feeling. We hear a primitive kind of speech in a dog's bark or a horse's whinny.

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<sup>28</sup> Technology changes our perception, of course, as is abundantly revealed in *MicroCosmos*, a documentary film of natural history. Thanks to state-of-the-art technology, viewers of the movie can follow every pirouette in a butterfly ballet, hear the clash of lances as Goliath beetles tilt, and perch on the back of a honey bee to accompany it on a breathtaking spree. In real life, of course, our experience of insects is far less entertaining and leisurely. When fleeing the light in our kitchens, cockroaches scramble as fast (relative to their size) as humans speeding 90 mph down the freeway. Nor can one imagine reading the frenetic sign language of ants or tracing the assaults of a marauding housefly without the aid of slow-motion photography.

<sup>29</sup> Many poets, of course, find in tiny bodies particles of dream. For Gaston Bachelard, "values become condensed and enriched in miniature"; representations of small spaces express "an experience of topophilia" and the discovery of "interior beauty" (150). Like dream, that little world of our making in which "Representation is dominated by Imagination," the miniature helps us "to escape through a crack in the wall" and is a source of freedom (151).

Today there are even some who relish the songs of the humpback whale. The insect, however, has neither face nor voice. Some make sounds, as anyone can attest who has heard the song crickets chirp of a summer night, or the choral racket cicadas make upon awakening, like so many Sleeping Beauties, from a seventeen-year sleep. Few besides poets, however, would be inclined to call their noise a voice.<sup>30</sup>

Confronting nuances too minute for our conceiving, the insect appears to act in a random or chance manner. Even someone as fascinated by insects as Jean Henri Fabre, the famous nineteenth century French naturalist, tends to underscore the ignorant behavior of the tiny creature, however wedded to the intelligence observable in nature.

The Banded Epeira spider:

spreads her toils across some brooklet, self-satisfied to finish her spiral after passing and repassing from spoke to spoke. But the vanity of the spinstress has naught to say to the matter: the strong silk zigzag is added to impart firmness to the web... Seated motionless in the center of her web... she waits for what luck will bring her (96)

While describing the arbitrary and automatic instinct of the spider female as she wraps her eggs in swaddling, Fabre gives way to mockery:

...sometimes she loses her head in her difficult trade, when some trouble disturbs the peace of her nocturnal labors. Disturbed at the moment of discharging her eggs, a mother may miss the mouth of the little bag and

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<sup>30</sup> The fondness of the ancient Greeks for the cicada (*tetti*) and cricket (*akri*) amounted to a virtual cult (Douglas 189), causing scholars to wonder why they found the sound of the cicada “so attractive (in strong contrast to the reactions of modern travellers from northerly climates). Has perception or taste changed so radically?” (Davies and Kathirithamby x). Lafcadio Hearn believes the answer lies in the refined sensibility and soulful depth of the ancient Greeks, qualities lacking in the Romans: “A people who enjoyed seeing men killing each other for sport could not have written poems about insects.” Whereas, the Greeks “expressed a joyousness fresh as that of a child— combined with a power of deep thinking, in which it had no rival” (11).

drop them on the floor. Yet she continues to weave the bag around nothing, as accurate in shape, as finished in structure. Poor fool, in a senseless task! You speak to me, in your own fashion, of a strange psychology which is able to reconcile the wonders of a master craftsmanship with aberrations due to unfathomable stupidity. (97)

In the series of spider acts limned by Fabre we may be surprised by the interweaving of empirical with anthropomorphic observations. Like the moral that appears below the engraving in an eighteenth century emblem book, an emotional apostrophe underscores his spider portrait. The tiny writhing creature presents the viewer with a philosophical or psychological riddle. On the one hand, the spider appears as *il miglior fabbro*, a figure representative of nature's intelligence or design. On the other hand, she is a fool par excellence that seems to lack any intelligence of her own. She is, paradoxically, both praiseworthy and ridiculous. Fabre's spider emblem is akin to a mock encomium, or praise of folly.<sup>31</sup>

However much we humans flatter ourselves by thinking ourselves rational and deliberate, it does appear true that a certain proportionate size is almost the *sine qua non* of our caring. For instance, the very suggestion that killing insects might be immoral would probably be regarded by the great majority as silly. Even Lewis Carroll, a keenly

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<sup>31</sup> Lucian's "The Fly" (*Muias encomium*), a mock encomium penned in Greek during the second century, served as a model for Desiderius Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly* (1511), one of the most controversial and seminal texts of Renaissance humanism. Clarence Miller writes: "Erasmus knew that the *Folly* was a glorious *jeu d'esprit* and that his opponents were racking a butterfly on a wheel. But his continuous revisions show that he also considered it a serious and important book: not merely foolish, not merely wise, but foolishly wise (*morosophos*)." Of these revisions, Miller writes: "With prickling particularity, they illustrate the quibbling questions debated by theologians, the stupid fascination of the monks with ceremonies and superstitious practices, the outrageously irrelevant introductions to the friars' sermons, and the scholastic theologians' citation of Scriptural tags taken out of context and wrenched to serve some dialectical subtlety or paradox" (xiii).

sensitive and gentle man who, as a child, “numbered certain snails and toads among his intimate friends” (Cohen 5), took the disposability of an insect life as a given, a self-evident truth.<sup>32</sup> Exceptions to this general prejudice, such as the prohibition against killing the ‘divine’ praying mantis, a notorious insecticide, merely prove the rule. Judging from our instinct to pluck an insect’s wings or flatten it underfoot, smallness can reduce to zero the human capacity to empathize, to see in a miniscule creature, a soul, an harmonious and purposive unity.

As soon as we begin to ponder the *meaning* of size, or its effects upon human *emotion* and *experience*, however, we are no longer simply talking about size or measurement, but the nature of *scale*. Scale is at the heart of our difficulty in identifying with, or caring seriously about, the actions of a protagonist as small as an insect. Scale seems to be part of the way humans are wired, an irrevocable part of our psychological circuitry. That is, we are only aware of, or moved to respond to, actions and objects that exist on the same plane and move through the same space as ours. In this respect we are not so different from the spider that naturalist Loren Eiseley encounters on a walk through the forest. The spider’s indifference to a pencil prod provokes the following pointed reflection: “Spider thoughts in a spider universe— sensitive to raindrop and moth flutter, nothing beyond, nothing allowed for the unexpected, the inserted pencil

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<sup>32</sup> In his essay “Some Popular Fallacies About Vivisection,” Carroll argues against those who would derive their right to hurt animals from their self-evident right to kill them: “The only question worth consideration is whether the killing of an animal is a real infringement of right. Once grant this, and a *reductio ad absurdum* is imminent, unless we are illogical enough to assign rights to animals in proportion to their size. Never may we destroy, for our convenience, some of a litter of puppies—or open a score of oysters when nineteen would have sufficed—or light a candle in a summer evening for mere pleasure, lest some hapless moth should rush to an untimely end! Nay, we must not even take a walk, with the certainty of crushing of many an insect in our path, unless for really important business! Surely all this is childish. In the absolute hopelessness of drawing a line anywhere, I conclude (and I believe that many, on considering the point, will agree with me) that man has an *absolute* right to inflict death on animals, without assigning any reason, provided that it be a painless death, but that any infliction of pain needs its special justification” (1190-91).

from the outside world” (23). Although humans pride themselves on being the masters of their domain, monarchs of their worldwide webs, they tend to be, like Eiseley’s spider, very limited in their awareness of objects or forces outside their immediate sensual field.<sup>33</sup>

A graphic portrayal of the concept of scale is given by Philip and Phylis Morrison’s *Powers of Ten*, which conveys the “relative size of things in the universe and the effect of adding another zero” by means of a sequence of pictorial frames. By simply turning the page, the reader is led on a journey from macro- to microcosmic scales, from the realm of empty space where distant galaxies glow “like clotted dust” to the world of particle physics, of “fast-moving quarks in intense interaction” (19). The authors append descriptive comments to each frame, of which the most familiar to the reader appear below the one measuring 1 meter:

This is the scale of human companionship, conversation, touch. A man is asleep on a warm October day. Around him are necessities and pleasures for mind and body. Between this image and the next frame inward, the size of the image would for once match the size of what it represents. ‘Of all things man is the measure,’ wrote Protagoras the Sophist. (71)

In the previous (or *outer*) frame, a blue whale at 30 meters practically dwells in a separate world from that of the human reader. Partly because it is so big, the whale feels deep, beyond scale for us humans. It evokes feelings, perhaps, analogous to those felt by

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<sup>33</sup> Eiseley’s account of spider mind recalls another by Fabre, remarkable for its anthropomorphization: “Insert a thin straw in and move it about; uneasy as to what is happening above, the recluse hastens to climb up and stops, in a threatening attitude, at some distance from the orifice. You see her eight eyes gleaming like diamonds in the dark; you see her powerful poison-fangs yawning, ready to bite. He who is unaccustomed to the sight of the horror, rising from under the ground, cannot suppress a shiver. B -r-r-r-r! Let us leave the beast alone” (105).

readers of Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*. Three frames beyond (or *into*) the human, we discover a parasitic mite, "tiny on the neck of its termite host" (76), assuming its rightful position at .1 millimeter. The mite is beyond scale for us also, although in the opposite direction.

The Morrisons' work helps us picture the universe as an interlocking grid of frames within frames, a total cosmic organization. The series of snapshots comprises a quasi-narrative pictorial quest to penetrate all the worlds within the world that humans inhabit and contain. Progress within the narrative is a matter of getting closer up, reveling in a plenitude of detail. The multiplication of perspectives reflects the relativistic mindset we associate with the development of modern science although, as we shall see, the concept is ancient. In cutting the universe into sections, segments, compartments or rooms, the normative or transcendental human sphere is flattened and set within a measurable and graduated cosmic scale. The resulting slide show might be thought to inoculate the reader against the more virulent strains of anthropocentrism. What is a 'hero' when the greatest of humans are as mites to the entities of the frames preceding them?

Whereas most of us probably just take our prejudice against minute creatures for granted, zoologists wonder about the meaning of size within the physical universe that we inhabit. They ponder the pros and cons of smallness. They consider the dinosaurs and ask: 'Why did they become extinct, were they too huge for their own sake? How did the insects outlast them? How do insects fit in with their environments? Why are they not larger?' Studying the physical evidence, they come up with speculative explanations like the following, offered by Wigglesworth:

The answer is that it is insects of the present size which have proved most successful in the present world. The giant dragonflies, with a wing span of more than 2 feet, died out in the Coal Measure period... few insects today... approach the rhinoceros beetle in size... Small insects require less food to reach maturity, just as it was the small-sized men who survived the conditions of semi-starvation in some camps for prisoners of war. Small insects can make use of small retreats to escape their enemies. Indeed their small size opens to them a whole world that is not accessible to larger animals. To mine between the two walls of a living leaf, to complete their growth within a single small seed, or to develop within the egg of another insect, is possible only for a very small animal. (24)

Like the zoologist, the poet and the philosopher also wonder about the meaning of size. They, too, think about how living entities are made, how they get along with each other or not, whether they are fit to survive. Poets resemble scientists when they ask questions about the relation between size and shape and sense, and offer us answers in the form of the hypothetical poems they create. As Jonathan Swift writes in "On Poetry: a Rapsody":

So, Nat'ralists observe, a Flea  
Hath smaller Fleas that on him prey,  
And these have smaller Fleas to bite 'em,  
And so proceed *ad infinitum* (337-40)

Swift's verse concludes: "Thus ev'ry Poet in his Kind/ Is bit by him that comes behind" (341-42). If Wigglesworth has in mind Charles Darwin's notion of the 'survival of the fittest,' then Swift's suggestion of the poet's parasitical relation to his precursor antedates

Darwin as well as Freud, from whom Harold Bloom derived his literary theory of the ‘anxiety of influence.’<sup>34</sup>

Since this is evidently the case with poets, literary critics may also be allowed to ask such questions as: Insects are small and evoke an emotional response, so then what about small poems and our aesthetic responses to them? What distinguishes the natural scientist — like the critic of poetry— is how he studies the relation of part to part, and the

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<sup>34</sup> For an exemplary case of such literary parasitism consider again Lucian’s “The Fly.” Lucian’s *jeu d’esprit* was mimicked during the English Restoration in “A Comical Panegyrick on that familiar Animal by the Vulgar call’d a Louse.” The author(s) is a “Mr. Willis of St. Mary-Hall, Oxon, with some additions by Mr. Tho. Brown.” From the title one might expect an homage to Lucian’s fly pure and simple, but the poem reveals itself to be, both in tone and diction, a parody of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. That epic had depended in part on the sublime effect of contemplating vast stretches of space, but Brown and Willis see as through a microscope: “Tremendous Louse, who can withstand thy power,/ Since fear at first taught mortals to adore?/ What mighty disproportions do we see/ In Adam’s glory, when compar’d with thee?” Humorous effects result from the incongruous juxtaposition, akin to zeugma, of moral and physical relations: “But tho’ so many virtues in thee shine,/ That we can hardly think thee not *divine*,/ It wou’d be great injustice to pass o’er,/ How kind thou art, and mindful of the poor;/ Whate’er befalls ‘em of calamity,/ They’re certain of a *bosom friend* in thee.” After going on in this manner for 68 lines the piece concludes with a reduction of the author—indeed, of all humanity—“Who can thy power describe, thy glories scan,/ Thou *Lord of nature*, since thou’rt *Lord of man*?/ In these we may thy wond’rous value see,/ The world was made for *man*, and *man* for thee” (Brown 128-29).

It was left, however, for later eighteenth century mock-epic writers to fully demonstrate this *reductio ad absurdum*. The anonymous author of *The Louse-Trap* (1723) begins: “There is an Animal, I need not name,/ Well known it is to all, in all the same;/ Just in the Crown it has it’s lofty Seat,/ And there at once find Food and a Retreat” (4). There followed, in 1787, *The Lousiad*, a mock epic in four cantos by Peter Pindar (nee John Wolcott). This labor of louse, complete with epitaphs and arguments, begins: “The Louse I sing, who, from some head unknown,/ Yet born and educated near a throne,/ Dropped down—(so willed the dread decree of fate!)/ With legs wide sprawling on the monarch’s plate” (25). One might think that Wolcott had reached the apex (or nadir) of such nonsense, but someone calling himself “Paul Pindar” swiftly responded in the same year with *The Fleaiad*, “humbly addressed” to Peter Pindar, Esq.>: “Of all the Lyric bards, from Horace/ To Hewardine and Captain Morris,/ In all the grand *desiderata*/ *Ornant quae poetarum prata*,/ Excepting wit, design, and metre,/ None can compare to thee, my Peter” (9-10). After some more fulsome praise of this sort, the poem hops, in predictable fashion, to its titular hero: “A Flea from low extraction sprung,/ Some say, from goose or pigeon’s dung,/ Of Cornwall tir’d, resolv’d to roam,/ Nor mope with vulgar fleas—at home” (11).

The flea was still alive, if unwell, in *The Flea* (1871), a mock epic authored by “You”: “A genuine aristocrat is he—/ Yet what so democratic as the flea?” (7). A final example is offered by Thomas Hood Jr., in his parody of a poem by the famous American author of “The Gold-Bug”: “It was many and many a year ago/ In a District called E.C./ That a Monster dwelt whom I came to know/ By the name of Cannibal Flea,/ And the brute was possessed with no other thought/ Than to live—and to live on me!” (Wells 145). Hood’s parody of Poe, at least, frankly admits what all these poets since Lucian have been doing: battenning off the blood of other satirical writers.

relation of these parts to the total form.<sup>35</sup> As he magnifies, dissects and analyzes the overall structure of an entity, his drive is to incorporate even the smallest of details. He interests himself, in other words, in the poetics of nature and the nature of poetics. As Aristotle writes in *De Partibus Animalium*:

Having already treated of the celestial world, as far as our conjectures could reach, we proceed to treat of animals, without omitting, to the best of our ability, any member of the kingdom, however ignoble. For if some have no graces to charm the sense, yet even these, by disclosing to intellectual perception the artistic spirit that designed them, give immense pleasure to all who can trace links of causation, and are inclined to philosophy. (645a)

The pleasure that awaits us in the intellectual appreciation of artistic objects is not unlike that which we may take in the scientific study of nature, especially when their formal properties have been laid bare by the discerning critic. If marvels await the student of nature, then so, too, the analyst of fictions.

Every realm of nature is marvellous: and as Heraclitus, when the strangers who came to visit him found him warming himself at the furnace in the kitchen and hesitated to go in, is reported to have bidden them not to be afraid to enter, as even in that kitchen divinities were present, so we

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Aristotle's apology in *De Partibus Animalium*: "If any person thinks the examination of the rest of the animal kingdom an unworthy task, he must hold in like disesteem the study of man. For no one can look at the primordia of the human frame— blood, flesh, bones, vessels, and the like— without much repugnance. Moreover, when any one of the parts or structures, be it which it may, is under discussion, it must not be supposed that it is its material composition to which attention is being directed or which is the object of the discussion, but the relation of such part to the total form. Similarly, the true object of architecture is not bricks, mortar, or timber, but the house; and so the principal object of natural philosophy is not the material elements, but their composition, and the totality of the form, independently of which they have no existence" (645a).

should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful.

Absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in Nature's works in the highest degree, and the resultant end of her generations and combinations is a form of the beautiful. (*DPA* 645a)

From the perspective of the critic, even the lowly and little, literary insect may contain quite as much evidence of wondrous order as the towers of Troy or the brows of Mount Olympus.

Within the history of criticism, the problem of the miniature is hardly a newfangled interest. Already Aristotle in his *Poetics* (*De Poetica*) views the magnitude of a poem's plot as a matter of the utmost critical importance, since it is intimately connected with the goodness, the necessary unity or wholeness, of a given poem.

...to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude. Beauty is a matter of size and order, and therefore impossible either (1) in a very minute creature, since our perception becomes indistinct as it approaches instantaneity; or (2) in a creature of vast size— one, say, 1,000 miles long— as in that case, instead of the object being seen all at once, the unity and wholeness of it is lost to the beholder. Just in the same way, then, as a beautiful whole made up of parts, or a beautiful living creature, must be of some size, but a size to be taken in by the eye, so a story or Plot must be of some length, but of a length to be taken in by the memory. (1450b-51a)

Notice how Aristotle begins with a presumption that the term “beautiful” (Greek, *to kalon*) ought to be used to qualify the primary excellence of a poem. As Gerard Else notes, “Beauty is the root of Aristotle’s theory, from which the other blossoms spring” (284). This presuming of the beautiful tells us something about the culture of the Greeks which the passage of time itself might have obscured. The efficient if not the final cause, so to speak, of a poem—the ultimate reason why it is important to get perspective on the plot—is so that we can have this experience of beauty.

Aristotle defines beauty poetically as an ordered whole, a unity perceptible in all its parts. He revealingly couples the poetic plot with the body of a living creature, thus stressing its organicity. This analogy arises again later in the *Poetics* when he speaks of the plot of epic, that it should be “based on a single action, one that is a complete whole in itself, with a beginning, middle, and end, so as to enable the work to produce its own pleasure with all the organic unity of a living creature” (1459a). A good poem grows, like a living thing, through its many changes. The end is implicit in its beginning.

Aristotle is in agreement with Socrates when the latter asks in Plato’s *Phaedrus*:

...I dare say you would recognize a rhetorical necessity in the succession of the several parts of the composition? ...At any rate, you will allow that every discourse ought to be a living creature, having a body of its own and a head and feet; there should be a middle, beginning, and end, adapted to one another and to the whole? (264)

Aristotle’s emphasis upon organicity, upon this sense of internal structural necessity, leads him to equate extreme smallness of size with the briefest duration of time, correlating both with our limited capacity for perception. Having thus animated his idea,

he concludes by reiterating his temperate mean for plot magnitude: A plot must be of sufficient, but not excessive, length. Exactly how long is ‘sufficient’ Aristotle does not specify. The bigger the better, he seems to say, but no more than is necessary to establish the *plausibility* of the action on a *human scale*:

As for the limit of its length, so far as that is relative to public performances and spectators, it does not fall within the theory of poetry... The limit, however, set by the actual nature of the thing is this: the longer the story, consistently with its being comprehensible as a whole, the finer it is by reason of its magnitude. As a rough general formula, ‘a length which allows of the hero passing by a series of probably or necessary stages from misfortune to happiness, or from happiness to misfortune,’ may suffice as a limit for the magnitude of the story. (*Poetics* 1451a)

Instead of ‘plausibility of the action,’ we might well have said ‘plausibility of the *change*,’ insofar as drama normally requires a change in the protagonist that we are able to witness. The tragic effect, especially, depends upon our sense of necessity, of feeling that such a change *must be*. There is no room in tragedy for random accidents or irrelevant features, not to mention random characters.<sup>36</sup> As we shall see, Aristotle regards plot as primary and characters as secondary. Characters are dominated by the plot, action or experience (Greek, *praxis*) that a serious poem attempts to convey. Yet they, too, like the

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Aristotle in his *Rhetoric (Rhetorica)*: “The things that happen by chance are all those whose cause cannot be determined, that have no purpose, and that happen neither always nor in any fixed way. The definition of chance shows just what they are. Those things happen by nature which have a fixed and internal cause; they take place uniformly, either always or usually. There is no need to discuss in exact detail the things that happen contrary to nature, nor to ask whether they happen in some sense naturally or from some other cause; it would seem that chance is at least partly the cause of such events” (1369a-69b).

plot to which they are made to conform, must reflect the inner coherence or unity of a living being.

With a logician's clarity but an empiricist's regard for realities like sense perception and human response, Aristotle characteristically reminds us here that the ideal of organic unity— however analyzable in principle— is in practice inseparable from the limits to sense, emotion, and memory specific to a *human spectator*. Our sense of a poem's beauty depends upon our experience of the organic unity of the plot, which Aristotle calls the "soul" of the poem (*Poetics* 1450a). Although that unity may objectively depend upon the order and arrangement of the poem's parts, subjectively the whole must be sufficiently large so that its parts can be *perceived* by human spectators as a unity. Only when the object powerfully interacts with the spectator, so that they are as if connected in the dramatic experience of participation, is the highest poetic effect realized. A body below a certain threshold of perceptible magnitude is virtually invisible from the aesthetic point of view. *Size matters* for the simple reason that, to behold beauty with the eyes, or to retain a whole object in our memory, our vision must be neither blurred and indistinct nor partial and fragmentary. A creature or a poem of negligible size is therefore inaccessible to mimetic representation. It can only be pictured as a whole, as a unity with an orderly arrangement of parts, with great difficulty, if at all. The heroic depiction of insects is forbidden by the most fundamental aesthetic principle of classical art.

For Aristotle, a poem must be plausible to be good, serious and powerful (Greek, *spoudaios*, "energetic, earnest, weighty" vs. *phaulos*, "slight, light, trifling"). Depicting an insect at greater length, as one might a dog or a horse, say, would no doubt make the

parts of its life easy to see. But such a poem, if not impossible, would be aesthetically troubling to a classical artist, because so implausible. If not troubling, then it would be laughable. Again, from the *Phaedrus*:

Soc.: ...suppose a person were to come to Sophocles or Euripides and say that he knows how to make a very long speech about a short matter, and a short speech about a great matter, and also a sorrowful speech, or a terrible, or threatening speech, or many other kind of speech, and in teaching this fancies that he is teaching about tragedy?

Phaed.: They too would surely laugh at him if he fancies that tragedy is anything but the arranging of those elements in a manner which will be suitable to one another and to the whole. (268)

Scale *inside* a work of art is linked to scale *outside* it. Aristotelian imitations observe a decorum that roughly approximates the norm of human experience. The problem is how to imitate a life that exists on a scale or plane of experience that is so radically different from ours.

But before moving on, we may unravel yet another clue from Aristotle's statement. We cannot fail to notice here his use of analogy to make perceptible his notion about perception. The comparison enables him to draw a line connecting the plot of a well-constructed poem to an animate body, or any well-made object. Since plot length is not easily envisioned, he invites us to picture an insect and a leviathan: size in two extremes. But notice how, through this comparison, meaning is transferred across

media, from the sound of narrative or drama to the sight and space of a physical body.<sup>37</sup> Length, a measure which exists in only two dimensions, thereby gains magnitude or volume, which exists in three, and the whole moves in time, that fourth dimension in which all living beings are born, grown and die. In this way, Aristotle's analogy deftly weaves four dimensions together into a unity.

Whether or not his argument is long enough to make us see the unity of a poetic creature, it succinctly suggests the dynamic nature of scale as well as the problem of the insect for poetry. Magnitude, duration in time, rhythmic motion and change, aesthetic perception, are all related here. First, as we guessed from the start, the problem of the insect's magnitude is really less a matter of absolute size than of relative scale. The insect is too small from the point of view of classical drama because the *human* spectator cannot *see it clearly* enough and, therefore, fails to perceive its unity, proportion, harmony and beauty. Second, with respect to duration and change, only a plausible representation will do if the spectator is to relate, feelingly, to the action or change being represented. In the case of the whizzing and flitting or still-as-stone insect, that action is going to seem inordinately quick or statue-like, immobile. The human viewer, as a consequence, is likely to be repulsed either by the appearance of manic energy or the utter absence of soul.

Let us pause to consider this last point. Changes in scale not only have a profound effect upon human perceptions, but they also govern the physics of animate bodies. "Size restricts the variety of patterns in living organisms" (11), writes John Tyler

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<sup>37</sup> Of this "application of the comparison from 'bodies' and 'animals' to plots" and of the "change of medium from sight to sound and from space to sound," Else comments: "Aristotle seems unaware of any difficulties, such as a modern aesthetician might raise, about the validity of the transfer from one sense to the other" (285).

Bonner in *Morphogenesis*. As a consequence, “in similarly constructed bodies the relations of the parts will vary with their size” (11) Bonner, following D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson, calls this “the *principle of similitude*” (12). For example, since muscle strength is a function of surface area, not mass, the insect displays— relative to its size— strength, speed, and gymnastic abilities that seem nothing short of prodigious when compared with human efforts on a much larger scale. About this phenomenon Wigglesworth writes:

...many of the problems with which insects are faced and many of the strange powers which they possess arise from the relation between surface and mass: the relative increase in the extent of the surface as the size or mass of the body diminishes. A rather similar consideration arises in connection with the muscular power of insects. Here again, the power of a muscle is proportional to the *area* of its cross section, whereas the mass it has to move is again proportional to *volume*. So that, whereas few men can jump much more than their own height, a flea can accomplish a high jump of 8 inches and a long jump of 13 inches. Size for size that would correspond to a high jump of 800 feet for a man. Because of this relation insects appear to be endowed with enormous muscular power. They are able to carry loads far exceeding the mass of their own bodies. (43-44)

Possessing so little mass, an insect suffers much less than larger creatures from the effects of gravity or fear of falling, because the force at impact of falling bodies is relative to body size, and even wingless insects are rarely hurt. Lightweight wings and a high metabolic rate further account for the excellent flight abilities of insects— they are

the only invertebrate species that can *fly*. Compared with us, an insect behaves like a lightning-quick superhero or a tiny King Kong.

Paradoxically, an insect's small size also means that the forces exerted by air currents or friction by the earth are correspondingly greater. Insect mobility suffers inordinately from the adhesive forces of minutiae on surfaces.<sup>38</sup> Such minutiae can even lead to paralysis. Surface forces play an enormous role in the lives of insects, forces which, as Wigglesworth comments, "giants like ourselves commonly ignore" (31).<sup>39</sup> For a scientist like Wigglesworth, sheer number underlies the insect's ferocious speed and strength, as well as its curious tendency to get stuck or bogged down in minutiae, seized by the powers of adhesion that lurk on surfaces. Aristotle, who incorporates but also moves beyond the purely physical perspective, reminds us that an insect is too small and superficial, its actions too sudden, to be susceptible of dramatic representation.

Another, related, block to human engagement is the— to us— unnatural spectacle of sudden insect growth or physical change. The stage of the gross and gluttonous caterpillar, for example, is so radically different from that of the beautiful and delicate,

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<sup>38</sup> Wigglesworth explains the insect's predicament: "The ordinary property of friction between our feet and the ground which makes it possible for us to walk, does in fact depend upon the seizure between innumerable minute points of contact between the soles of our shoes and the ground. We appreciate this only when we come to walk on a smooth greasy surface on which seizure does not occur. The situation is not so very unlike that of the insects— with one important difference: the insects are so small that these forces of adhesion between surfaces are great enough to support the entire weight of the body. It is easy to see why that is so. The volume of a sphere is given by the formula  $\frac{4}{3} \times \pi \times \text{radius cubed}$ , where  $r$  is the radius of the sphere. Whereas the surface of a sphere is given by the formula  $4 \times \pi \times \text{radius squared}$ . As a sphere increases in size its volume (and therefore its weight) will increase as the square of the radius. That is why, as an object gets smaller and smaller the surface becomes greater and greater in relation to its volume; and therefore, the forces which exist in surfaces become relatively greater" (31).

<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, as we shall see when we examine more lyrical evocations, much of the insect's charm lies in their being imagined as beholden to minutiae, as in Walter de la Mare's "The Fly," from *Songs of Childhood*: "How large unto the tiny fly/ Must little things appear!—/ A rosebud like a feather bed,/ Its prickle like a spear;// A dewdrop like a looking-glass,/ A hair like golden wire;/ The smallest grain of mustard-seed/ As fierce as coals of fire;// A loaf of bread, a lofty hill;/ A wasp, a cruel leopard;/ And specks of salt as bright to see/ As lambkins to a shepherd" (1-12)

winged adult that they might as well belong to different species. How is a poet to model a plot on an insect that does not seem arbitrary and forced, or does not appeal to sudden, supernatural resolutions to conflict? Again, for Aristotle, a plot must be humanly plausible to appear unified, complete, and hence, beautiful. This is why, in his *Poetics*, he protests against the overuse of dramatic ‘machinery.’<sup>40</sup>

An insect-sized body, then, is bound to fail of a certain dignity, depth, and gravity required of tragic drama, that most serious of literary genres which strives to represent the grandest movement of life and the unfolding of human destiny. As an analogy or figure of speech, however, the insect functions admirably and is capable of leaping from one extreme of the scale to the other, from the sub- to the super-human. From this perspective, the insect is trivial in the original sense of the word (Latin, *trivialis*, “of the crossroads,” < *trivium*, “a crossing of three roads”). As we shall see when we examine several types of epic simile, the tripartite in-sect figure is often used to mark the intersection of the animal, human and superhuman worlds. First, however, we must consider this segmented or ‘cut-in’ nature of the insect more closely and at greater length.

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<sup>40</sup> The *deus ex machina* seems to intervene or come from the outside, imprinting a kind of arbitrary solution. It thus diminishes the structural integrity of the plot, which ought to be self-contained and whose several incidents ought to be so closely connected as to abide by a kind of internal necessity: “The Unity of a Plot does not consist, as some suppose, in its having one man as its subject. An infinity of things befall that one man, some of which it is impossible to reduce to unity; and in like manner there are many actions of one man which cannot be made to form one action... The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is not real part of the whole” (*Poetics* 1451a).

The ancient Greek notion of tragedy raises the question of whether a Christian tragedy is possible. After all, the *deus ex machina* is what turns the spiritual history of humanity into a “divine comedy.” Aristotelian tragic drama, with its emphasis on plot or action, seems incompatible with the orientation of Christian eschatology, which views history in terms of end states (i.e., either salvation as a reward for being good, or damnation as a penalty for being bad). If pagan dramaturgy plays itself out into a fullness of ‘living and being here now,’ then such dramatic immediacy or presence would seem to be trivialized by the machinery of the Christian scheme of grace or damnation, which tends to impose on narrative, as if from without, a kind of prearranged destiny for the protagonist.

*An Insect is In-sected, Cut-into, Segmented*

If ‘small’ is the first adjective that usually comes to mind in any layman’s description of the insect, then ‘in-sected’ cannot be far behind. If one opens up a modern biological textbook on insects, one is likely to see a graphic illustration of an insect—a grasshopper say—with every part of its body tagged, named, and identified according to its function. The insect body lends itself to such pedagogical display.

This anatomical quality or configuration of the body, after all, inspired the insect’s name. By a curious twist of fate, entomology grew out of etymology. The Greek verb *temnein*, “to cut,” provided the root for Aristotle’s word for the insect, *entomon*, a creature that is “cut into” or has *entomai*, “segments, sections, incisions” on its body. As Aristotle writes in *Historia Animalium*:

And by ‘insects’ I mean such creatures as have nicks or notches on their bodies, either on their bellies or on both backs and bellies. (487a)

Insects have three parts common to them all; the head, the trunk containing the stomach, and a third part in betwixt these two, corresponding to what in other creatures embraces chest and back. In the majority of insects this intermediate part is single; but in the long and multipedal insects it has practically the same number of segments as of nicks. (531b)

Once cut, the name stuck. Six centuries later Pliny the Elder would translate *entomon* into Latin *insectum* (< *insectus*, pp. of *insecare* < *in* + *secare*, “in” + “to cut”), transmitting it, winged, to the European world in his own rather graphic, picturesque style:

There remain some creatures of immeasurably minute structure... These are of great number and many kinds... and all are rightly termed insects, from the incisions which encircle them in some cases in the region of their necks and in others of their chests and stomach and separate off their limbs, these being only connected by a thin tube, with some however the crease of the incision not entirely encircling them, but only at the belly or higher up, with flexible vertebrae shaped like gutter-tiles.

(*Natural History* 433)

The word “insect” first enters the English language via Philemon Holland’s popular translation of Pliny, *The Historie of the World* (1601). Here is how Holland renders “those living creatures,” “most subtill of all other that Nature hath brought forth” (310):

Many and sundrie sorts there be of Insects... And well may they all be called *Insecta*: by reason of those cuts and divisions, which some have about the necke, others in the breast and belly; the which doe goe round and part the members of the bodie, hanging together only by a little pipe a fistulous conveiance... a man shall perceiue in them certaine rings or circles, apt to bend and wind to and fro, & those so plated and plaited one over another, that in no thing elsewhere, is more seen the workmanship of Nature, than in the artificiall composition of these little bodies. (310)

The insect is preeminently a creature whose body is cut into sections, and therefore lacks the appearance of wholeness common to most other animals, including humans. For Philemon Holland, as for Pliny the Elder, the insect’s “artificiall composition” is a source

of wonder.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, this cut-into or insected body character really has a claim to being, from our modern scientific point of view, the most defining property of the insect.

Modern entomologists, not surprisingly, regard Aristotle's denomination (*entomon*) as historically significant. The idea of identifying a species by physiological structure may seem natural to us, but it is radical within the ancient context. According to Isaac Harpaz:

In fact, zoology (let alone entomology) did not at all exist as a methodological, written discipline of science, until the days of Aristotle. Moreover, in Biblical Hebrew, for example (and probably also in the other Middle Eastern tongues of that time) there is not a word to denote "insect" specifically. The nearest Hebrew term *sheretz* actually embraces all the "teeming creatures," of which insects obviously make up the majority.

(22-23)

Names hold the souls of creatures captive. The difference between the natural history of Aristotle and the sacred history in the Bible is that the latter contains absolutely no science at all. Nature in the biblical scheme is subordinated to the supernatural. God or Logos is the transcendent and self-sufficient measure of all bodies. Typically, the bug in the Bible is a "daemon," one of God's agents, a distributor of destiny.<sup>42</sup> Poetics is

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<sup>41</sup> Wonder at insect artifice is observed by a character in Coleridge's play *Remorse*: "Yon insect on the wall,/ Which moves this way and that its hundred limbs,/ Were it a toy of mere mechanic craft,/ It were an infinitely curious thing!/ But it has life, Ordonio! life! enjoyment! And by the power of its miraculous will/ Wields all the complex movements of its frame/ Unerringly to pleasurable ends!" (5.1.127-34).

<sup>42</sup> The bug is demonic/daemoniac in the senses defined by Schneewis: "Etymologically, the word demon is usually derived from [*daiomai*] meaning to distribute or to divide. The demon is a distributor, usually of destinies"; and Langton: "The etymology of the *daimon* is... derived from the root *daio*, meaning 'to divide,' part out,' or 'distribute.' By some scholars it is therefore understood to denote God as the Alotter or Distributor—He who apportions to man his lot on earth" (qtd. in Fletcher 43). By a curious coincidence, the Graeco-Roman *entomon/insectum* ("divided one") is also, in the Bible, a *daimon* ("divider").

subtended by rhetoric, meaning and intention, the *telos* of sacred history. The drive of such transcendent theology, which sees Yahweh as “not part of nature but entirely outside of it,” is towards identifying knowledge “in purely intellectual or abstract terms, entirely apart from the operations of the natural world [God] created” (Coffin and Stacey 71).

Aristotle, by contrast, trained in medicine, juxtaposes empirical observations onto a partly *a priori* teleological method. In an effort to achieve a grand classification of the species of nature, he, like Linnaeus and Darwin after him, is naturally looking very closely at limbs and arms and legs, that is, segmentations. Indeed, this systematizing impulse leads to what sometimes appears as a rabid concern with partition for the sake of ordering, a zeal to break a body into its constituent parts so as to arrive at the ‘reason’ or ‘order of the whole,’ or what Aristotle thought comprised the entity’s ‘soul.’<sup>43</sup> This culminated in *De Partibus Animalium*, although the opening of his *Historia Animalium* also expresses the analytic humor quite well:

Of the parts of animals some are simple: to wit, all such as divide into parts uniform with themselves, as flesh into flesh; others are composite, such as divide into parts not uniform with themselves, as, for instance, the hand does not divide into hands nor the face into faces (486a)

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<sup>43</sup> This discovery through analysis of the ‘soul,’ or ‘reason of the whole’ has a rhetorical or persuasive function, as Aristotle makes clear where he describes division’s power to strengthen the appearance of an argument: “Moreover, things look better merely by being divided into their parts, since they then seem to surpass a greater number of things than before.... The same effect is produced by piling up facts in a climax... The reason is partly the same as in the case of division (for combination too makes the impression of great superiority), and partly that the original thing appears to be the cause and origin of important results” (*Rhetoric* 1365a). When the parts begin to move of their own accord, however, insection can impart an uncanny aspect to the body in question, as Freud notes in his essay on “The ‘Uncanny’”: “Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, as in a fairy tale of Hauff’s, feet which dance by themselves, as in the book by Schaeffer which I mentioned above—all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when, as in the last instance, they prove capable of independent activity in addition” (244). In all such phenomena Freud sees a ‘return of the repressed’ or a recurrence of primitive animistic ideas, such as the belief in the ‘omnipotence of thoughts’ and the return of the dead.

The appeal that partitioning held for Aristotle can be detected even in Pliny who, in his *Natural History*, has a tendency to load every rift with the ore of wild surmises.

Consider, for instance, the curious conflation of insect and anatomy that orders his eleventh book, in which, following thirty-six chapters on various sorts of insects and their ethology, he suddenly commences “a discourse Anatomically, of the nature of living creatures, part by part, according to their particular members” (Holland 326):

It remaineth now to treat of the severall parts of the bodie, and over and above the former description, to particularize and set downe the storie of one member after another. (Holland 326)

Even Pliny, fascinated as he is by folklore and magic, departs from the purely mystical outlook of the Bible. In the Graeco-Roman tradition of scientific-philosophic analysis, one analyzes by cutting things into pieces. Cut a body up and re-assemble it, and you get an insect. From this perspective alone, Aristotle remains one of the greatest thinkers we have ever had and his authority remains central in all Western thinking. His doctrine of ‘immanent form’—the notion that form has no separate existence but is immanent in matter, a text we can read—is critical for modern thought.<sup>44</sup> Philosophically speaking, Aristotle’s inscription of the insect incorporates *differance* long before Derridean

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<sup>44</sup> Among the scientific thinkers we call ‘early modern’ is Sir Francis Bacon, who sounded the clarion call and led the charge in a war against the scholasticism of the medieval church. In the first book of his *Advancement of Learning* (1605), for instance, Bacon draws an analogy between those “many [solid] substances in nature” which “do putrefy and corrupt into worms” and that “good and sound knowledge” which likewise [putrefies and dissolves] into a number of subtile, idle, unwholesome, and (as I may term them) vermiculate questions” (140). Bacon exhorts readers to distance themselves from those who, “knowing little history, either of nature or time; did out of no great quantity of matter, and infinite agitation of wit, spin out unto us those laborious webs of learning which are extant in their books. For the wit and mind of man, if it work upon matter, which is the contemplation of the creatures of God, worketh according to the stuff and is limited thereby; but if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit” (140). We take the Aristotelian and Baconian attitude so much for granted that we must make an effort to imagine how radical and fresh— and no less, pious and careful in its step— was Bacon’s championing of the study of Nature in Protestant England of the early seventeenth century.

‘deconstruction.’ His empirical approach de-centers the logocentrism operating in biblical theology and Platonism alike.

But poetically, too, the segmented body is quite fascinating. In Aristotle’s remarks upon magnitude above, we recall, a critical importance was assigned to the parts of a poetic body. If a plot— a body in motion— is too tiny, the viewer sees the whole as if in an instant, so that the parts pass by in a blur. If too large, the parts pass by too gradually for the viewer to take in their interrelation and harmony with the whole. Either the parts or the whole, the many or the one, are “lost to the viewer,” though ideally these should be viewed together. Clearly, the problem regarding magnitude is a problem of the perception of order and unity requisite to our apprehension of beauty. This amounts finally to whether a mind is able to *cut into* a body, and thus *perceive* the special function of its parts while, at the same time, mentally synthesizing the parts into a *unity*, a whole body. On reflection, then, the insect, though it epitomizes the very idea of a whole body cut into or divided into parts, ironically seems, because of its tiny size, inaccessible to the analysis and synthesis required of serious mimetic treatment. Without obtaining a clear perception, we will be unable to get rid of the idea that the insect body is made up of bits and pieces that are *arbitrarily* joined together.

This realization focuses our attention upon the second aesthetic problem plaguing the insect: Due to its body being insected, the insect body appears rather unnatural, lacks a sense of wholeness. For Aristotle, for a body to be beautiful, it must appear as a whole, a unity. That is to say, it must contain a clearly perceptible beginning, middle and end. As he puts in the *Poetics*, in the passage immediately preceding his discussion of magnitude:

We have laid it down that a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude; for a whole may be of no magnitude to speak of. Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle, and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something else, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. A well-constructed Plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes; beginning and end in it must be of the forms just described. (1450b)

That is to say, even if an insect were large enough to be clearly perceived, its body character is of such a kind that it would still remain aesthetically troubling. True, no animal body has a more obvious beginning, middle, and end, than the insect with its manifestly tripartite structure. However, instead of these flowing one into the other seamlessly, as in most animals, the insect's body parts seem joined together by chance, artificially. Or, to use Pliny's words, they seem "only connected by a thin tube," and "with flexible vertebrae shaped like gutter-tiles." The insect body is too much composed of angular parts, too symmetrical even in its irregularity. It is too discretely segmented into beginning, middle and end. Its hardness and fixity, its discontinuity, are everywhere perceptible. The insect, in short, offends that aesthetic sense of which Burke speaks:

But as perfectly beautiful bodies are not composed of angular parts, so their parts never continue long in the same right line. They vary their direction every moment, and they change under the eye by a deviation

continually carrying on, but for whose beginning or end you will find it difficult to ascertain a point... Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness, the softness, the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface, continual, and yet hardly perceptible at any point, which forms one of the great constituents of beauty? (114-15)

If the human body type presents the norm for an indivisible unity, then by comparison the in-sected body seems unexpected, accidental, almost an absurdity. It is as if the creator forgot to take down the scaffolding. Instead of a living actor, the insect resembles a marionette dressed in motley.

At this point, we might pause to ask if there is not something disingenuous about all of this. After all, did not Aristotle himself use an insect, or a “very minute creature,” to help him get his point across about the magnitude of plots? A ready-made point of reference to the nearly invisible, the insect then helped us visualize the difficulty of getting perspective on plots and bodies too small from the human point of view. Its very tininess made it a potent agent, a carrier of the code of magnitude’s relativity.

This contradiction, however, is only apparent. The minute creature appeared as part of an analogy in a work of criticism, in the form of a quasi-logical argument. In his discussion of serious poems, however, Aristotle is referring to the problem of getting perspective on *actions*, on separate parts of the entire plot. His remarks on plot

magnitude are justified within his own scheme because a plot imitates an action. This point is quite important within Aristotle and deserves emphasis. A poem is an imitation of an action, more than a portrayal of characters, which he considers to be included merely for the sake of the action. Poems, he says, are imitations of serious subjects, “not persons, but action and life, of happiness and misery” which always “[take] the form of action.” The end of the poem, like “the end for which we live,” is a “certain kind of activity, not a quality” (1450a). To repeat, an insect-sized action, like an insect-sized body, passes beneath (or above) our human radar. And, since human experience is indeed the unchallengeable norm or standard of experience, as also of aesthetic representation and measurement, then obviously the minute or insectal can only be introduced as a jarring variation on, or contrast to, it.

Such mimetic dictates do not apply to an analogy, however, which refers to a *quality* and helps us to visualize an underlying likeness between two apparently unlike things. An analogy works by abstracting and comparing, and is content to use the merest simulacrum to physicalize the idea which it signifies. An analogy, in other words, *reduces*, even as it weaves together two different whole bodies, as if to create a third, artificial body out of three parts: the two bodies joined and the element in common used to thread them together. One reason why an insect can serve so well is because an analogy is a *statement of identity*, not an *imitation of action* or life. The analogy draws us away from time, movement and change— digressing from action and life, so to speak— and moves us towards the static and picturable. Action is frozen in the analogy, and what is captured in its web is rather more like a quality of character— less a substance than an accident, less a body than a wing. Generally speaking, one does not think of particularity

per se as the main focus of dramatic composition, whereas analogy tends to express a drive towards refinement and delineation. Rabid analogists may well revel, seemingly lost, in a welter of details. While dramatic representation moves towards *mythos* or story, analogical figuration moves in the direction of *logos*, theme or idea.

Properties roughly equal to those of the analogy inhere in the simile. It, too, is a 'cut into' body, a heterogeneous thing that assumes the intersection of whole or complete bodies of different entities. A device of delineation, analysis and synthesis, it too functions to help us *see* something better, although it does so—in the *epic* simile, especially—by creating a scene. Like those in an analogy, the elements in a simile are also attached to, depend or hang on other things.

### *Insect Embroidery*

A simile cuts into the narrative, either turning us away from or lifting us out of the flow of action in order to hold us rapt and still before a particular image. It signals a time when the poet behaves as if momentarily less interested in volume or masses in motion, than in surfaces he can refine or delineate. In the process of adorning a scene or a character, he seems at pains to gratify the reader with details the eye can zoom in on or wander among. Sometimes this departure from plot coincides with a character's sudden exit from the story itself, i.e., with the moment of his fatal wounding, the thread of his life being cut. Then, the simile can act like a suture, a thread to bind a multiplicity of strands tightly together. As an instance of this, we may consider the simile in the *Iliad* that accompanies Menelaus' slaying of young Euphorbus.

But his turn next, Menelaus

rose with a bronze lance and a prayer to Father Zeus  
and lunging out at Euphorbus just dropping back,  
pierced the pit of his throat— leaning into it hard,  
his whole arm’s weight in the stroke to drive it home  
and the point went slicing through the tender neck.  
He fell with a crash, armor ringing against his ribs,  
his locks like the Graces’ locks splashed with blood,  
still braided tight with gold and silver clips,  
pinched in like a wasp’s waist... (Fagles 17.50-59)

In the thick of depicting a gruesome death, the poet focuses our eyes on a kind of poignant beauty. On the lunge and crash and ring of action, on the violent splashes— he engraves braids and clips like signs of order, delicacy and restraint.<sup>45</sup> Notice how artifice and nature are interwoven: The allusion to the godly Graces sacralizes while it paints the blood-stained warrior’s hair; the crowning comparison of locks with a wasp’s waist more tightly clasps their braids, their gold and silver clips. The wasp’s waist is particularly wispy and haunting, for it adds a token of the “natural” to suggest a living artifice that flies above the other kinds of ornament. Thus rendered, this purely poetical image— the wasp isn’t present, of course, except in the simile— is strangely double in aspect and seems almost to glint at us, like a specter seen in a mirror. We briefly marvel how such nobility can die, spirit no longer able to wax and grow but prematurely pinched or cut to

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<sup>45</sup> In “How many times these low feet staggered,” Dickinson, similarly, moves from cold and muted metallic imagery: the “soldered mouth,” awful rivet,” and “hasps of steel,” to artifice rendered at once more poignant and ironic by its domestic association: “adamantine fingers” that “Never a thimble—more—shall wear.” Insects limn Nature’s indifference: “Buzz the dull flies—on the chamber window—/ Brave—shines the sun through the freckled pane—/ Fearless—the cobweb swings from the ceiling—” before the final ironic cry: “Indolent Housewife—in Daisies—lain!” (9-12)

the quick. Time stops for the warrior, decorated with the simile as with a medal, an emblem of heroic and stinging ferocity. Yet he remains woven in a piece of embroidery in the border of an evolving tapestry, the great narrative of the Trojan war. Gravity is implied, but not the kind that weighs larger bodies heavier in the scale. In a split second Euphorbus' soul will fade or unravel, and be free to go who knows where. But for now the poet arrests, lifts, and fixes it here, pinned like an insect in the simile. At the precise moment when the flow of narrative is ruptured and the character must confront the end of his life, the image gleams forth with a preternatural vividness.<sup>46</sup>

The archetype for the idea of poem as tapestry, in which similes might be compared to embroidery in its margins, is Helen's web:

Meantime, to beauteous *Helen*, from the Skies

The various Goddess of the Rainbow flies:

(Like fair *Laodice* in Form and Face,

The loveliest Nymph of *Priam's* Royal Race)

Her in the Palace, at her Loom she found;

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<sup>46</sup> Such is the predicament of Peyton Farquhar in Ambrose Bierce's short story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1891). Captured by federal soldiers while trying to blow up the bridge, the condemned man is immobilized, physically and emotionally. With neck, wrists and ankles bound tightly with rope, he is held rapt and still before the image of his impending death. As his life hangs by a thread, his captors rendered "grotesque and horrible, their forms gigantic" by his fear, Farquhar imagines himself escaping and returning to wife and plantation. At the precise moment he imagines his freedom, his world explodes with images of beauty and wonder. To achieve this effect, Bierce chiefly appeals to the microscopic insect world. Like those of the protagonists in Edgar Allan Poe's stories, Farquhar's physical senses became, "indeed, preternaturally keen and alert. Something in the awful disturbance of his organic system had so exalted and refined them that they made record of things never before perceived. He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck. He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf—saw the very insects upon them, the locusts, the brilliant-bodied flies, the gray spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass. The humming of the gnats that danced above the eddies of the stream, the beating of the dragonflies' wings, the strokes of the water spiders' legs, like oars which had lifted their boat—all these made audible music" (177). The hallucinatory vividness of these images intensifies our sense of dramatic irony: We know what the protagonist refuses to believe, that his escape is merely imaginary. In juxtaposing monstrous imagery upon the exquisite design and beauty of the miniature insect world, Bierce also conveys his darkly ironic perspective on the Civil War.

The golden Web her own sad Story crown'd,  
The *Trojan Wars* she weav'd (herself the Prize)  
And the dire Triumphs of her fatal Eyes. (Pope 3.165-72)

The stillness of this scene, the break in the action for the purpose of viewing, is strongly emphasized in Iris' message itself, for she whispers to Helen to hasten to the tower to watch the scene below, how the fighting has stopped, the warriors standing at ease, in silence, Paris and Menelaus about to duel for her. Helen's web describes what the poet is doing in his similes all along, portraying and freezing the action, emphasizing its ability to be contained, framed, viewed as a whole, as something artificial not natural. In Helen's web as in the poet's similes, the part contains, frames, includes the whole.<sup>47</sup> It suggests the view that the real aim of heroic poetry is the beauty that can be spun out of it to render it memorable, to compel us to see or understand its order. The poet, like a spider, weaves an iridescent web in which the hero is captured, captivated, reduced.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Penelope, in Homer's *Odyssey*, is a weaver. While her weaving (and unweaving) of her father-in-law's shroud serves to keep her parasitical suitors at bay, it also parallels Odysseus' wandering: The longer Odysseus' wandering, the longer Penelope's weaving (and, also, Homer's narrative weave). When Odysseus returns home, all these webs are undone.

In the cult of courtly love, this relation is given a Venusian twist such that the poet/suitor undergoes an agony, but at the hands of a cruel mistress, not a returning hero. The longer she resists, the longer he must plead his suit in the form of poetry he weaves. Following in the manner of Dante and Petrarch, English poets in the sixteenth century ply their love complaints in the sonnet. This intricately woven little web, with its abundant ornamentation (as cosmic as cosmetic), proved a perfect structure on which to weave mini-tapestries of the lover's spiritual woes in a sensuous form. Cf. Sonnet #23 in Spenser's *Amoretti*: "Penelope for her Ulisses sake,/ Deviz'd a Web her woovers to deceave:/ in which the worke that she all day did make/ the same at night she did again unreave,/ Such subtile craft my Damzell doth conceave,/ th'importune suit of my desire to shonne:/ for all that I in many dayes doo weave,/ in one short houre I find by her undone./ So when I thinke to end that I begonne,/ I must begin and never bring to end:/ for with one look she spils that long I sponne,/ and with one word my whole years work doth rend./ Such labour like the Spyders web I fynd,/ whose fruitlesse worke is broken with least wynd" (1-14).

<sup>48</sup> In sonnet #71, Spenser writes: "I joy to see how in your drawn work,/ Your selfe unto the Bee ye doe compare;/ and me unto the Spyder that doth lurke/ in close awayt to catch her unaware./ Right so your selfe were caught in cunning snare/ of a deare foe, and thrilled to his love:/ in whose straight bands ye now captived are/ so firmly, that ye never may remove./ But as your worke is woven all about,/ with woodbynd flowers and fragrant Eglantine:/ so sweet your prison you in time shall prove,/ with many deare delights bedecked fine./ And all thensforth eternall peace shall see/ betweene the Spyder and the gentle Bee" (1-14).

### *Reducing to Magnify*

A simile can cut into a character as well, as if human wholeness could be made subject to an anatomical incision, and a single quality or attribute isolated, highlighted and tagged, even. In the poetical comparison that results— a simile’s heterogeneous body— the merest of threads may suffice to tie human and insect souls together. Such insection and coupling acts both as an elevation and a reduction of human nature. As a reduction, the simile’s effect is to shrink a person down almost to an essentially irrational instinct. This is a momentary but utter rupture with the roundness, emotional complexity, and deliberation we expect of a mimetically portrayed human being. On the other hand, such condensation of spirit also affects the reader with a sense of elevation, of pure libido, of unfettered power. The character trait is made even more wondrous from its linking together of vastly different human and insect scales. The spirit of a human being, when compared to that of an insect acting at its own scale, seems no less than daemonic, and consequently, may be viewed as that much more compelling, attractive or repellent. Although such similes achieve their special effect by yoking supernatural, human, and subhuman levels together, they tend to evoke less a natural than a supernatural agency, and a fated quality in the individual thus grotesquely exaggerated.

A hero’s epiphany may occur, of course, not only at the moment of his death—as we saw in the case of Euphorbus—but at his apotheosis in battle (*aristeia*). A poet may then use such a simile to highlight a greater-than-human spirit (*arête*), as a way of limning one outstanding hero’s deeds amid the general melee. One instance of this occurs in Minerva’s startling transformation of Menelaus:

Her gray eyes afire, the goddess Pallas thrilled

that the man had prayed to her before all other gods.

She put fresh strength in his back, spring in his knees

and filled his heart with the horsefly's raw daring—

brush it away from a man's flesh and back it comes,

biting, attacking, crazed for sweet human blood.

With such raw daring she filled his dark heart

and he bestrode Patroclus, flung a gleaming spear— (Fagles 17.645-52)

Implied in many human-insect comparisons is that one can be small in body but great in spirit. Homer praises Menelaus here by likening him to a horsefly for strength, fearlessness, and relentless pursuit of its prey.<sup>49</sup> The simile, interestingly, first rears itself in the insect's name, a tag to fix his being and identify instantaneously an otherwise inexplicable energy. The name is connected via "daring" to the creature's persistent return, as if to imitate in the clausal structure of narration a pattern of behavior that the poet couldn't avoid, and that he wanted his reader to see better. Then comes a repetition of the phrase "raw daring," as if the quality of spirit had worked itself free from the name, and were being transferred from one compartment of the simile—the horsefly phantom—to another—that of the 'real' human. Menelaus in a sense becomes possessed by Minerva's spirit. The thread of the simile shows how he is fated to be her instrument through this magical binding and releasing. The simile's reduction is aligned with the careful manipulation of the goddess, who maintains control throughout the

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<sup>49</sup> Stephen Crane's hero in *The Red Badge of Courage*, more realistically, vacillates between feelings of impotence and omnipotence: "His fingers twined nervously about his rifle. He wished that it was an engine of annihilating power. He felt that he and his companions were being taunted and derided from sincere convictions that they were poor and puny. His knowledge of his inability to take vengeance for it made his rage into a dark and stormy specter, that possessed him and made him dream of abominable cruelties. The tormenters were flies sucking insolently at his blood, and he thought that he would have given his life for a revenge of seeing their faces in pitiful plights (95).

process of disembodiment and transference or infusion of spirit, of a sub- or super-human energy.<sup>50</sup>

The archetype for this reduction of a character to a single emotion, so that he becomes ruled by it, is Achilles' wrath. Achilles, one recalls, sulks on the sidelines after Agamemnon, to compensate himself for the loss of his own mistress, robs the hero of the fair Briseus. This temptation or infatuation (in Greek, *ate*) has tragic consequences. The plot reversal of the *Iliad* occurs when Achilles, upon the death of his beloved Patroclus, finally gains perspective and frees himself from his anger's embrace (or, rather, redirects it towards the end of the good of his whole community). In the following pronouncement, he telescopes the conflict of the entire poem as if via an oracle:

No, no, here I sit by the ships...  
a useless, dead weight on the good green earth—  
I, no man my equal among the bronze-armed Achaeans,  
not in battle, only in wars of words that others win.  
If only strife could die from the lives of gods and men  
and anger that drives the sanest man to flare in outrage—  
bitter gall, sweeter than dripping streams of honey,  
that swarms in people's chests and blinds like smoke—

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<sup>50</sup> This 'psychic intervention,' or communication of power from god or daemon to man, is described by E.R. Dodds in *The Greeks and the Irrational*: "In the *Iliad*, the typical case is the communication of *menos* during a battle, as when Athena puts a portion of *menos* into the chest of her protégé Diomedes... [This] is not primarily physical strength; nor is it a permanent organ of mental life like *thumos* or *noos*. Rather, it is, like *ate*, a state of mind... [such a man] is conscious of a mysterious access of energy; the life in him is strong, and he is filled with a new confidence and eagerness... It is significant that often, though not always, a communication of *menos* comes as a response to prayer. But it is something much more spontaneous and instinctive than what we call 'resolution'; animals can have it, and it is used by analogy to describe the devouring energy of fire. In man it is the vital energy, the 'spunk,' which is not always there at call, but comes and goes mysteriously and (as we should say) capriciously. But to Homer it is not caprice: it is the act of a god..." (8-9).

just like the anger Agamemnon king of men  
has roused within me now...

Enough.

Let bygones be bygones. Done is done.

Despite my anguish I will beat it down,

the fury mounting inside me, down by force. (Fagles 18.122-35)

Achilles' statement here sums up, reduces to a moral, the epic poem, as if heroic action is driven by sweet anger and bitter gall—a bee's sensibility. Better to be a bee furious in a swarm, fighting for the whole tribe, than an egoistic and useless drone stinging himself with his own poison.<sup>51</sup> Note the peculiar blend of causes, internal and external, subjective and objective, which Achilles gives for his disgrace. His personal, or subjective, responsibility is conveyed by such phrases as: "I sit," "I, no man my equal," "I will beat it down..." On the other hand, the objective agent is "Agamemnon king of men," he whose action had angered him. A sense of compulsion is further suggested by verbs like "drives," "flare," "swarms," "roused," "mounting." Although Achilles is not evading responsibility and he admits to being blinded by his *ate*, this *ate* is expressed as both internal and external to himself.<sup>52</sup> Achilles' fate (*moira*) has *made* him do something. The externalization of this psychological agency, akin to a form of personification, is reflected by the insect products conjured: the "bitter gall" that

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<sup>51</sup> The titular hero of *Beowulf* (whose name, a "kenning" or compressed metaphor, derives from 'bee-wolf' or bear, the wolf that steals honey from bees) gives similar advice to a morose Hrothgar upon the death of his beloved thane, Aeschere: "Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better/ to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning./ For every one of us, living in this world/ means waiting for our end./ Let whoever can/ win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,/ that will be his best and only bulwark" (63).

<sup>52</sup> As Dodds says, "...*ate* in Homer is not itself a personal agent... *ate* is a state of mind—a temporary clouding or bewildering or the normal consciousness. It is, in fact, a partial and temporary insanity; and, like all insanity, it is ascribed, not to physiological or psychological causes, but to an external 'daemonic' agency" (5).

“swarms, the “dripping streams of honey” that “blinds.” The reduction to insect imagery coincides with an effort to magnify, as well as to animate, the psychological forces which compel him.<sup>53</sup>

It is worth pondering this curious fact that Achilles, who is the chief heroic figure in the *Iliad*, remains immobile for virtually the whole length of the epic before lashing out at the end to wreak his revenge upon Hector, the murderer of his beloved Patroclus. The reader is, from the perspective of Achilles alone, suspended between two extremes of inaction and manic fury. Of course, Homer mostly focuses our attention on the much larger stage of the ongoing war, a far more external and public affair than Achilles’ obsessive brooding.<sup>54</sup> Inwardness is conveyed whenever the action is thus suspended, as when we are taken inside Helen’s room to watch her weave or inside Achilles’ mind to watch him brood. Inwardness is also conveyed by the similes that suspend us above

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<sup>53</sup> In Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, this instinctive process of projection is very curiously ‘dramatized,’ or rather, subsumed into a kind of narrative mode. For instance, when the poet wants us to see Redcross, his knight of ‘Holiness,’ as being separated from the lady he escorts, Una (‘Truth’), he does so by having him fantasize, firstly about her seducing him, and secondly (and more fatefully) about her having sex with someone else. This process is described by Spenser as a magical projection wrought by Archimago (‘arch image-maker’). First the magician conjures up wicked spirits to do his bidding: “And forth he cald out of deepe darknes dredd/ Legions of Sprights, the which like litle flies/ Fluttering about his everdamned hedd,/ A waite whereto their service he applyes” (1.1.38.1-4). Selecting “the falsest twoo” (1.1.38.6), he sends one down to the Cave of Morpheus to obtain a simulacral Una as well as an X-rated dream of her copulating with a squire. The fly-sprite finds Morpheus asleep in a miniature landscape, a mental sense-surround: “And more, to lulle him in his slumber soft,/ A trickling streame from high rocke tumbling downe/ And ever-drizling raine upon the loft,/ Mixt with a murmuring winde, much like the sowne/ Of swarming Bees, did cast him in a swowne...” (1.1.41.1-5).

<sup>54</sup> Like Achilles, Shakespeare’s Hamlet broods inwardly and obsessively on the loss of his father and his mother’s hasty remarriage. If war occupies our attention for much of Homer’s epic, then it is the war within Hamlet’s breast that we watch, fascinated, in Shakespeare’s enigmatic tragedy. Shakespeare compels us, writes Stephen Greenblatt, “to live inwardly in the queasy interval between a murderous design and its fulfillment” (44). “The playwright focuses,” says Greenblatt, “almost the entire tragedy on the consciousness of the hero suspended between his ‘first motion’ and ‘the acting of a dreadful thing’” (44). Hamlet is, as it were, as much a prisoner of his consciousness as Achilles was, but Shakespeare magnifies and interiorizes our experience of that fact. One wonders whether that experience of “inwardness” which Greenblatt credits Shakespeare with inventing for Renaissance English drama would have been possible without the intensely ornamental or metaphoric language employed at every moment to enable spectators to ‘see’ the heroic soul in its struggle to articulate both its bondage and desire for freedom.

heroic action to interweave the consciousness of warriors with the larger natural and supernatural world.

### *A Fated Perspective*

Thus far we have seen a simile decorate a warrior, like a medal that pins the single individual to the fate of the whole tribe to which he belongs. We have also seen how a simile can be used to render an individual at once godlike and animal by magnifying the irrational part of his soul. These affects are possible because the figure is manipulating perspectives through the use of scale.

Reduction isn't always, however, about concentration and magnification of spirit. As the reference to Achilles suggests, sometimes the figure negatively demonstrates a human failure at getting the larger perspective. Then it has a negative, ironic quality, showing how little man sees, how powerless he is, when up against forces far greater, far-seeing, more divine, or multitudinous, than he. At such moments, too, the simile draws us away from plot and toward image.<sup>55</sup> In a certain sense, all narrative is somewhat a ritual involving the participation of unconscious participants who are unable to see the larger picture. But the insect simile threatens to interrupt that heroic ritual by reducing

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<sup>55</sup> In Spenser, where narrative is segmented and largely a reflection of characters' mental states, similes picture and map out plot changes. In Book I, an insect simile helps establish the crucial stages by which Redcross (Holiness) gets separated from Una (Oneness, Truth). First he struggles against the "thousand" spawn of Error who crawl, swarming, all about his legs. The poet uses a simile to picture this: "As gentle Shepheard in sweete even-tide,/ When ruddy Phebus gins to welke in west,/ High on an hill, his flocke to vewen wide,/ Markes which doe byte their hasty supper best;/ A cloud of cumbrous gnattes doe him molest,/ All striving to infixe their feeble stinges,/ That from their noyance he no where can rest,/ But with his clownish hands their tender wings/ He brusheth oft, and oft doth mar their murmurings" (1.23.1-9). Reducing monsters to feeble, tender-winged gnats mirrors the hero's loss of perspective. Instead of following Una's advice—"Add faith unto your force" (1.19.3), he reacts "halfé furious" (1.24.3) and "fearful more of shame,/ Then of the certeine perill he stood in" (1.24.1-2). Later, when he thinks his lady and a squire "have knit themselves in *Venus* shamefull chaine" (2.4.8), his partial fury becomes full "furious ire" (2.5.8) and "the eie of reason was with rage yblent" (2.5.7). The simile pictures the hero's fluctuating mental states and his reduction, from fear of shame to jealousy and irrational fury.

through comparison, framing and detailing a miniature scene. Using differences in scale to measure a narrow against a larger perspective, it has an implicit potential to ironize an action. We are permitted to view human will and action, with its accompanying hubris, in a microcosmic context, helping us to see better a character's momentary lack of perspective.

A charming instance of this appears when cowardly Pandarus, emboldened by his mistaken belief that the Trojan side has the full support of the gods, breaks a temporary truce and sends an arrow in secret singing towards Menelaus (Atrides), with fateful consequences that will rain back upon the Trojans. But godly eyes are watching— as the simile, like a parting of eyelids, reveals to the reader. With respect to a god's power, an arrow is a pitiful, and easily deflected, thing.

But Thee, *Atrides!* in that dang'rous Hour

The Gods forget not, nor thy guardian Pow'r.

*Pallas* assists, and (weaken'd in its Force)

Diverts the Weapon from its destin'd Course.

So from her Babe, when slumber seals his Eye,

The watchful Mother wafts th' envenom'd Fly.

Just where his Belt with golden Buckles join'd,

Where Linen Folds the double Corslet lin'd,

She turn'd the Shaft, which, hissing from above,

Pass'd the broad Belt, and thro' the Corslet drove. (Pope4.158- 67)

Momentarily, we are granted the perspective of the goddess who, martial yet maternal, loving and ever vigilant, views a mortal arrow as innocuous. Like a fly, a mere

annoyance, it threatens no more than the soft oblivion of her child's sleep. The smiling conjunction of scales in the simile works, most obviously, to balance Pandarus' hubris. Supernatural agency is introduced here partly to make plausible, deliberate and orderly, events which might otherwise strike us as accidental or random. The simile is just long enough to allow us to explicate, or disentangle, the fateful thread that underlines heroic action. Allusion to supernatural agency, unnatural in a human sense, is carefully undercut by the juxtaposition of the grand heroic with a domestic scene eminently low, humble and familiar, where we see displayed a mother's compassion, a child's unconscious safety.<sup>56</sup> The grand, heroic drama is one thing, but we must also let the child dream. The versatile simile cuts both ways, meanwhile, for it simultaneously reflects upon Pandarus' arrogance, his false sense of security and of being favored by fate. As hubris exaggerates, wisdom reduces.<sup>57</sup>

In a certain sense, such a simile may be seen as a species of vigil itself. It harmonizes the consciousness or vision of two beings at once: namely, that of the somewhat unconscious participants in the narrative 'dream,' and that of the cosmic witnesses or agents whose power is felt by the former but rarely directly seen. The effect,

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<sup>56</sup> According to Bachelard, many miniatures reflect this experience of well-being, of "the gentle warmth of enclosed regions" which is "the first indication of intimacy." Such warm intimacy, he says, "is the root of all images... Large issues from small, not through the logical law of a dialectics of contraries, but thanks to liberation from all obligations of dimensions, a liberation that is a special characteristic of the activity of the imagination" (154-55). Bachelard compares this domesticating comfort of the miniature with the daydream: "Miniature is an exercise that has metaphysical freshness; it allows us to be world conscious at slight risk. And how restful this exercise on a dominated world can be! For miniature rests us without ever putting us to sleep. Here the imagination is both vigilant and content" (161).

<sup>57</sup> In this regard, there is an interesting moment in Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* when the youth, having returned to his old position to survey the ground over which they had charged, discovers that his mind has inflated size and distance, emotion and scale are interrelated: "The youth in this contemplation was smitten with a large astonishment. He discovered that the distances, as compared with the brilliant measurings of his mind, were trivial and ridiculous. The stolid tress, where much had taken place, he saw to have been short. He wondered at the number of emotions and events that had been crowded into such little spaces. Elfin thoughts must have exaggerated and enlarged everything, he said" (117).

akin to dramatic irony, is conveyed in the form of an epiphany whereby the god reveals herself to us, but not to the heroic participants, who are warring far from home, outside the domestic scene. Familiar domestic space half takes us out of heroic narrative, and back to the peaceful and private world for which the heroes are partly fighting. A poignancy, a pathos, a homeliness, is allowed to mingle with the heroic, as though two cross-sections have been offered to compare an arresting, and larger, perspective on the entirety of the human sphere. We are reminded of the homeland the heroes are fighting for, and also, perhaps, what they in their titanic struggle are continually missing. No matter how much they wish to see themselves writ large, they continue to be, in the larger scheme of things, small and insignificant.<sup>58</sup>

### *Swarming Images: An Apocalyptic Perspective*

Both effects—powerful fury in the fated hero, weak dullness in the presumptuous mortal—can be joined together in a simile, even as they are modified by a third: the splitting of an antagonist into a swarm of individuals. This demonstrates yet another way in which simile has a propensity to cut a body into sections. We shall now look at similes as swarming images.

Generally speaking, the question raised by the swarm is that of the many with respect to the One. For instance, no normal human-sized antagonist can stand up to a god, or to a god's near equivalent—a hero on the rampage, in the fury of his *aristeia*.

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<sup>58</sup> In Crane's novel, a large part of the soldier's ascent to wisdom is the gradual realization, through the trauma of war, that an individual is actually a "very wee thing": "The youth reflected. He had been used to regarding his comrade as a blatant child with an audacity grown from his inexperience, thoughtless, headstrong, jealous, and filled with a tinsel courage. A swaggering babe accustomed to strut in his own dooryard. The youth wondered where had been born these new eyes; when his comrade had made the great discovery that there were many men who would refuse to be subjected by him. Apparently, the other had now climbed a peak of wisdom from which he could perceive himself as a very wee thing. And the youth saw that ever after it would be easier to live in his friend's neighborhood" (*RBoC* 83).

Indeed, against such a demi-god, even a multitude of warriors are easily crushed.

Numbers do not really matter in the face of cosmic fury; all told, a host of fractions still add up to less than one. On the one hand, the poet magnifies the hero's power, unifying and narrowing his spirit to the point where it seems godlike. On the other, he shatters and scatters the enemy host, the disarray and demoralization in their ranks tantamount to a dismemberment. The hero rages like a brush fire, a plague in human form, bent on consuming a hundred thousand animate pieces.

Now back in their tracks the Trojans fled pell-mell  
while Hera spread dense cloud ahead to block their way.  
But the other half were packed in the silver-whirling river,  
into its foaming depths they tumbled, splashing, flailing—  
the plunging river roaring, banks echoing, roaring back  
and the men screamed, swimming wildly, left and right,  
spinning round in the whirlpools. Spun like locusts  
swarming up in the air, whipped by rushing fire,  
flitting toward a river— the tireless fire blazes,  
scorching them all with hard explosive blasts of flame  
and beaten down in the depths the floating locusts huddle—  
so at Achilles' charge the Xanthus' swirling currents  
choked with a spate of horse and men— the river roared. (Fagles 21.7-19)

The reduction and multiplication of Trojans, or the action of human beings *en masse*, which is difficult in any case to represent naturalistically, results here in a diminishment of heroic individuality. The surface texture of extreme activity, reflected in a frenetic

throng of verbs, distracts us from the fact that our eyes are fixed upon a doomed and almost apocalyptic scene. Dense cloud blocks the participants' vision, yet the reader enjoys the spectacle of a divine fury raining down upon an ignorant and condemned multitude. Would-be titans are indifferently swept aside.

An inversion of the Homeric image appears in the plague of locusts Yahweh sends to afflict the Egyptians in *Exodus*, or the avenging grasshoppers in *Revelation*. In both those instances the swarm embodies divine fury. Through his engines God intervenes and enters upon the stage of human history. He magically breaks the impasse through the action of an insectal *deus ex machina*.<sup>59</sup>

The swarm in Homer, however, consists of human warriors. Less like persons with distinct and full lives than faceless fragments of a doomed whole, the crazed warriors can no longer grab at glory, only copy one another in a swarm of fleeting images. Their reaction to the onslaught conveys they are up against an elemental and irresistible nature, like that of a raging fire or swirling river. But no matter how destructive in his effect, Achilles remains— as engine— both absolute and single. Here, one is at war with many, monomania rages against schizoid frenzy. Unity of purpose dominates random action; the fate of the whole is impressed upon us without surrendering the detail in all its variety. The simile reduces daemonic forces and renders them manageable, not by getting rid of multiplicity, but by subjecting them to weaving.

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<sup>59</sup> However unsuitable the *deus ex machina* for drama, such forcing resolutions appear in narratives like *The Spider and the Fly* (1556), by English dramatist John Heywood. A parody of scholastic disputations and legal abuses, like Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, Heywood's prolix allegory moves in its final stages towards a full-blown war between the armies of the spider (Protestant) and fly (Catholic). At last, just when there seems to be no end in sight, Heywood has a maid (Queen Mary) suddenly come in and restore justice, crushing the spider under foot and sweeping aside all objections with her broom. Heywood's allegorical 'theater' describes the inaction of insects locked, as it were, inside a room and confined to grandiose speeches until finally someone of human size and, hence, capable of real action, appears.

Disguising itself in the insect swarm as something *more* natural than the human, the simile is really quite artificial. As scale shifts mark our departure from a mimetic norm, we almost feel that gravity has been reversed, and we are allowed to hover above the earth to take part in a critical judgment. We witness the action of a higher order, one that can command the destiny of persons, and subject them to miniature representation. The simile is small enough to view in a glance, bright enough to serve as ornament for a poem's hero, and wide enough in the perspectives embraced to elevate a mere man to godly status.

*Swarming Images: A Pastoral Perspective*

The epic simile especially can feel generous— after all, we are given two scenes in place of two nouns or adjectives. The poet extends himself, gives us many more details than he would need to if he were sticking to a bare analogy. Examples above suggest how the simile can bestow splendor, and even a kind of luxurious excess, despite its spatial economy, like intricate brocade. But the lavish attention spent on digression, while often spelling out surplus, at other times, pricks us with longing, the want or desire of exiles, by alluding to a world prior to, or at a far remove, from the heroic.

..... Rank and file  
streamed behind and rushed like swarms of bees  
pouring out of a rocky hollow, burst on endless burst,  
bunched in clusters seething over the first spring blooms,  
dark hordes swirling into the air, this way, that way—  
so the many armed platoons from the ships and tents

came marching on, close-file, along the deep wide beach  
to crowd the meeting grounds, and Rumor, Zeus's crier,  
like wildfire blazing among them, whipped them on. (Fagles 2.102-10)

The cloth for this kind of woven fabric might have been cut from pastoral idyll. Nature emerges suddenly as from a cleft to swell in fragrance and pleasure, the bounty and new life associated with spring. Opening up before us is another part of the human world, a scene far removed from bloodshed. On the surface the simile puts us in mind of the quite physical stream of the warriors, their startling numbers, the hot and excited motion as rumor spreads from one to another. But beneath this we may read a larger perspective on their situation, one which considers their entire existence. The warriors bustle and swarm like bees in spring when their old hive must be abandoned with an ominous humming. It is a critical, because liminal, point for them. The swarming itself seems like an emblem of the moment of crisis, for swarming is a continual motion that does not move anywhere. They have broken with their austere routine of labor, and are restless, excited and uncertain before finding their new home. A scene from nature cuts into the film of narrative like a flashback to a world of peace. The juxtaposition widens our perspective on the whole human cosmos, and does so by relishing the local, detail. Nature turns down to a whisper the clamorous sweep of mob rhetoric driven by Rumor. Balancing loss of heroic magnitude is the picturesque quality of the woodland scene.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> After his initial, cowardly, flight from battle, Crane's youth looks to nature to get perspective on both his action and the chaos he had fled: "After a time the sound of the musketry grew faint and the cannon boomed in the distance. The sun, suddenly apparent, blazed among the trees. The insects were making rhythmical noises. They seemed to be grinding their teeth in unison. A woodpecker stuck his impudent head around the side of a tree. A bird flew on lighthearted wing. Off was the rumble of death. It seemed now that Nature had no ears. This landscape gave him assurance. A fair field holding life. It was the religion of peace. It would die if its timid eyes were compelled to see blood. He conceived Nature to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy" (*RBoC* 47).

Other similes can be found in epic that amass, without loss of beauty, images in a season of war: the numbers, rush, relentless bursts, the cloud of warriors, chaos and clamor outdoors. If the warp is martial and public, if the fate of nations can be traced in scenes of destruction, then there are other, more homely and private, embellishments of nature, when pastoral or domestic concerns supply the woof.

Thus num'rous and confus'd, extending wide,  
The Legions crowd *Scamander's* flow'ry Side,  
With rushing Troops the Plains are cover'd o'er,  
And thund'ring Footsteps shake the sounding Shore:  
Along the River's level Meads they stand,  
Thick as in Spring the Flow'rs adorn the Land,  
Or Leaves the Trees; or thick as Insects play,  
The wand'ring Nation of a Summer's Day,  
That drawn by milky Steams, at Ev'ning Hours,  
In gather'd Swarms surround the Rural bow'rs;  
From Pail to Pail with busie Murmur run  
The gilded Legions, glitt'ring in the Sun.  
So throng'd, so close, the *Grecian* Squadrons stood  
In radiant Arms, and thirst for *Trojan* Blood. (Pope 2.546-59)

As the simile reduces and crowds its agents, our eyes dilate the better to focus on a suddenly flush and miniature surface. The agents' fascinated involvement with that surface, that target— evokes a distance, together with the intensity of their voyeurism, that almost seems designed to evoke that frustration in us akin to envy. At the very least,

the phenomenon seems to draw from us a kind of literary rubbernecking. This, in turn, permits the poet to assign to that target a powerful boost, to depict it as irresistible. Imitating our attraction to the momentary luxury of text offered to our mind's eye, narrative surface becomes more picturesque even as the masses of detail swarm. Like flies to sweet milk or a moth to glittering flame, soldiers are drawn by curiosity if not blood-thirst to the very noon of their dooms' day.<sup>61</sup>

The aptness of the insect simile to interweave an almost irresistible attractive center with a swarming, circling, martial furor is repeated in a number of examples. One of the most striking appears below:

Now great Sarpedon on the sandy Shore,  
His heav'nly Form defac'd with Dust and Gore,  
And stuck with Darts by warring Heroes shed;  
Lies undistinguish'd from the vulgar dead.  
His long-disputed Corse the Chiefs inclose,  
On ev'ry side the busy Combat grows;  
Thick as beneath some Shepherd's thatch'd Abode,  
The Pails high-foaming with a milky Flood,  
The buzzing Flies, a persevering Train,  
Incessant swarm, and chas'd, return again.  
  
Jove view'd the Combate with a stern Survey,  
And Eyes that flash'd intolerable Day;

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Crane: "The battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to him. Its complexities and powers, its grim processes, fascinated him. He must go close and see it produce corpses (51)... A certain mothlike quality within him kept him in the vicinity of the battle. He had a great desire to see, and to get news" (*RBoC* 67).

Fix'd on the Field his Sight, his Breast debates  
The Vengeance due, and meditates the Fates;  
Whether to urge their prompt Effect, and call  
The Force of Hector to Patroclus' Fall,  
This Instant see his short-liv'd Trophies won,  
And stretch him breathless on his slaughter'd Son;  
Or yet, with many a Soul's untimely flight,  
Augment the Fame and Horror of the Fight? (Pope 17.773-92)

These scenes out of pastoral cut into the battle narrative and ironize it. Do the warriors realize they are ferocious as insects? Does this demean them or make them wild animals? Do they remember the pastoral world of peace that they are fighting for? Above all, the simile makes it easier for us to imagine what is difficult to see otherwise: the incredible speed and fearless, almost daemonic fury of the warriors moving *en masse*— difficult to picture mimetically, but easy to visualize when we think of insects who can act as if with an almost supernatural power, due to the difference between our and their scale, metabolism, etc.

The adversaries trying to get at the bodies, armor, and glory of their fallen victims are compared to insects that buzz around milk. The surface reason for the comparison is to show and praise their relentless and fearless action, but we can't help smiling at the reduction implied in the comparison. These insect similes almost always are mock serious for just this reason. The scale difference emphasizes both the daemonic— hence, supernatural— activity, while it is held in check by our own godly sense of lording our

greater size, greater importance, over the insect used in the comparison.<sup>62</sup> Here the irony is underlined by the presence of Zeus, ever watching. His divine perspective reminds us that even though they may see themselves as indefatigable, fearless, warriors, there is a higher order, a higher perspective and fate, which has allowed this all to happen, because it is part of Zeus' larger plan. Had he wanted, he could have deflected—as Pallas did Pandarus' arrow—or squashed them all like flies.

### *From Tribe to Empire*

Simile has a descriptive function, is involved with *images*, and so bears a marginal relation to the main business of epic narrative, which is to represent the *actions* of heroes on the grandest possible scale. We would be mistaken, however, to view such imagery as merely decorative digression. As we have seen, our reaction to the simile, as to the insect, has a cognitive as well as perceptual aspect. First, simile abstracts the essence of a character and offers us a ratio instead of an action. Second, simile does not merely invite us to view the action from above, below, or far away; often simile grants these perspectives simultaneously. Even as we are distanced from the action, then, we are drawn to contemplate the whole cosmic scheme within which heroic action—the siege of a city, say—is but a single part. Both of these rationalizing movements occur *outside the time* of narrative and *within* a kind of *mental space*. The similes are like verbal jewels in which an incomprehensibly large universe may be mirrored through the

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<sup>62</sup> Distance alone renders things small in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Queen Mab*: "The thronging thousands, to a passing view,/ Seemed like an ant-hill's citizens" (II, 101-02). Sometimes, however, the inversion of the human-insect prospect suggests moral superiority, as in Andrew Marvell's *Upon Appleton House*, which opposes the duties of martial action with the pastoral pleasures of retirement and peace: "And now to the Abyss I pass/ Of that unfathomable Grass,/ Where Men like Grashoppers appear,/ But Grashoppers are Gyants there:/ They, in their squeaking Laugh, contemn/ Us as we walk more low then them:/ And, from the Precipices tall/ Of the green spir's, to us do call" (369-76).

light refracted in its facets. The epic simile— with its intersection of godly, human and animal perspectives— displays how the epic poem contains within it, in these epiphanic flashes that come to the poet as if from the other world, a vision of integration, of the cosmic whole.

Normally epic action is seen from the outside, as ‘objectively’ or dramatically as possible. While simile, too, has a superficial character, it may be best described as the *intersection* of two or more surfaces. Due to this interaction, the simile suggests introspection or inward movement. It is as if action were momentarily to yield to a kind of contemplative wonder, if not an ambivalent moral stance. Despite, or perhaps because of, its involvement with an almost microscopic *detail*, the simile maintains its iconic or thematizing character even when the figure produced seems merely picturesque. The simile is an artful device insofar as it imposes order. The peculiar aesthetic effect of the simile, like that of the insect itself, is due to the extreme degree to which it miniaturizes or concentrates, segments or differentiates.

Earlier we described the elements of a simile as attached to, depending or hanging on other things, but the same may be said about similes themselves. Like many ornaments, similes are detachable. If similes contextualize by their very nature, then they also mean different things in different contexts. Indeed, similes reveal the societies that are being magnified by the epics in which they appear.

In the classical Greek period, for instance, Aristotle emphasizes the human-centered scale because that is the vision of heroism that prevails, from the epics of Homer to the tragedies of Sophocles. In Homeric epic, in particular, the hero was a special type of individual. He was bigger than life, stronger and faster than anyone else, as well as

blessed by a kind of primitive, irrational fury. In this respect, Achilles was singular, fairly unique, almost like a god. Odysseus, too, was exceptionally shrewd, a sort of trickster figure. This does not surprise us, since the culture described by Homer was very tribal, really. The Achaians and the Trojans lived by force and cunning. They were destroyers of cities, warriors fighting for their land.

By the time of the Roman empire, however, Virgil sees that his hero, Aeneas, is very much implicated in imperial expansion, empire-building. The very first insect simile in Virgil's *Aeneid* sets the tone and theme for his entire epic. Observe the poet's detailed description of the business that Aeneas witnesses upon his arrival at Carthage:

The toiling *Tyrians* on each other call,  
To ply their Labour: Some extend the Wall  
Or dig, or push unweildy Stones along.  
Some for their Dwellings chuse a Spot of Ground,  
Which, first design'd, with Ditches they surround.  
Some Laws ordain, and some attend the Choice  
Of holy Senates, and elect by Voice.  
Here some design a Mole, while others there  
Lay deep Foundations for a Theatre:  
From Marble Quarries mighty Columns hew,  
For Ornaments of Scenes, and future view.  
Such is their Toyl, and such their buisy Pains,  
As exercise the Bees in flow'ry Plains;  
When Winter past, and Summer scarce begun,

Invites them forth to labour in the Sun:  
 Some lead their Youth abroad, while some condense  
 Their liquid Store, and some in Cells dispene.  
 Some at the Gate stand ready to receive  
 The Golden Burthen, and their Friends relieve.  
 All with united Force, combine to drive  
 The lazy Drones from the laborious Hive;  
 With Envy stung, they view each others Deeds;  
 The fragrant Work with Diligence proceeds.  
 Thrice happy you, whose walls already rise;  
*Aeneas* said; and view'd, with lifted Eyes,  
 Their lofty Tow'rs; then, ent'ring at the Gate,  
 Conceal'd in Clouds (prodigious to relate)  
 He mix'd, unmark'd, among the buisy Throng,  
 Borne by the Tide, and pass'd unseen along. (Dryden 1.586-615)

If you are creating a society, Virgil's simile says, then you are actually doing a building routine the way that the bees do. Notice that the various constructions here, of a senate, harbor and theater ("for ornaments of scenes and future view"), are part and parcel of what we understand as culture. Virgil's project is to show, *in detail*, how to found, ground, and build a civilization. The Achaians and Trojans in Homer lacked Virgil's clear sense of empire. In Theodore Hacker's words:

Achilles was too impetuous, his death profitless... Odysseus knew too much, was too fickle, had too large a sense of humor. Both these heroes

would have presented an obstacle to successful statecraft. Rome needed  
ancestors to be builders and rebuilders, not destroyers of cities. (70)

By contrast, Virgil, as a Roman and a poet of empire, is chiefly concerned with building a state that will endure. In putting Homer's swarming bees to work, the Roman poet is active in the service of asking a question about individual heroism.

Nor is this an isolated instance in Virgil's work. Virgil sets the stage for such a questioning in his *Georgics*. In that discursive, descriptive and didactic treatise, he deals, in turn, with the cultivation of the earth (whence the poem's title), the vegetable and animal worlds, and finally, in the fourth book, the society of bees. This last book begins, curiously enough, as if he were about to conduct an epic poem. Homer had sung in the *Iliad* of the "wrath" of Achilles, in the *Odyssey* of "the arms and the man." Virgil, too, shall sing of "Embattl'd Squadrons and advent'rous Kings," of "a mighty Pomp, tho' made of little Things" (4-5). Like Homer, Virgil also invokes heavenly aid to help him reveal their "Arms," "Arts," and "Manners," and "whence the people rose" (5-7), for:

Slight is the Subject, but the Praise not small,

If Heav'n assist, and *Phoebus* hear my Call (Dryden 8-9)

Virgil's bee community is set within a peaceful natural landscape, presenting the strongest possible contrast to the fighting which, as he describes at length, sometimes breaks out from within the hive:

But if intestine Broils allarm the Hive,

(For two Pretenders oft for Empire strive)

The Vulgar in divided Factions jar;

And murm'ring Sounds proclaim the Civil War. (Dryden 92-95)

Homer's heroes had besieged a foreign city. Here, clearly, division of the body politic is on Virgil's mind after one hundred years of bloody wars. In the ensuing battle descriptions, Homer is mirrored. Men at war had reminded Homer of bees. Bees at war remind Virgil of Homeric heroes.

Inflam'd with Ire, and trembling with Disdain,

Scarce can their Limbs, their mighty Souls contain. (Dryden 96-97)

Heroic fury had always lent itself to hyperbole and Homer's simile helped express that invisible spiritual leap. Now, however, all such hyperbole has a determinedly spatial component as well. Spiritual and physical aspects reflect each other, as in a pun. There is a hum, as well as a clash, in this collusion between the metaphorical and metonymical.

With Shouts, the Cowards Courage they excite,

And martial Clangors call 'em out to fight:

With hoarse Allarms the hollow Camp rebounds,

That imitate the Trumpets angry Sounds: (Dryden 98-101)

The insect similes in Homer, like occasional flowers, had decorated a moment in the heroic narrative. The correspondence between insect and human worlds in Virgil, however, is wreathed in simile after simile.<sup>63</sup> Here are "nimble Horsemen" that scour the Fields of Air" (103) and "on their sharp Beaks... whet their pointed Stings" (108). Here are "shocking Squadrons" that "meet in mortal Fight" (115) their "migh ty Souls in narrow Bodies prest" (124), "obstinately bent to win or dye" (127). The Roman poet is

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<sup>63</sup> In Lucian's "Fly," similes are also stitched together like beads on a string. All encomia magnify, of course, but few before Lucian's had demanded an eye so keen or mind as fearless in its leap. In Lucian's detailed anatomy, the insect is dissected in body and soul. Each dismembered part, in turn, gets magnified by means of a simile or similes comparing it with the analogous part possessed by some greater animal, man, or god. Under Lucian's microscopic eye, the fly proves to be an exquisite little world, glittering and rich, cosmic in its scope. The reader is also moved, however, to consider the obsessional nature of the scrutinizer's behavior. His fly fixation amounts to a virtual taxonomy or catalogue of all the rhetorical fireworks at the orator's disposal, a demonstration of the arbitrary uses to which that arsenal can be put.

continuously busy in this imitative exercise of cutting Homer's warriors down to size and *in detail*. Presumably, Virgil could keep this going on forever, but suddenly he breaks off and reminds the beekeeper that, as regards this "dreadful" and "deadly fray" (130):

A cast of scatter'd Dust will soon alay,  
And undecided leave the Fortune of the day. (Dryden 131-32)

Indeed, it is loyalty to the bee chief, rather than the rage of an Achilles, that earns Virgil's highest praise:

...not *Egypt, India, Media*, more  
With servile Awe their Idol King adore:  
While he survives, in Concord and Content  
The Commons live, by no Divisions rent;  
But the great Monarch's Death dissolves the Government.  
All goes to Ruin; they themselves contrive  
To rob the Honey, and subvert the Hive. (Dryden 306-12)

He admires not their warring so much as their efficiently run and governed beehive cities:

Of all the Race of Animals, alone  
The Bees have common Cities of their own:  
And common Sons, beneath one Law they live,  
And with one common Stock their Traffick drive. (Dryden 224-27)

The image is one of a composite system in which each tiny part perfectly knows his narrow place. Each citizen is allotted a job and retires to the confinement of his own cell. He works untiringly for the good of the whole, the cultivation of liquid nectar. The worker's drive is sustained by the intensely close proximity of other citizens who are

viewing him, and whom he views. The whole system is kept in check by envy of those who surpass, and resentment towards those who undermine, one's own fury for labor:

Each has a certain home, a sev'ral Stall:  
All is the States, the State provides for all.  
Mindful of coming Cold, they share the Pain:  
And hoard, for Winter's use, the Summer's gain.  
Some o're the Publik M agazines preside,  
And some are sent new Forrage to provide:  
These drudge in Fields abroad, and those at home  
Lay deep Foundations for the labor'd Comb,  
With dew, *Narcissus* Leaves, and clammy Gum.  
To pitch the waxen Flooring some contrive:  
Some nurse the future Nation of the Hive:  
Sweet Honey some condense, some purge the Grout;  
The rest, in Cells apart, the liquid Nectar shut.  
All, with united Force, combine to drive  
The lazy Drones from the laborious Hive.  
With Envy stung, they view each others Deeds:  
With Diligence the fragrant Work proceeds. (Dryden 228-44)

Virgil takes pains to set this well-run machine within an idyllic natural landscape. Like Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid* had ended on a tragic note that emphasized the cyclical and futile nature of warfare. In his fourth *Georgic*, however, Virgil embraces a comic vision. Specifically, he envisions the possibility of humankind returning to an innocent

and unfallen world, or of achieving a society of fulfilled desires by way of a microcosmically organized system that is intelligible to the nth degree. From the viewpoint of modern science, one might well call this progress. Certainly much “liquid nectar” has been gleaned through our embrace of a systematized society and bureaucracy. The result is a system that seems, to a majority of its citizens, efficient if not fated and necessary.

The more inscrutable that fate and external the necessity, however, the more Virgil’s bee-model, or miniature of human society, moves toward what Northrop Frye called the “demonic human world.” Such a society is “held together by a kind of molecular tension of egos, a loyalty of the group or the leader which diminishes the individual, or, at best, contrasts his pleasure with his duty or honor” (147). The “molecular tension of egos” diminishes the individual, reduces his power of significant action, and endangers his very soul. The hero finds himself in a wasteland, a nightmare which demands a scapegoat (Kafka’s *The Trial*, *The Metamorphosis*), a hellish world where work has become perverted (as in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*), and the hero is a prisoner of a tyrannical order, reduced under the gaze of Big Brother (Orwell’s *1984*).

The problem of scale has, as we saw in our discussion of simile, both a metaphysical and a physical aspect. The fate of the citizens of empire, on the one hand, is like that of the self-absorbed demons in Milton’s Pandemonium:

Behold a wonder! They but now who seemd  
In bigness to surpass Earths Giant Sons  
Now less than smallest Dwarfs, in narrow room  
Throng numberless, like that Pigmean Race

Beyond the *Indian Mount*, or Faerie Elves... (1.777-81)<sup>64</sup>

Lacking the perspective of both heaven and earth, those “Seraphic Lords” (1.794) have no idea of the hellish degree to which they have been reduced. Happily they fall in with Mammon’s proposal, announced in the second book, neither to battle nor make peace with heaven, but “seek/ Our own good from our selves” (252-53), such that “Our greatness will appear/ Then most conspicuous, when great things of small... We can create” (257-58; 260). Our best hope, says Mammon, lies in parody, for “cannot we his Light/ Imitate when we please?” (270). We can plunder the earth for “hidden lustre, Gemms and Gold” (271). If heaven glitters, then we must mine gold. Mammon values resemblance, simulacra or show, as the best means of putting to work their envy at all they have lost: “Nor want we skill or Art, from whence to raise/ Magnificence; and what can Heav’n show more?” (272-73). The easiest solution, according to Mammon, is to turn Hell into a sort of underground Disneyland.

Pandemonium in Milton is clearly raising epistemological if not ontological questions, but the surface nature of such parody or simulacra reminds us of the quite physical laws according to which small bodies suffer inordinately from the adhesive

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<sup>64</sup> Milton parodies Homer’s and Virgil’s bee-simile in *Paradise Lost* to describe the thronging of the demons in their new citadel at Pandemonium, the “high Capital” of Satan their ‘heroic king’: “From every Band and squared Regiment/ By place or choice the worthiest; they anon/ With hunderds and with thousands trooping came/ Attended: all access was throng’d, the Gates/ And Porches wide, but chief the spacious Hall/ (Though like a cover’d field, where Champions bold/ Wont ride in arm’d, and at the Soldans chair/ Defi’d the best of *Paynim* chivalry/ To mortal combat or career with Lance)/ Thick swarm’d, both on the ground and in the air,/ Brusht with the hiss of russling wings. As Bees/ In spring time, when the Sun with *Taurus* rides,/ Pour forth thir populous youth about the Hive/ In clusters; they among fresh dewes and flowers/ Flie to and fro, or on the smoothed Plank,/ The suburb of thir Straw-built Cittadel,/ New rub’d with Baum, expatiate and confer/ Thir State affairs. So thick the aerie crowd/ Swarm’d and were straitn’d; till the Signal giv’n,/ Behold a wonder! They but now who seemd/ In bigness to surpass Earths Giant Sons/ Now less than smallest Dwarfs, in narrow room/ Throng numberless, like that Pigmear Race/ Beyond the *Indian Mount*, or Faerie Elves... / Thus incorporeal Spirits to smallest forms/ Reduc’d thir shapes immense, and were at large,/ Though without number still amidst the Hall/ Of that infernal Court. But far within/ And in thir own dimensions like themselves/ The great Seraphic Lords and Cherubim/ In close recess and secret conclave sat/ A thousand Demy-Gods on golden seat’s,/ Frequent and full” (1.756-97).

forces of minutiae on surfaces. Wigglesworth describes the problem insects face from these surface forces, chief among which is ‘surface tension’:

Molecules sufficiently close together attract one another; and since the molecules in a liquid are far closer together than they are in a gas, those molecules that lie at the surface of a liquid will be strongly attracted to one another. As a result the surface of a liquid in contact with air is tending always to contract and reduce itself to the smallest area possible. In fact the surface often behaves as though it were covered by an invisible elastic film... These powerful surface forces may sometimes involve insects in accidents. We often see insects that have landed on the surface of water trapped in the surface film. They seem to be struggling against invisible bonds that are holding them down. (31-32)

Wigglesworth’s description of the experience of an insect in a miniature world—trapped in “molecules sufficiently close together” to “attract one another,” encountering a world whose “surface often behaves as though it were covered by an invisible elastic film,” “struggling against invisible bonds that are holding him down”—sounds rather like the experience of a child playing a video game. At the same time, it also sounds uncannily like the torment Gregor undergoes in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*.

Walter Benjamin once noted the “physical perplexity” of Kafka’s sentences, which he ascribed to the author’s detection of a “tremendous tension” within the mystical tradition, as well as his experience as a “modern big-city dweller”—that is, “a modern citizen who knows that he is at the mercy of a vast machinery of officialdom whose functioning is directed by authorities that remain nebulous to the executive organs, let

alone to the people they deal with” (*Illuminations* 141). The physical perplexity of Kafka’s prose is, of course, at one with the *agon* undergone by his hero. Gregor is involved in a titanic struggle simply to get out of bed in the morning. The same energy employed by Achilles to chase down Hector and tear down the walls of Troy is, in Kafka’s tale, barely sufficient to open the bedroom door, move around the furniture, or cling to a picture.

Today we often feel, like Gregor, bogged down in minutiae, at the mercy of the very details by which we have built up our empire. A vast stretch of history falls between Homer’s occasional simile and the endless series of divisions by which we separate and join the forces that knit our experience in the modern world. Even so, the insect metaphor is still alive and well. Thousands now take relief from their mechanized labors to sit rapt before a flickering screen and surf the images of a Worldwide Web, dreaming of a pastoral retreat amidst the dew-glistening megabytes, the starkly segmented and commodified surfaces. Homer’s warriors took heart from these winged spirits, which hummed to a cosmic scheme. We mobilize our resources and martial our ingenuity to stop the Y2K Bug before the system crashes, heading off the catastrophe of zeros and ones in an infinite series.

### Chapter 3 Fable: The Insect Narrative

#### *Towards the Structure of Fable*

In the previous section we saw how the simile is a kind of insect structure. The elements of a simile are attached to, depend or hang on other things. Analogies cut across or abstract from different whole bodies, identifying elements held in common to spin a thread of comparison and juxtapose scales. We also saw that they have a special way of reducing. In epic simile, the human narrative is momentarily reduced to a ‘seeming’ picture. This is how humans appear, sometimes, when possessed by frenzy or when swarming *en masse* for war. Reduction renders humans daemonic—strong, quick, and fearless. The reduction of simile can evoke a sense of merely physical or emotional distance, a bird’s-eye view or a sense of nostalgia. Such similes display what is above and below the human and gives the reader a glimpse of a total cosmos. Surface is hyper-developed relative to inner content, resulting in a proliferation of details, delineations of flattened surfaces, weaving of a multiplicity of images into a separate but parallel scene, with elaborate picturesque effect.

In the present section, we shall be examining the insect within narrative forms known as ‘fable.’ This progression is quite logical, insofar as fable narratives are extended similes. Indeed, there is a “natural” reason why some essential fables virtually had to be about insects. A fable needs the correct protagonist, one which is *already* a *simile*. I shall argue further, however, that fables are stories which are also exoskeletal.

We can readily see this if we take a look at one of the most famous of Aesop's fables, "The Grasshopper and the Ant." The version below is Jean de La Fontaine's, in Marianne Moore's English translation:

Until fall, a grasshopper  
Chose to chirr;  
With starvation as foe  
When northeasters would blow,  
And not even a gnat's residue  
Or caterpillar's to chew,  
She chirred a recurrent chant  
Of want beside an ant,  
Begging it to rescue her  
With some seeds it could spare  
Till the following year's fell.  
"By August you shall have them all,  
Interest and principal."  
Share one's seeds? Now what is worse  
For any ant to do?  
Ours asked, "When fair, what brought you through?"  
—"I sang for those who might pass by chance—  
Night and day, an't you please."  
—"Sang?" you say? You have put me at ease.  
A singer! Excellent. Now dance." (Moore 13)

Despite the rhetorical charm of the La Fontaine-Moore coat, there is no mistaking the plain, basic and Aesopian facts: An ant says, “I work” and then a grasshopper says, “I sing.” Everything of significance is on the outside in fable. Unlike most realistic narratives, which are not only tremendously longer but also feel deeper and more endoskeletal, fable is insected and ‘out on the surface.’ The whole point is to make us think, ‘What is the structure?’

*The Insect Body is Rigid, Exoskeletal*

A third physical characteristic of the insect, equally important as the first two, is its hard bony exterior. For Aristotle, this hardness of body was third among its most prominent features, after smallness and insectation. He identifies insects as creatures that, “as the name implies”:

have nicks either on the belly, or on both belly and back, and have no one part distinctly osseous and no one part distinctly fleshy, but are throughout a something intermediate between bone and flesh; that is to say, their body is hard all through, inside and outside. (*HA* 523b)

The same aspect of insect anatomy is thus articulated by Pliny in his *Natural History*:

So far as is perceptible, insects do not appear to possess sinews or bones or cartilage or fat or flesh and not even a fragile rind, such as some sea creatures have, nor anything that can properly be termed a skin, but a substance of a nature intermediate between all of these, as it were dried

up, softer in the sinew but harder or rather more durable in all the other parts. (437-39)<sup>65</sup>

To the physical strength and furious metabolism associated with small size, we may now add hardness of body to our reasons why the insect has seemed especially suited for heroic comparisons. We should not be surprised to find that the hard insect body has often suggested martial imagery to colorful minds. Nor is Pliny alone in marveling at the soldier-like impenetrability in a creature so small and capable of such delicate productions. Modern zoologists, too, are impressed by the insect's amazingly strong skeletal substance. Wigglesworth notes, for instance, that wood-boring beetles "can bite through sheets of lead, silver, copper, or zinc...which means that their mandibles are harder than these substances" (10). The incorporation of sclerotin with chitin is a versatile compound, "readily molded into the most elaborate structures," forming "the great spines on the legs of cockroaches," "the delicate stylets of mosquitoes and other piercing and sucking insects, the intricate parts of which fit so wonderfully together," "the elaborate mating organs of the two sexes, and the stings of bees and wasps" (11). Divided into parts, blazoned in clearly marked lines, often metallic in appearance, the body looks less like animal flesh than artificially hammered plates. The insect, encased in what resembles a coat of mail, suggests a soldier, impersonal, impenetrable, sealed off from natural decay or death.

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<sup>65</sup> Pliny seems at first to be repeating Aristotle but then, like a ventriloquist, speaks in another voice. His wish to replace the grey phrase "intermediate substance" with the more colorful "rind" puts him in mind of a sea creature, and plunges him into contradictory reflections. First he says insects possess neither sinews nor other parts, and then he states that their sinews are softer than all other parts. He seems content to swim between two conflicting claims, as if trusting that they will incorporate themselves according to some happy, if illogical, art. No doubt an insect's small size plays a role in such inconsistencies, but this is also Pliny's encyclopedic style. He stitches together items read in books, placing data side by side without worrying whether they agree with each other. Some principle of metonymy seems to be at work in Pliny, whereby proximity is felt to be a sufficient guarantee of identity.

Let us return, for a moment, to the Homeric hero. A hero's utmost hope, that his name will be immortalized through his action, may be said to steel, or 'armor,' him for battle. Conversely, his persistent fear about body desecration or corruption may be read allegorically as a desire to preserve a monumental or statuesque quality. The archetypal scene for this anxiety is when Achilles, overjoyed at his mother's gift of armor newly forged in heaven, obsesses over Patroclus' corpse, how "carrion blowflies/ will settle into his wounds, gouged deep by the bronze,/ worms will breed and seethe, defile the man's corpse" (Fagles 19.30-32). His mother, the ocean goddess Thetis, reassures him she will "protect him from those swarms,/ the vicious flies that devour men who fall in battle./ He could lie there dead till a year has run its course/ and his flesh still stand firm, even fresher than now" (Fagles 19.36-39). Hermes performs the same role later on in the twenty-fourth book, distracting Priam, agonizing over the corpse of his son Hector. Hermes explains that the gods have placed ambrosia in Hector's wounds. Elsewhere in the epic, insects make only ghostly appearances in similes that tend to decorate a hero's spirit. Here, however, insects are real agents that cut into and threaten the wholeness of that hero's body, demonic forces of decay that can only be averted by divine favor. Real maggots or worms, writhing in the flesh, may be counteracted, however, by godly vigilance in simile, insectal visions that turn or trope in the mind. The latter are ambrosial, balms of wholeness to heal the ugly pain of dismemberment, sips of immortality to shore against mortal dissolution.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Crane's pictures of war have a photographic accuracy, as when the youth stops "near the threshold," stricken with horror "at the sight of a thing": "The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip" (48). At last able to flee, he is "pursued by a sight of the black ants swarming greedily upon the gray face and venturing horribly near to the eyes" (*RBoC* 49).

Beyond these heroic associations, however, we may also add the poetical. The stiffness and rigidity of this body material has caused many to wonder at the challenges Nature faced in putting an animal together out of such unyielding materials. Pliny marvels that the insects, with their “vertebrae shaped like gutter-tiles,” show “a craftsmanship on the part of Nature that is more remarkable than in any other case: inasmuch as in large bodies or at all events the larger ones the process of manufacture was facilitated by the *yielding* nature of the material, whereas in these minute nothings what method, what power, what labyrinthine perfection is displayed!” (NH 433). But either way, whether as the armor of a hero or the face of a well-wrought urn, the rigid body of the insect challenges our ability to penetrate to the heart of its strange existence.

From a certain point of view, the insect body is almost like the human body turned inside out, with a surface exterior that most closely reflects our structural interior. The outwardly visible, human body surface is mostly soft flesh and skin, supported from within by a rigid and mostly hidden structure or skeleton. After maturity, these fleshy materials remain flexible, facilitating continual, though gradual, growth or change. The surface of an insect, on the other hand, looks and feels to the touch more like bone or nail. Its structure is given by a hard exterior that completely hides an amorphous inside. Because this external skeleton is not flexible like human flesh or skin, growth in the manner normal to humans is impossible. Thus, the skeleton must be periodically shed or molted in order for the organism to increase in size, entailing a radical change in body structure. Vulnerability to the crushing force of gravity during the molting phase, entomologists believe, partly accounts for the limit to insects’ size. An insect wears its skeleton on its sleeve.

A law of physics underlies the formation of this hard exterior, or “exoskeleton,” the name zoologists use today. In an earlier section discussing some of the physical properties of small bodies, we had occasion to note how their surface to volume ratio is much higher, resulting in what appear to us to be fantastic feats of muscle strength, flight, and energetic action. We also noted how, balancing a decrease in the effects of gravity, there was an increase in factors like surface tension. A raindrop can become, for an insect, a watery prison. The exoskeleton, too, leads us to ponder how critical is the surface of tiny organic bodies. That is, a third consequence of the great difference in surface-to-volume ratio in miniature creatures is the enormous increase in the rate of evaporation (a function of surface area) relative to body moisture (a function of volume). Creatures whose bodies are as tiny as insects have a very high ratio of surface to volume values, hence a high rate of evaporation relative to water content. As a result, an insect’s small size has a critical impact upon its ability to retain that water which, as for all organisms, is vital for its survival. One could say that the insect body contains less moisture than its surface would reveal, or let escape through its surface. An exoskeleton is absolutely necessary to prevent a swift death through dessication. The hard exoskeletal body is a watertight and waterproof armor necessary to the insect’s survival.

Since the insect’s very body, the shape and form of its being, is so heavily predicated upon a response to the environmental dictates of the surface to volume ratio, we may assume that its rigidity, like its smallness, amount to a narrowness of options, a compulsion to behave in certain limited ways. Indeed, we observe insect behavior in many ways to be more or less predictable. As Wigglesworth says:

The behavior of insects give the impression of being stereotyped. The insect seems to have a set of prearranged acts, each well suited to its normal conditions of life. When faced with a given situation it produces the appropriate 'act.' (216)

When we refer to animals in this manner, we tend to mean that they are more or less falling back upon 'instincts.' The lower animals, accordingly as they seem to deviate from mere instinct, show a greater or lesser proximity to humans. If this is the general case, then insects lie at the distant range of the spectrum— they seem to be almost wholly governed by their instincts. So stereotyped are they in their behavior that they 'know' what they have to do— acts which are, to our eyes, quite sophisticated and complex— from birth:

These acts, or 'patterns of behavior,' are built into the nervous system in some way that we do not in the least understand, and they are inherited like any other character in the form or color of the body, so that on the first occasion they are called for they can be performed with absolute precision— in exactly the same way as a growing insect can form a perfect head or brain without having had any previous practice or experience. (216)

Like the "intermediate substance" of the insect body, between bone and pliant flesh, the mind of the insect leaves us with feelings that are somewhat mixed. On the one hand, we feel wonder, even amazement, whenever we contemplate the extreme economy and efficiency of the insect life. On the other hand, it is hard to understand how insects can be so effective in acting instinctually, because our sense of ourselves is largely predicated

upon our ability to learn and improve through practice and experience. Our rational nature assumes a capacity, and a need, to evaluate, deliberate, and draw certain conclusions before we act. For us, the insect's stereotypical reactions—the attraction to, or avoidance of, light, for instance—indicate a qualitative difference in experience, a lesser measure of awareness. In place of the human soul, the insect appears to substitute an engine, a program, an instinctive drive that either impels it on or repels it from a disagreeable sensation. The insect, to our mind, lacks, to an extreme degree, that quality which most distinguishes us as being rational and human. Or, at least, the insect performs its deliberations at a speed and at a level that is imperceptible to us. Since its actions do not seem as deliberate, we deny it the possibility of consciousness.<sup>67</sup> But we may still appreciate the expedience of Nature in all of this. The brevity of insect life—a function, again, of its tiny size—makes learning, after all, far less important for survival than the possession of built-in reactions. Reflecting upon the human parallel, Wigglesworth writes:

It is not easy to compare this kind of behavior with our own, which seems to be so much more dependent upon practice and experience. But it is well to remember that most of our own activities from minute to minute are of exactly the same performed type as those of the insect; that it may

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<sup>67</sup> Consciousness, whether as an attribute of the soul or an activity of the brain, was mostly ignored by the behaviorist model that arose in the early twentieth century. In *Neuronal Man* Jean-Pierre Changeux writes: “We interact with our environment and communicate with our fellow human beings by moving our lips, eyes, and hands; by a set of motor activities that we call behavior. The study of these activities took shape in 1913, through a dynamic scientific movement initiated by John B. Watson—*behaviorism*. Concerned with eliminating the subjective from scientific observation, behaviorism restricted itself to considering the relation between variations in the environment (the stimulus conditions) and the motor response that was provoked. It was enough to know the rules governing these relationships to explain behavior. Why should one be concerned about the contents of the ‘black box’ inserted between the stimulus and the response? As one might have expected, the narrowness of this approach led the behavioral sciences, and with them many other human sciences, to an impasse” (97).

well be that many others which we believe to be based on 'reason' are really of the same kind; and that in any case the brain and nervous system which operate our behavior are performed in precisely the same fashion as those of the insect and certainly work on the same general principles...

The chief difference between the brain of the insect and the human brain is one of quantity. We have immeasurably more brain cells and connecting fibers. This vast supply of nerve cells and connections provides for a corresponding variety in behavior, and capacity for learning. The insect with its *relatively* few nerve cells is compelled to economize its equipment and to organize its behavior along set lines, and with comparatively little scope for individual learning from experience. (251)

The instinctive behavior of insects, while provoking marvel and wonder, is associated with other emotional responses less agreeable. Rigidity of behavior in the insect seems to us consonant with its bony façade. In the endoskeletal human, however, a too-rigid persona lacks grace. In a natural context, we associate the human body with generation, growth and seasonal change; psychologically, this is reflected in a certain mental flexibility, choice and deliberation. In a more artificial context, however, there are certain types of human being who exhibit an unnatural rigidity of physical appearance and behavior, with a corresponding tendency to conform to artificial standards of time. When developed to an extreme degree, such types express an unwholesome flattening or a narrowing of being.

The classic example is the well-trained soldier, a special case forced into a certain rigid role or function the more he identifies with his position. To that degree he is

hardened, made to seem less natural, animal, or human. He lives a life that is more rigid, narrow and limited in the actions he can make. He is no longer an individual, but part of a regiment.<sup>68</sup> He is denied the right to deliberate or to think. He measures time not by the seasons or the rise and setting of the sun, but by the seconds on a stopwatch, the pace of a march, the beat of a drum. The rhythm of the drumbeat emphasizes the soldier's strict conformity to an externally imposed military order, or *taxis*. This rational order is necessary in direct proportion to the degree to which he must be able to follow commands and act effectively in the most irrational and anarchic of situations.<sup>69</sup>

We may observe, in modern times, many of these same characteristics in the disciplined office worker, who is trained to deny his desires or personal preferences. As the soldier is identified as a member of a regiment, the worker is always reminded that he is but a part of a department, a 'team player.' He works from nine to five and often late into the night; the 'type A personality,' however, goes far beyond the call of duty. Time is measured in deadlines that are themselves market-driven. Within the company, each worker may be strictly partitioned from others in his office or cell. Socializing tends to be restricted to communications of benefit to the entire corporation. On the largest scale, capitalism is said to work through the competition between, and merging of, whole

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*: "Directly he was working at his weapon like an automatic affair. He suddenly lost concern for himself, and forgot to look at a menacing fate. He became not a man but a member. He felt that something of which he was a part—a regiment, an army, a cause, or a country—was in a crisis. He welded into a common personality which was dominated by a single desire. For some moments he could not flee no more than a little finger can commit a revolution from a hand"(34).

<sup>69</sup> The drumbeat dominates "The Ants," the apocalyptic final act of the Capek brothers' *The Insect Play*, where its humorless rhythm expresses the bombast of ideology, the simplistic mindset of the soldier, a sense of inevitability, and the regime's rigid division of humanity into 'us and them': "Chief Engineer: One, two! War forced upon us—one, two, one, two! In the name of Justice! No quarter! For your hearths and homes! One, two, one, two! We are only defending ourselves. War on the world. For a Greater Home and Country. One, two—a ruthless enemy. Will of the Nation! To battle—strike hard. Historical claims. Brilliant spirit of the Army. One, two, one, two!" (164).

companies. On a smaller scale, however, the individual office worker often seems to be in competition with the machine.<sup>70</sup>

The sheer efficiency of stereotyped behavior in insects, too, no doubt accounts for the frequency with which they are compared to robots. Long before the invention of microchips, entomologists marveled at the tiny size of the insect brain, which is small even when compared to the size of a nerve cell. As James R. Busvine remarks in *Insects, Hygiene and History*: “It is well to remember when we speak of a simple nervous system, that the brain of a small insect is able to perform tasks which one could reasonably compare, I suppose, with those of a modern electronic computer. A notable difference is that the insect brain may weigh only a microgrammè ( 49). The relatively simple nervous system of the insect brain means a reduced dependence on one central brain. This is the major reason why decapitated insects live quite well until finally they perish due to starvation or dessication. On a macrocosmic level, we may draw a parallel between this rather gruesome survival of the decapitated insect and the altogether amazing behavior of the insect colony as a whole. In *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, Douglas Hofstadter compares the workings of a make-believe ant colony, “Aunt Hillary,” to that of a human brain, in that the behavior of the colony/brain is radically more complex than that of individual ants/neurons (314-33; 382). Today, at research centers like MIT, the interactions of individuals within ant and termite colonies

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Grant Jeffery’s *Science and Technology Stocks* (1961): “The firm’s concept of an armored ‘servo soldier’ amounts to a one-man tank whose running, jumping, and lifting activities are electronically stepped up to rival the performance of a King Kong. For the construction market, Litton is working on an exoskeleton with dimensions twice those of an average worker, permitting the occupant of this hulking frame to take immense strides while handling a steel I-beam as easily a baseball bat” (qtd. in Fletcher 55).

are being simulated in computer programs designed to teach children how to interact, and learn from, decentralized models of behavior.<sup>71</sup>

On a more emotional level, however, the insect-as-robot strikes many as a simply horrifying model for humanity. We know all too well the devastating results of individuals guided by simple programming. In the twentieth century, for instance, fascist ideology made possible the extermination of human beings with no more compunction than one would step on a pile of ants. The stereotypical behavior of insects is relatively life-affirming; insects are guided, however unconsciously, by an instinct of survival. In our own time, we have seen the rise of the religious terrorist, who adheres so fanatically to the dictates of dogma that he is willing to exterminate himself in an effort to bring about the death of thousands.

### *From Simile to Fable*

There is a moving scene in the third book of the *Iliad* when Helen displays herself on the tower of Priam, drawing the attention of the “old men of the realm” gathered nearby. These old warriors, no longer able to prove themselves on the field, are still prized for their eloquence in speaking, in leading others. Past battle, their experience has ripened into wisdom. The poet compares the sweet sound of their voices to that of cicadas. We do not hear the old chiefs speak just yet— in the moment addressed by the

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<sup>71</sup> Mitchel Resnick, a researcher at MIT, has developed a computer program called StarLogo to cultivate a more “decentralized mindset” in young schoolchildren. In *Turtles, Termites, and Traffic Jams: Explorations in Massively Parallel Microworlds*, he explains the value of studying systems modeled on ant colonies: “Each individual ant is quite simple. But an ant colony as a whole is capable of rather sophisticated behavior. Thus ant colonies have come to be viewed as a prototypical example of how complex-group behavior can arise from simple-individual behavior. As such, many people see the colony/ant relationship as an illuminating model (or, at least, an inspiring metaphor) for thinking about other group-individual relationships—such as the relationship between an organ and its cells, a cell and its macromolecules, a corporation and its employees, or a country and its citizens” (60).

simile, the humans are seen, or rather, ‘spoken for’ by the insects— but they are rendered touchingly in the image articulated by the poet.

And there they were, gathered around Priam...

.....

The old men of the realm held seats above the gates.

Long years had brought their fighting days to a hall

but they were eloquent speakers still, clear as cicadas

settled on treetops, lifting their voices through the forest,

rising softly, falling, dying away... So they waited,

the old chiefs of Troy, as they sat aloft the tower. (Fagles 3.175; 179-84)

It is a poignant stay in the narrative, for the elders are about to testify, like witnesses, to the beauty that mercilessly drives on the bloodshed of war year after year. In the passage following, these orators curse the day Trojan Paris set eyes on the Achaian lovely, yet feel captivated when they themselves behold her beauty. Men of experience, by custom expected to guide others by their superior knowledge and reasoning, they are themselves captivated by Helen’s glorious beauty, a beguiling surface.<sup>72</sup> We imagine the grating murmurs gradually rising and transfixing us in their melting crescendo. Bereft of all the old saws, their eyes teaching their hearts instead to play the old fiddle, the elders are reduced to songsters. Here is a shrill but glowing testimony to the simmering tension that Helen, a goddess in human form, has the power to resurrect in their withered bodies,

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<sup>72</sup> By contrast, an insect serenade in Crane’s novel underscores the soldiers’ impatience for action: “Presently the army again sat down to think. The odor of the peaceful pines was in the men’s nostrils. The sound of monotonous axe blows rang through the forest, and the insects, nodding upon their perches, crooned like old women. The youth returned to his theory of a blue demonstration” (*RBoC* 22). Henry Fleming had fed himself with expectations of a glorious Homeric encounter, his mind full of “large pictures extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds” (5), but now the insects mock that and suggest that he is a minute part of an impersonal and superficial exercise, a vast and meaningless dumbshow.

wistful souls. As elsewhere, the simile here condenses, in an instant of vision, an arresting physical image. In its oblique but striking comparison, humans inside the epic narrative are juxtaposed with diminutive creatures outside in nature, or rather, in the artificial nature fabricated by the simile, and so made larger than life. Suspending us above the action, entrancing us with a tiny piece of embroidery, the similes free us to contemplate the expanse of the total tapestry.

The simile of the elders and the passage that follows illustrate how wisdom sometimes bows to beauty, reason surrenders to feeling, practicality yields to a more eloquent and languorous music. The black and white, rigid, law of nature dictating that we always behave strategically, choose to do what we need to survive, occasionally does bend to the green and lugubrious beauty that makes brief moments memorable forever. We may simply note how the poet, comparing these withered old voices to the pulsations of the heated chorus, recalls us to that chastening tone that sometimes relents in the face of an awful beauty. But there is a palpable difference between suggesting, on the one hand, that the elders evoked a feeling like cicadas' music, and on the other, stating that they were utterly identical with them. The simile maintains a decorum proper to heroic comparison and human sensibility that the metaphor— in its extreme reduction of the human to a mere type— abjures entirely.

We must now turn our attention to this other, more abstract form of comparison known as 'metaphor.' The word derives from Greek, *metapherein* < *meta-* "beyond" + *pherein* "to carry." Aristotle says that a simile is also a metaphor, and that both are felicitous because:

We all naturally find it agreeable to get hold of new ideas easily: words express ideas, and therefore those words are the most agreeable that enable us to get hold of new ideas.... It is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh. (*Rhetoric* 1410b)

Similes, he says, become metaphors when the explanation is omitted. But there is a greater difference he mentions, important with regard to fable because evocative of contemplation or analysis. In the metaphor, unlike in the simile, two things are identified such that the mind wants to examine the relation:

The simile, as has been said before, is a metaphor, differing from it only in the way it is put; and just because it is longer it is less attractive. Besides, it does not say outright that 'this' is 'that,' and therefore the hearer is less interested in the idea. (*Rhetoric* 1410b)

Less obviously insected than similes because they obviate the need for the conjunctives "like" or "as," metaphors are thus able to project, superficially at least, a more seamless identity. When such metaphors are extended to the length of a brief narrative, however, the seam remains as a telltale zipper on a dress or rivets on a suit of armor. Such a metaphoric narrative, or fable (< Latin *fabula*, "discourse, narrative, plot"), possesses an obviously over-determined surface, which seems simultaneously to disguise and display a preciously guarded interior. Metaphor is a figure of speech that 'carries [us] beyond'; its extension to the length of a narrative produces caricature (Italian *caricatura*, "over-loaded"). Fables, like insects, wear heavy burdens lightly.

Fables are obviously over-determined because of the morals appended to the end of them, which seriously restrict our responses to them as works of imagination. These

morals flatten the fable narratives as they explain them, turning characters into mere caricatures of types that are recognizably human. On the other hand, the entire design of a fable leads us to anticipate the final sentence. The instant an animal in fable speaks, its animate quality is lessened, and we are beckoned to peer below the exoskeleton to the lesson or ‘law’ underneath. Indeed, both *fabula* and *fatum* (“decision, decree; that which has been spoken”) are derived from Latin *fari*, “to speak”—whence our word “fate,” the force that unalterably determines, in advance, how things will happen. Fables condition us to think more fatefully, i.e., in terms of destiny, final results or outcomes. The more accustomed we become to fables, the more readily we respond to them in the manner of a reflex mental reaction. Initially amused by the cartoon pretext, or charmed by the sweetness and delicacy of humanoid minutiae, we quickly trade the sketch or outline on its surface for the ratio or proportion that has truly determined its construction. In contrast to Greek tragedy, whose plot is a *mythos* or traditional story with quasi-historical characters, a fable plot is a *logos*, a “theme or idea.” Indeed, *logos* is the word originally used by the ancient Greeks for “fable.” *Logos* also meant to them: “a computation or reckoning; a relation, correspondence or proportion; an explanation; an inward debate of the soul; a divine utterance or oracle.” In thinking about fable, we should bear these other related meanings in mind.

Unlike similes, which silently compare two physical images, the morals in metaphorical fables speak stridently, oracularly, as if a disembodied voice of wisdom—the spirit of a maxim, old saw or proverb—had suddenly become incarnate in a physical form. Even more than similes, which are analogies of a sort, fables are intensely self-conscious logical entities. Aristotle describes fables as a type of “argument by Example;”

they have “the nature of induction, which is the foundation of reasoning” (*Rhetoric* 1393a). Describing the method of their composition, he says: “You will in fact frame them just as you frame illustrative parallels: all you require is the power of thinking out your analogy, a power developed by intellectual training” (1394a). Although they, like similes, depict something, fables are illustrations of another kind. Morally arresting, fables depict a truth rather than a physically beautiful or picturesque scene, and resemble narratives more than descriptive images.

Recall for a moment how, in speaking about the insect above, we had noted that a rigid body construction was necessitated by the deadly forces that beset an organism that small. The exoskeleton reflects a radical compromise between the life within and the world without. All creatures need water to live, but the insect’s entire being is dictated and fashioned in accordance with a single law: the surface to volume ratio, because that governs the rate of water evaporation relative to body mass.

If we were to speak metaphorically now and convert the insect physique into a brief fable, we might say that an insect is always ‘on trial’ for its smallness. The question becomes: Does an animate body (attitude) that small physically, and nearly void within, deserve to live? The judge (Nature, or instinct of survival), naturally seeks a swift decision. A negative conviction would bring a sentence of death pronounced, of course, dryly. The exoskeleton (fable narrative)—rigid and compartmentalized but lightweight and efficient, a physical emblem of the insect’s instinctive and stereotypical way of thinking and reacting—surfaces as the primary witness, and the insect’s main source of defense in this case. As the lawyer (fabulist) interrogates the evidence, meticulously

examining the pros and cons of smallness, the jury (reader) considers the advantages and disadvantages of possessing a narrow perspective and limited range of choices.

Perhaps such a fable seems merely strained or ridiculous. Few readers, however, would object to the rough definition, that a fable is a metaphor extended to the length of a tiny narrative, all of whose parts are directed towards a law, a kind of judgment. This law, moral or oracle is usually announced at the end of the fable where it arbitrates between the two conflicting attitudes around which the plot tends to revolve. Fables are stories especially drawn to ‘bottom lines,’ *sententiae*, or summaries of final consequences. Such sentences, pronounced oracularly by a detached and usually disembodied voice external to the fable, purport to bring perspective and a sense of proportion into the argument. Often they are used, for instance, when the *size* of importance of something has been exaggerated.<sup>73</sup> In this way, a fable often has the effect of a witness giving evidence or testifying on behalf of the desired ruling (*Rhetoric* 1394a). This ruling, in turn, is articulated in the form of a general precept that applies, as Aristotle says, not to individual cases but to whole classes of men (1356b). It claims a universal validity, as if capable of governing practical conduct in all analogous cases.

According to the history of fable surveyed by Ben Edwin Perry in *Babrius and Phaedrus*, fables at the time of Demetrius (fifth century B.C.) were collected in handbooks for orators and arranged beneath their appropriate rhetorical *topoi* for easy reference (xi). As they gathered more weight as stories per se, their morals began appearing at the end. The ‘evolution’ of fables shows them becoming increasingly

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Aristotle: “All orators, besides their special lines of argument, are bound to use, for instance, the topic of the Possible and Impossible; and to try to show that a thing has happened, or will happen in future. Again, the topic of Size is common to all oratory; all of us have to argue that things are bigger or smaller than they seem, whether they are making political speeches, speeches of eulogy or attack, or prosecuting or defending in the law-courts” (*Rhetoric* 1391b).

detached from the appended moral as they increased in length and embellishment. Before they could qualify as *belles lettres*, or be turned into poetry— an event late in their history, the second century A.D.— fables had to prove they could exist in their own right, independent of a larger oration (xii). Fables grew in size and richness of texture as they liberated themselves from the didactic ‘laws’ that constricted them, that is, the morals, and stretched themselves to amuse and entertain (xc-xci). Like the smallness of the insect that necessitated an exoskeleton, the moral nature of fable had definite consequences. The moral preserved its life but restricted growth beyond a certain size.

We may briefly return now to the analogy drawn between the parts of the fable and the exoskeleton of the insect. The general, abstract, and incorporeal maxim is given solidity via a surface explanation. External to the precept, this surface appears as a low mimetic simulacrum conjoining two or more natural bodies. Barely animal in any naturalistic sense, the surface is hardened and insected by the underlying logical structure that exists to preserve and protect the drop of insight contained within. The reader does not just read the tale by gliding over the surface, but cuts into it with his intellect. He must peel away the constricted outer surface in order to apply the lesson to his life, thus enlarging his understanding.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> The traits described above as exoskeletal and characteristic of both fable and insect body and behavior (i.e., an increase in surface tension, a stereotyped manner, the sense of prearranged acts and built-in reactions) might be applied to allegorical texts, generally. Although allegorical reading of scripture had been a customary practice within the Midrashic tradition of “wisdom” interpretation, Christian commentators extended this exegetical practice by reading the entire Old Testament history as a prefiguration of God’s incarnation as the Logos or Christ. By this means, “the letter that kills” — the literal, (natural) historical, narrative, the *exoskeletal* body of the text— is sublated by the “spirit that gives life”— the truth of the Word, the underlying doctrine, inner soul or didactic message. The Christian message of redemption by grace and faith (replacing the Judaic order by law and works) is divined by *in-section*, allegorically reading between the lines of the text. As Christ’s spirit resurrects from the body in death, so the intellect extracts from texts the spiritual “kernal” and discards the physical “chaff.”

## *Aggregation and Dismemberment*

Many fables were originally inset as a tiny part of a larger narrative— an oration, usually. Like the parable in scripture or the exemplum that medieval preachers might affix to their sermons, such a narrative was designed to teach or restrain men easily swayed by emotion or otherwise unable to reason properly.<sup>75</sup> In the following example, Aesop slyly reads the public assembly as a crowd clamoring for the demagogue’s blood. In the flood of unchecked emotion, they have been reduced to a swarm of tormenters, impulsive and unreflecting, indistinguishable from one another apart from their shared thirst for revenge.

Aesop spoke to the public assembly at Samos when a demagogue was being tried for his life. ‘A fox which was crossing the river,’ he said, ‘was carried into a deep gully, and all his efforts to get out were unavailing. Besides all the other suffering that he had to endure, he was tormented by a swarm of ticks which fastened on him. A hedgehog which came that way on its travels was sorry for him and asked if it should pick off the ticks. ‘No, please don’t,’ replied the fox. ‘Why not?’ said the hedgehog. ‘Because these have already made a good meal on me, and don’t suck much blood now. But if you take them away, another lot will come, all

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<sup>75</sup> Aristotle emphasizes that fables are easily invented parallels “suitable for addresses to popular assemblies” (*Rhetoric* 1394a). Syllogistic in nature, their reasonings are adapted to an “audience of untrained thinkers” who cannot follow a long train of reasoning (1357a). An orator should use them when he feels he will be unable to persuade hearers by complicated logical argument: “Thus we must not carry its reasoning too far back, or the length of our argument will cause obscurity: nor must we put in all the steps that lead to our conclusion, or we shall waste words in saying what is manifest. It is this simplicity that makes the uneducated more effective than the educated when addressing popular audiences—makes them, as the poets tell us, ‘charm the crowd’s ears more finely.’ Educated men lay down broad general principles; uneducated men argue from common knowledge and draw obvious conclusions” (1395b). Here we note a similarity between Aristotle’s comments on obscurity of reasoning and the problem of proper magnitude in his *Poetics*. Although the former refers to intellectual capacity and the latter deals with mimetic representation, both stress the ability of an audience to perceive the order of a given composition.

hungry, and drain every drop of blood I have left.’ ‘It is the same with you, men of Samos,’ said Aesop. ‘This man will do you no more harm, for he is rich. But if you kill him, others will come who are still hungry, and they will go on stealing until they have emptied your treasury.’

(Handford 17)

To make his case more persuasive, Aesop embodies the assembly as a wise individual, the coolly reflective and stoic fox. Not only does he thus attempt to flatter them, but also, to reduce the fury excited by their antagonist by depicting him as a mere irritant on a much larger and more secure body politic. Two metonymic relations—that of parts to whole and that of whole to parts—are made to mirror each other, subtly conveying a critical sense of proportion. On the one hand, the fabulist views the multiplicity of individuals as an aggregate, amassing into one more protected (exoskeletal) body a host of seemingly irrational and indistinguishable entities. On the other hand he dismembers, dissects or rather *in-sects*, a single, intimidating body into a number of isolated and inferior parts. The giant evil, the lone political parasite, is reduced to a swarm of hungry and like-minded types, parasites as numerous as they are minute, and hence, easily sated and inconsequential.

From this example we may also draw a number of observations applicable to most fables. Compared with other narratives, fables tend to have extremely short plots or tiny bodies. As parallels they are dependent by their very nature, and so, in a certain sense, parasitical. They attach themselves onto real life situations in order to derive nourishment from them. As narratives, they move very quickly to their destined end, and so could be said to have very short lifespans. Along the way, they entertain few options,

behaving as if the circuitry in their brains were relatively simplistic, or they couldn't be bothered with distractions. In the fraction of time required to read a fable, we feel taken outside real life, the stream of near and pressing events. We pause to ponder what is happening in the margins, particularly at those crossroads where we are beset with decisions. Wisdom necessitates we look beyond the dis-ease of the present moment. We need distance from our emotions which heat us in the moment if we wish to obtain clarity on future, and final, consequences.<sup>76</sup> Otherwise, we shall be driven like the insects themselves are, whose choices and ends are as limited as their bellies and lifespans.

And so we enter the tiny space engraved by the fable like that of a secular temple, an intaglio cut into a fictional world more profane than heroic, for the purposes of more rational contemplation (< Latin *contemplari*, “to observe carefully” < *templum*, “open space cut out by augurs for observation”). The dialogue form helps bring to the surface whichever attitudes or alternatives are in question.<sup>77</sup> Like plays, many fables depend on

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<sup>76</sup> Aristotle correlates emotional distance, capacity for judgment, use of detail, even as he distinguishes among the political, legal (“forensic”) and ceremonial species of oratory: “Now the style of oratory addressed to public assemblies is really just like scene-painting. The bigger the throng, the more distant is the point of view: so that, in the one and the other, high finish in detail is superfluous and seems better away. The forensic style is more highly finished; still more so is the style of language addressed to a single judge, with whom there is little room for rhetorical artifices, since he can take the whole thing in better, and judge of what is to the point and what is not; the struggle is less intense and so the judgement is undisturbed. This is why the same speakers do not distinguish themselves in all these branches at once; high finish is wanted least where dramatic delivery is wanted more, and here the speaker must have a good voice, and above all, a strong one. It is ceremonial oratory that is most literary, for it is meant to be read; and next to it forensic oratory” (*Rhetoric* 1414a).

<sup>77</sup> In obedience to the command of his inner daemon to “make music,” Socrates’ last act while awaiting execution was to versify some fables of Aesop (*Phaedo* 386). On trial for his life, he concocted a fable in which he identifies himself as a gadfly sent to goad the torpid citizenry of Athens: “For if you kill me you will not easily find another like me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by the God; and the state is like a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has given the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening on you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. And as you will not easily find another like me, I would advise you to spare me. I dare say that you may feel irritated at being suddenly awakened when you are caught napping; and you may think that if you were to strike me dead as Anytus advises, which you easily might, then you would sleep on for the remainder of your lives, unless God in his care of you sent another gadfly” (*Apology* 329).

repartee, on people encountering each other and arguing with each other, and virtually debating. You can actually see the author dichotomizing, if not infantilizing, the ideas set forth upon his mini-stage. Most fables involve a facile mirroring and critical distinctions are made clear through incongruous juxtapositions. Since the fable is compelled only to adhere to the proportions dictated by its logical algorithm, characters may be insected or conglomerated at will. As an example, consider the following fable by Phaedrus, as translated by Christopher Smart:

As on his head she chanc'd to sit,  
A man's bald-pate a gdfly bit;  
He, prompt to crush the little foe,  
Dealt on himself a grievous blow.  
At which the fly deriding said,  
'You that would strike an insect dead  
For one slight sting, in wrath so strict,  
What punishment will you inflict  
Upon yourself, who was so blunt  
To do yourself this gross affront?'—  
'O,' (says the party) 'as for me,  
I with myself can soon agree.  
The spirit of th' intention's all;  
But thou, detested canibal!  
Blood-sucker, to have thee secur'd,  
More would I gladly have endur'd.'

What by this moral tale is meant  
Is—those who wrong not with intent  
Are venial; but to those that do  
Severity, I think, is due. (1-20)

All kinds of dichotomizing may be employed to draw the reader to look more deeply than superficial resemblances, to see that the psychic figuration may differ even when the actions appear analogous.

*A Flattering Mirror and a Moral Coat*

There is an emotional effect, too, incurred by the fabling process. Insofar as the reader finds himself mirrored by the ignorant or unlawful attitude represented, he may feel trapped by the word-swarm, as if the fable had made its point only by stinging him. But the fable's insecting— or fractioning— of his attitude, embodying its pieces not as humans like himself, but as various recognizable and subhuman types, allows him to detach himself from the attitude sentenced to judgment. The analytic procedure of insecting, isolating, and reducing the human soul to attitudes or types, and then embodying them in animal characters which serve as their emblems, allows a rapid recognition of ideas for the sake of interpretative judgment.<sup>78</sup> Such ideas lie on the

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<sup>78</sup> The taxonomy of types collected in fable resembles that found in the 'bestiary,' a strange literary farrago which collects the ethical types manifest in God's creation. To a modern reader, the medieval bestiary seems to lie somewhere between earnest natural history and gratuitous sermon. The anonymous author of a twelfth century Latin bestiary, translated by T. H. White, notes the first "peculiarity" of the ant, "that these creatures walk in a line, and each of them carries one grain in his mouth. Their comrades do not say 'give us your grains' to the loaded ones, but they go along the tracks of the latter to the place where they found the corn, and they carry back their own grain to the nest. Mere words, you see, are not an indication of being provident. Provident people, like ants, betake themselves to that place where they will get their future reward" (97). In a thirteenth century bestiary, the English Franciscan Bartholomew Anglicus thus describes the purity of bees: "Also maidenhood of body without wem is common to them all, and so is birth also. For they are not medlied with service of Venus, nother resolved with lechery, nother bruised with sorrow of birth of children. And yet they bring forth most swarms of children" (122).

surface, as it were, of fable. Naturally, humans are much more differentiated and rounded than these emblematic features would suggest. As Aristotle writes:

In the great majority of animals there are traces of psychical qualities or attitudes, which qualities are more markedly differentiated in the case of human beings. For just as we pointed out resemblances in the physical organs, so in a number of animals we observe gentleness or fierceness, mildness or cross temper, courage or timidity, fear or confidence, high spirit or low cunning, and, with regard to intelligence, something equivalent to sagacity. (*HA* 588a)

The fact is, the nature of man is the most rounded off and complete, and consequently in man the qualities or capacities above referred to are found in their perfection. (*HA* 608b)

In-section and reduction also, however, offer comic relief. The more “rounded off and complete” human reader, thus detached by the analytic mood which the fable engenders, feels amused by being able to look down upon the characters at some distance. We may recall how Aesop above had deftly mirrored his audience at Samos without directly seeming to, wryly manipulating perspective by inverting proportions, playing upon the emotional effects of scale. He does not merely ridicule his audience, possessed as they are by feelings of vengeance and fear. He also offers them a more flattering option, a more complimentary self-image: They may identify with the fox (wise human being), who possesses the superior perspective. When the reader’s interpretation coincides with that of the verdict rendered, he is additionally flattered to discover that his own private

preference has been turned into a universal maxim, his ugly animus planed smooth to resemble a piece of proverbial wisdom.<sup>79</sup> In Aristotle's words:

One great advantage of Maxims to a speaker is due to the want of intelligence in his hearers, who love to hear him succeed in expressing as a universal truth the opinions which they hold themselves about particular cases... The maxim... is a general statement, and people love to hear in general terms what they already believe in some particular connexion...

*(Rhetoric 1395b)*

No doubt one reason why fables were so rhetorically effective was the immediate credence they lent the orator, whose use of maxims conveyed the impression that he had moral character. Indeed, Aristotle considered the appearance of moral purpose to be their single most important feature, rhetorically. The most important advantage of the use of maxims is that it "invests a speech with moral character":

There is moral character in every speech in which the moral purpose is conspicuous: and maxims always produce this effect, because the utterance of them amounts to a general declaration of moral principles: so that, if the maxims are sound, they display the speaker as a man of sound moral character. *(Rhetoric 1395b)*

Exoskeletal in structure and clearly patterned upon morals, fables invest or 'cloak' the speaker with character.

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<sup>79</sup> In the preface to his mock-epic *The Battle of the Books*, Jonathan Swift expresses the dynamic as follows: "Satyr is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover everybody's Face but their Own; which is the chief Reason for that kind of Reception it meets in the World, and that so very few are offended with it. But if it should happen otherwise, the Danger is not great; and, I have learned from long Experience, never to apprehend Mischief from those Understandings, I have been able to provoke; For, Anger and Fury, though they add Strength to the Sinews of the Body, yet are found to relax those of the Mind, and to render all its Efforts feeble and impotent" (215).

### *Refuge for the Little Man*

Another reason fables were appealing, particularly to a popular audience, was thematic: Fables frequently champion the cause of the lowly and weak—not that there is much place for Christian compassion in the cynical view fable casts on humanity. Fable satirizes soft and unfocused sentiment as often as the haughty upstart’s claim to nobility. The fable remains brutally faithful to the law of the jungle in its grimly realistic portrait. Yet in lifting the importance of perspective to nearly sacred status, fable often seems to enshrine, as in a hieroglyph, the belief that ‘right makes might,’ a creed reassuring to the disenfranchised. The fable has served as a refuge not merely for the morals which had struggled for practical currency since time immemorial, but for the hopes of those members of human society looked down upon or oppressed by those in power. Whether slave or commoner, those who lacked a political voice felt that fable spoke for them.<sup>80</sup>

A hare pursued by an eagle was in sore need of succour. It happened that the only creature in sight was a beetle, to which he appealed for help. The beetle bade him take courage, and on seeing the eagle approach called upon her to spare the suppliant who had sought its protection. But the eagle, despising so tiny a creature, devoured the hare before its eyes. The beetle bore her a grudge for this, and was continually on the watch to see

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<sup>80</sup> Aesop lived in Greece during the sixth century B.C. A prisoner of war sold into slavery (*andrapodon*), he is said to have earned favor and freedom through his wit and skill at contriving fables. According to Perry, Aesop was turned into a culture-hero and martyr after his death, the “spokesman of a homely rural culture characteristic of Phrygia and the satyrs coming into rivalry and conflict with the Apolline culture” (xli). The story of his death at the hands of the Delphians “describes what in reality must have been the ritual sacrifice of a scapegoat (*pharmakos*), with its accompanying aetiology giving the reason why the victim was killed: he had insulted the Delphians or had quarreled with the keepers of the shrine” (xlii). A plague then befell the Delphians and an oracle from Zeus directed them “to make atonement for the death of Aesop,” such that representatives of various Greek states allegedly came to Delphi to investigate and levied a penalty for this action on the Delphians (xliii).

where she made her nest. Every time she laid eggs, it flew up to the nest, rolled the eggs out, and broke them. Driven from pillar to post, the eagle at last took refuge with Zeus and begged him to give her— his own sacred bird— a safe place to hatch her chicks. Zeus allowed her to lay her eggs in his lap. But the beetle saw her; so it made a ball of dung, and flying high above Zeus dropped it into his lap. Zeus got up to shake it off, without stopping to think, and tipped out the eggs. Ever since that time, they say eagles do not nest during the season when beetles are about.

*This fable is a warning against holding anyone in contempt. You must remember that even the feeblest man, if you trample him in the mud, can find a way some day to pay you out.* (Handford 134)

The fable, obedient to its moral, is bound by necessity or fate to a justice regardless of physical might, transcendent of high and low, native or alien.<sup>81</sup> When this law is transgressed, upsetting the equilibrium that holds between sacred and profane, a kind of anarchy ensues. A line is drawn and crossed over, setting into motion a sequence of events with fatal consequences. The terms of philosophy may be transferred via physiology into psychology, when the idea of fate translates physical smallness into an emblem of spiritual concentration and one-pointedness, with distractions few and focus narrow. Upon the wrongful death of the hare, the beetle is turned into an engine of revenge, a miniature dung-eating Fury, a dirt bomb-packing terrorist. The pompous and

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<sup>81</sup> Eagle and beetle may be seen as emblems for a series of dichotomies: large and small, powerful and weak, high and low, sacred and profane, noble and baseborn, cultural and sub-cultural. One recalls the ancient association, well known to the Greeks, of the dung beetle and the Egyptian god— here, an obvious rival with the eagle, totem of the Olympian Zeus. What is sacred to one culture is profane to another. The fable's battle form and its apparent theme here— the return of the repressed— suggests a demonization of cultural stereotypes such as that described in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

complacent eagle has no chance against the beetle's deeply etched memory and indefatigable energy. Even Zeus seems unable to read the writing on the wall. The beetle's frightful automatism is somewhat relieved by the parodic element when Zeus is made a butt by his own brand of automatism: a repulsion to anality bred by a sanitized Olympian ideal. This fable puts us in mind of the spirit that joys to carve graffiti on bathroom walls.

On the other hand, viewed in terms of scalar effects, smallness also manifests here as psychological invisibility: What you don't know, can't see, or ignore because beneath you, *can* hurt you. The eagle's downfall is hardly more tragical than comical, but the eagle does share some of the liabilities of the tragic hero: a blinding hubris of character, and that circumstantial precariousness that appends to beings so high and mighty. That is, personal arrogance goes hand-in-hand with the heightened visibility due one's public position. One becomes a kind of lightning rod, whether for scheming antagonists or divine retribution. Even a beetle may turn God's spy when ego falls prey to a dangerous overlooking, and one's sins come home to roost.

### *Molting and Mimicry*

The fable of the eagle and the beetle gains greater poignancy when one recalls the legend that Aesop *told it* when on trial for his own life. Aristophanes, a Greek dramatist of the fourth century B.C., alludes to this in his comedy *Wasps*:

Philocleon: The Delphians once charged Aesop—

Bdelycleon: It doesn't interest me.

Philocleon: With stealing the god's cup: he said the beetle—

Bdelycleon: You and your beetles! I'll ruin you. (Hadas 182)

Perry comments on this legend as follows, drawing on the *Life* of Aesop:

Aesop had offended Apollo by representing Mnemosyne instead of the god as the leader of the Muses in a shrine that he had built at Samos, and... Apollo connived with the Delphians in their plot to put him to death on the false charge of having stolen a golden cup from the temple. In this biography Aesop is represented as the protégé of the Muses, and it is at their humble little shrine that he takes refuge as a suppliant when the Delphians plan to put him to death. (xli)

From the perspective of serious literary forms such as epic or tragedy, the fable seems so lowly, despicable and innocuous, that it alone may have a chance of surviving, by flying below— or above— the radar of a censor or a ruthless and powerful adversary. As the case of Ovid makes clear, a satirist would be wise to stay under the radar since he might suffer a far worse fate than bad reviews, such as exile and disgrace. Writing a fable about an insect would be one way to reduce the risk. Armored by its smallness, protected by a ludicrous subject matter, a fable might criticize and even threaten contemporaries with impunity. Part of the fable's immunity derives from the presumption of self-mockery, as if reduction to absurdity were already inscribed within its own body. This is analogous to the process of molting in the insect, whereby the insect grows a new exoskeleton by consuming the old one. A good case in point is Lucian's "The Fly." Lucian's performance in that piece, ostensibly a satirical *tour de force* that attacks the abuses of a decadent age of orators, finally folds itself up into a self-consuming maxim that might appear at the end of a fable.

I will stop talking, for fear you may think that, as the saying goes, I am making an elephant out of a fly. (95)

At once jocular and serious, lacking in the gravity of a full-blown satire, a fable may suffer less fear of falling prey either to the attack of critics, or of contemporaries who think they recognize themselves as the butt of humor. Critics risk being made fun of for stooping to attack something so obviously light and trivial. Consider from this perspective the opening lines of *Virgils Gnat*, Spenser's translation of the pseudo-Virgilian *Gnat (Culex)*, a mock epic in Latin devoted to the 'heroic' exploits of a gnat:

We now have played (*Augustus*) wantonly,  
Turning our song unto a tender Muse,  
And like a cobweb weaving slenderly,  
Have onely played: let thus much then excuse  
This Gnats small Poem, that th' whole history  
Is but a jest, though envie it abuse:  
But who such sports and sweet delights doth blame,  
Shall lighter seeme than this Gnats idle name. (1-8)

Any fable may invoke a commonplace maxim, belying the fact that it is aimed at some particular contemporary, and hence, controversial to the core. However, a fable that is also a parody, a literary imitation of a much larger literary form, enjoys a similar subterfuge, due to the superficiality or obviousness of its imitative exercise. Like the pseudo-Homeric *The Battle of the Frogs and Mice (Batrachomyomachia)*, the *Culex* is an obvious reduction or parody of Homeric epic. Such self-conscious and hyper-aesthetical works could, of course, as easily take a swipe at a pompous politician as an overblown

writer of epic. However, when the fable is clothed in rhetoric so rich and given a surface so ornate—investing the slenderly woven web with such “sweet delights”—the identity of those being stung was rendered ambiguous and the poison turned to honied medicine. The elaborate *recusatio* at the opening of the *Culex* suggests that an opponent might be annoyed by the buzz without being able to crush the poet who flew on such light wings.<sup>82</sup>

Indeed, as with the insect, so with the fable that employs mimicry: It might be hard to distinguish wing from leaf. The poem’s overdetermined mimetic character may serve the poet as camouflage, much like the insect’s own fabled artistry:

A cicada sat chirping in a tall tree, and a fox which wanted to devour it thought out a plan. He stood facing it and spoke to it with admiration of its beautiful voice. Then he asked it to come down. He wanted, he said, to see how big it was, having heard what a loud voice it had. But the cicada did not fall into the trap. It broke off a leaf and dropped it, and the fox darted forwards, never doubting that it was the insect. ‘You were wrong, my friend,’ said the cicada, ‘if you thought I would come down. I have been on my guard against foxes ever since the day when I saw cicadas’ wings in a fox’s droppings.’ (Handford 136)

Fable looks towards history’s lows, not its highs. It teaches us to learn from the past or be condemned to repeat it, as if to say: Stay in touch with the past or lost all perspective

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<sup>82</sup> There is evidence to suggest that Spenser’s beast fable, *Mother Hubbards Tale*, played a role in his ‘exile’ to Ireland. Scholars have fastened, consequently, on the dedicatory sonnet to the deceased Earl of Leicester which Spenser affixed to *Virgils Gnat* and which hints as a personal motive for translating the poem: “Wrong’d, yet not daring to expresse my paine,/ To you (great Lord) the causer of my care,/ In cloudie teares my case I thus complaine/ Unto your selfe, that onely privie are:/ But if that any *Oedipus* unware/ Shall chaunce, through power of some divining spright,/ To read the secrete of this riddle rare,/ And know the purporte of my evill plight,/ Let him rest pleased with his owne insight,/ Ne further seeke to glose upon the text:/ For grieffe enough it is to grieved wight/ To feele his fault, and not be further vext./ But what so by my selfe may not be showen,/ May by this Gnatts complaint be easily knowen” (1-14).

in the moment. Weighed down on its wings of dung, fable models certainly appear unheroic and despised. But in the final analysis, they may prove life-saving. Above all fable teaches us to be wary, not to succumb to flattery (magnification by praise), nor be fooled by appearances. We need to cultivate a hardness, a facade, a mask or persona to disguise and protect one's inner motives. The wisdom of fable, after all, is *ingenious*, and likes to remain hidden, not display itself in show. Its gift is in exposing others. To look 'behind' is to see ahead towards final consequences.

Parody is another, highly imitative, form of looking backwards. The pleasure which parody gives depends on our ability to distinguish layer upon layer of irony. Parody is one way of weaving novel variations on old, perhaps hackneyed, literary forms, resurrecting and injecting new life into them. It can also be a way of ironically reflecting on contemporary life and art, comparing the ancient with the modern world to show how far the latter comes up short. The form of Lucian's paradoxical encomium, if not his entomological subject matter, for instance, was an important model for Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly*. Erasmus himself mentions Lucian's "The Fly" in the letter he wrote to Thomas More, anticipating readers who would take offense:

For there will probably be no lack of quarrelsome quibblers who will attack it unjustly, some as too light and frivolous for a theologian, some as more biting than is compatible with Christian moderation. They will cry out that I am reviling the Old Comedy or imitating Lucian, accusing me of ripping everything to shreds. As for those who are offended by the levity and playfulness of the subject matter, they should consider that I am not setting any precedent but following one set long ago by great writers:

ages ago Homer amused himself with *The Battle of the Frogs and Mice*, as Virgil did with the Gnat and the Rustic Salad... (2)

Indeed, Erasmus' enemies did not take the *Folly* lightly. Condemned by the Sorbonne, it appeared on lists of forbidden books in France, Spain and Italy.

### *At War with Appearances*

Overall a collection of fables looks expansive, with a wide range of character types, icons, and emblems, to represent the human zoo. One by one, however, the reductive procedure of each fable is most striking. Tiny size obviously intensifies a fable's need to economize, but the moral at its heart is sometimes condensed to the point of a mathematical formula. An enigmatic moral may pack an enormous amount of information, while a vaguely worded moral seems spread thinly enough to accommodate whole classes of men. Complex or simple in expression, morals are always short. The more we ponder them, however, the more we see how, despite their brevity, they actually imply a huge number of test cases. Such are meant to save us time and energy in dealing with the countless particularities displayed in a variety of situations. If justice means gaining clarity and a greater sense of proportion, then fables can help us weigh in the scale by simplifying both terms of the equation.

Fables proceed on the assumption— shared by Plato as well as modern scientists— that our lives are riddled with wrong perceptions, and we can't trust the evidence of our senses. Fabulists get at the truth by clearing away the uncertainties that pertain to life in a body. Like scientists, therefore, they are constantly abstracting to reduce the number of variables that need to be tracked in order to arrive at a manageably

small number. This is not a matter of being naive or ignorant. Simply, as we become more learned, the world appears increasingly more vast and complex. And so, to organize our own thoughts and convey them to a lay audience, we must simplify in proportion to the complexity of our thinking. The end of reducing the number of laws and processes is finally to demonstrate a certain dynamic at work. Fable trains the reader to become an expert at diagnosing attitudes. A fabulist must be expert at fixing large and unwieldy groups under the sign of one character.

This logical leap from particular to general has proved extremely useful, and deserves much of the credit for the vaunted position of man. The fable teaches a primitive, but very canny ‘if-then’ structure such as may be used to predict cause-effect relationships. The simple relation of cause and effect— ‘Do this, or this will happen’— describes the argument of many a fable, but not all are equally direct. Some of the more laconic and delightful ones are like riddles. Such statements, Aristotle says, are pleasurable both because they take the form of metaphors, and because they are difficult. The more oblique the metaphor, the greater the pleasure to be obtained through thinking. The example cited by Aristotle is Stesichorus’ threat to the Locrians: “Insolence is better avoided, lest the cicadas chirp on the ground” (*Rhetoric* 1395a). Here, the enthymeme (that is, the second clause which explains the maxim, like the tiniest of fables) is so concise as to approach enigma. As W. Rhys Roberts explains in a footnote: “The cicadas would have to chirp on the ground if an enemy cut down the trees” (1395a).

Sometimes, however, a fable will warn the reader of the danger that a too rigid adherence to induction can entail. And in the process of our character analysis, we can develop blindness to the worth or uniqueness of individuals. Moreover, when the many

are stamped by an arbitrary ruling and the one is forced to participate in a class, the problem is not just an injustice perpetrated upon the masses. Where the many are reduced to a type, the very image of the soul is distorted if not dismembered. Ruling by logic in this way, man plays at being god but without a god's superior perspective.

A man who saw a ship sink with all hands protested against the injustice of the gods: because there was one impious person on board, he said, they had destroyed the innocent as well. As he spoke he was bitten by a swarm of ants which happened to be there; and, though only one had attacked him, he trampled on them all. At this Hermes appeared and smote him with his staff, saying, 'Will you not allow the gods to judge men as you judge ants?'

*Let not a man blaspheme against God in the day of calamity, but let him rather examine his own faults.* (Handford 152)

As man makes himself the measure of all things, elevated by his lofty sense, sympathy recedes into the distance. 'They' are flattened into surfaces that cannot reflect our soul or earn our respect, only our hatred or scorn. Stereotypes, like reflex reactions, may help us avoid sudden dangers when we lack the time to make more deliberate decisions. But what follows when we cease to recognize ourselves in our antagonism, or, what is worse, in *theirs*? Shall we eventually be able to exterminate each other with as little compunction? Fables subject us to a preview of this kind of ultimate fate, but their gift is to sting us awake with sudden shifts in perspective. These allow us to look at ourselves as through the opposite sides of a lens, magnified, sometimes, to such a degree that we feel able to take the measure of a god. At other times, the reflected image renders us

incredibly puny and small. When do we walk in the shoes of an insect? Who is contained by whom, and who sees, in the larger picture?

### *Intentionality and Telos*

Structurally, rhythmically, and conceptually, fable shows a marked preoccupation with ends or finalities. When this is true, what better way to mirror compulsive behavior than with the end-obsessed fable? Although fables may not mirror *the things of life* in any realistic fashion, they can mirror our attitudes towards one another. They mirror us when we try too hard to determine what happens in our lives, and are finally stunned into the realization that we are ‘being lived’ by forces much greater than ourselves. Our anxiety to control, our race towards a desperate goal, is revealed as pathological or fated. When the life flows out of us towards some external, we ironically become even more isolated, our identity fixated in that relation, our furious souls frozen in a static state. Obsessed with ends, we fail to perceive alternatives. At that moment, essential human depth is sacrificed and we become enslaved to mere surfaces.

This brings us to one of the most interesting problems posed by fable: the tension between means and end. Even when fables contain imperious reflections about life and death, truth and error, they never quite lose their fictional facade. They flirt with images, in fact, with surfaces. Speaking practically, these surfaces are necessary productions—how else to animate the ideas they reflect, enough to galvanize even simple-minded persons? Aristotle speaks of how orators, like poets, must strive to bring things vividly before the eyes of the audience by referring to things in action. Homer, he says, is exemplary, for he gives “metaphorical life to lifeless things”; all his passages “are

distinguished by the effect of activity they convey” (*Rhetoric* 1411b). The goal, says Aristotle, is to represent “everything as moving and living; and activity is movement... Liveliness is specially conveyed by metaphor, and by the further power of surprising the hearer; because the hearer expected something different, his acquisition of the new idea impresses him all the more” (*Rhetoric* 1412a). It would follow from this that characters which are as idea-laden as those in fable are in special need of a boost, and one device used by fabulists is to make them seem as driven towards images as we are.

On the other hand, speaking philosophically, these surfaces are worse than superficial. Images are precisely what lead, in real life, to people making wrong decisions. Built into the very fabric of fables is this conflict between image and idea, between the means of a fable’s production and the end towards which that product is aimed. As the illustration of an idea— an imperative forever the same— the fable must remain at war with life’s uncertain flickering of images.

All images are, in a certain sense, dangerous according to the ethos of the fable world. Bad enough is to confuse truth with an object, but even worse is to confuse truth with the image of an object. When desires or fancies drive us to an extreme degree, we have lost perspective on reality. In a belief system that stresses micro- and macrocosmic unity, above mirrors below. Negative emotions like envy, vengeance, and jealousy cut off our spiritual birthright. They blind us to this micro/macrocosmic relation and reduce our awareness of ‘real character.’ Zeal to emulate the human hero or the god— typical of heroic poetry, for instance— is replaced by envy of an equal or a lower human being. Emulation is a sign of noble character, whereby one seeks to earn a good name or reputation. As Aristotle describes the emotion:

Emulation is pain caused by seeing the presence, in persons whose nature is like our own, of good things that are highly valued and are possible for ourselves to acquire; but it is felt not because others have these goods, but because we have not got them ourselves. It is therefore a good feeling felt by good persons, whereas envy is a bad feeling felt by bad persons.

Emulation makes us take steps to secure the good things in question, envy makes us take steps to stop our neighbor having them. (*Rhetoric* 1388a)

Envy, however, is driven by a sense of privation, an inner lack, which drives us to deny others what we feel we lack. Or, we steal the effect, the image, of a person's public esteem, rather than to try to cultivate the cause in our own selves. Aristotle says:

Envy is pain at the sight of such good fortune as consists of the good things already mentioned; we feel it towards our equals; not with the idea of getting something for ourselves, but because the other people have it... We feel envy also if we fall but a little short of having everything; which is why people in high place and prosperity feel it— they think every one else is taking what belongs to themselves... And small-minded men are envious, for everything seems great to them. (*Rhetoric* 1387b)

Emulation and envy both involve our looking at the images of others, comparing and finding ourselves wanting. However, whereas emulation involves a laudable imitation, envy involves a malice towards others together with a feeling of covetousness. The difference between emulation and envy is a matter of character. The spirit *behind the action* makes a difference and, indeed, defines the character.

As character is reduced by zeal to replace what is true or real within ourselves with a public image or a mere appearance, human depth recedes still further into the psychological distance. We regress into artifice, collectors of likenesses, distant from our origins.

The first ant began life as a human being. He was a farmer who, not content with the fruit of his own labors, kept casting envious eyes on his neighbors' produce and stealing it. His greed made Zeus so angry that he transformed him into the insect which we call the ant. But even when his form was altered his character remained unchanged. To this day he goes to and fro in the fields collecting other people's wheat and barley and storing it up for himself.

*This fable is meant to show that even the severest punishment does not change the original character of a bad man. (Handford 140)*

Envy— that mania of looking— magnifies all in one's distorted perception that one is, or else possesses, nothing. Such reduction entails a fall from the human potential for fullness or depth. The soul, made narrow by an all-consuming desire to possess, is finally possessed by that very desire. Human nature is reduced to animal nature when such a pattern of behavior is repeated endlessly. Body is reduced, hardened, and cut into an emblem of the soul's madness. Other fables treat the symptoms of other negative feelings, and we may look at them briefly:

A wasp settled on a snake's head and tormented it by continually stinging.

The snake, maddened with the pain and not knowing how else to be

revenged on its tormentor, put its head under the wheel of a wagon, so that they both perished together.

*Some men elect to die with their enemies rather than let them live.*

(Handford 59)

Resentment, or the desire for revenge, reduces one to the level of the aggressor, a revolving wheel or endless vicious cycle. Revenge is as much a poison as malice is; fixation on the image of the enemy makes one indistinguishable from the other. To lose the capacity to think, deliberate and choose, is to despair of change, and so become flattened into a surface reflection of one's enemy.

In the next fable, jealous bees are reduced, by metonymy, to their sting.<sup>83</sup> This double-edged weapon becomes an of the bees' failure to leaven their business with sweetness. Note how the body part is separable, isolated, the better to focus and convey the poisonous attitude. Having cut themselves off from others, they are finally cut off from god and themselves.

The bees grudged their honey to men because they regarded it as their own property. So they went to Zeus and prayed him to grant them the power of stinging to death anyone who approached their combs. Zeus was so angry with them for their ill-nature, that he condemned them not only to lose

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<sup>83</sup> The word "envy" derives from Latin *invidia* and *invidere*, "to look at with malice," "to see in, or look upon." "Jealousy" derives from Greek *zelos*, "zeal." A "jealousie" is a blind or shutter with horizontal slats through which an observer can peer without being seen. Ironically, envy and jealousy may be seen as a kind of blindness, the result of an overzealous worship of images. The ant in the fable might be psychoanalyzed as suffering from an atrophied sense of self-worth, leading to a loss of the sense of inner depth. In consequence, his whole being becomes concentrated in the gaze he turns outwards upon surfaces. The bees, meanwhile, are blinded by their fear of losing their precious honey. The madness to hold what is dear ironically leads to the loss of everything. Their whole being is concentrated in the tiny poisonous sting which turns out to point both ways.

their stings whenever they used them on anyone, but to forfeit their lives as well.

*This fable is an apt censure of people who indulge their ill-will even at the cost of injury to themselves.* (Handford 139)

Though we may find them fascinating, we are not likely to feel much sympathy for the characters in these tales. They are exemplary of poetic justice: They just got, as we say, what was coming to them. On the one hand, feelings of envy, jealousy and vengeance are so embarrassingly petty and grasping that we applaud their correction as just. On the other hand, we find it reassuring. These are creepy, insidious creatures of the dark, and we like them best when exposed, labeled, and pinned to a single spot.

In fables such as these, we may observe human nature being reduced through smallness of mind, regressing to various kinds of automatism or unnatural behavior. At this point, we may feel prompted to ask, 'What' is natural? Or, how 'natural' are fables? Superficially, fables cloak human attitudes, acts and speech in animal bodies, usually situating them in the wild, far from manmade towns and cities. But nobody, not even the most isolated city-dweller, would ever confuse their representations with nature. A fable presents the merest semblance of nature, and is most unlike any lifelike portrait of the original, the real thing. The fable demands from the reader a continuous suspension of disbelief.

Probably for this reason fables today are largely relegated to little children. Whereas adults are constantly nagged by the disjunction between art and nature, a copy and its original, children are far more tolerant and gladly make up the difference. Their imaginations require less realism from an imitation, and far less naturalistic detail is

needed to amuse or frighten them. Little children are able to feel for the predicament of animals in fable as readily as for the toys they animate in the bedroom. Now wonder that Aristotle traces the human delight in artistic imitation to an instinct first apparent in little children: “Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation” (*Poetics* 1448b). Proof that pleasure in imitation *per se* is primary, Aristotle believed, can be found in the fact that pleasure exists even where the objects represented are unpleasant in and of themselves. Such objects may themselves “be painful to see,” and yet we still “delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies” (1448b).

Fables do often depict painful situations involving the lowest animals— and insects above all, which loom large in fable— but these representations can hardly be called ‘realistic.’ The awful horror Oedipus’ blindness releases in us can hardly be compared to how we feel about the fabled eagle’s fall, although both are blind and beset by plagues. Our emotional participation in Sophocles’ tragedy— or Homer’s epics, for that matter— elicits a radically different kind of reaction, one decidedly more spiritual.<sup>84</sup>

The hero of epic— and tragedy, though in a different manner— is a human with a greater than average power over himself and nature. According to Aristotle’s theory of catharsis, spectators are made to identify with the hero, purged by witnessing his mistakes, and in the process lifted beyond their all-too-humanness. They draw upon the

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<sup>84</sup> The gap between Sophocles and Aesop may be great, but so is that between Aesop and Disney. Adults raised on Hollywood’s version of Pinocchio, for instance, are shocked to learn that Jiminy Cricket— charming conscience of the wooden hero— got crushed to death midway through the grim original. Walt Disney knew that wouldn’t do to keep the little ones and their moms returning to the theater, so he had Jiminy wink and dance and sing his merry jingle all the way through to the closing credits.

almost supernatural power that seems to flow from him, fascinated to the end by their leader's charisma, and bind together more closely as a group behind him. He is the greater-than-average hero, a redeemer who completes his quest and, through his death, leads the band back to a peaceful society. There they are free to build their monuments, envisioning humanity in its triumph over nature.

However much one agrees with Aristotle's theory, fables are clearly not very interested in bringing about a catharsis of this order. Their epiphany is less that of a hero's divinity and triumph over nature, than of the exposure of a fool.

A gnat went up to a lion and said: 'I'm not afraid of you. You can't do anything more than I can. If you think you can, then tell me what it is. Scratch with your claws, perhaps, and bite with your teeth? Any woman who has a fight with her husband does as much. I am far stronger than you, and I'm ready for a battle if you are.' And sounding his trumpet the gnat fastened on him, biting the hairless part of his face round the nostrils. The lion kept tearing himself with his own claws, until in the end he cried off from the fight. With another blast on its trumpet the victorious gnat set up a hum of triumph and flew away. But it got entangled in a spider's web, and while it was being devoured it lamented the irony of fate which allowed a creature capable of doing battle with the strongest of animals to be destroyed by such an insignificant thing as a spider. (Handford 137)

The egotistic pretensions of the fool succumb finally to that law of perspective which levels all, a law more absolute for being completely relative. The law of proportion that

makes possible intricate design in such a small space, is so subtle it transcends not only physical might but, also, the heroically brave ego.

In heroic narrative, a hero overcomes the powers of darkness, triumphs over nature, through the spark of divinity that blazes within him. In fable, a character merely recovers his lost perspective by waking up to his mundane limitations as in the following amusing tale told by Phaedrus, in Christopher Smart's translation:

A Fly, that set upon the beam  
Rated the Mule—"Why sure you dream?  
Pray get on faster with the cart  
Or I shall sting you till you smart!"—  
She answers, 'All this talk I hear  
With small attention, but must fear  
Him who upon the box sustains  
The pliant whip, and holds the reins.  
Cease then your pertness—for I know  
When to give back, and when to go.'

This tale derides the talking crew,  
Whose empty threats are all they do. (1-12)

Fable depicts one growing up, so to speak, surrendering the childhood dream of omnipotence. Consider the sensibility of the fly that Francis Bacon adopted for his essay, "Of Vain-Glory":

The fly sate upon the axle-tree of the chariot-wheel and said, "What a dust do I raise!" (443)

The flies in the fables above are almost like twins. In the first, the annoying presumption of the fly is perfectly balanced by the matter-of-fact understanding of the ass who knows who “holds the reins.” Note that the foolishness of the fly in the second fable is not chastised with a moral. His arrogance of power seems somehow more forgivable, like the foolishness of the bumpkin or the naïvete of the child. No moral is given and we are called upon to coin our own. Should we do so, our happy phrase or witticism shall show off our urbanity.<sup>85</sup>

### *Mordant, or Cutting, Humor*

These last fables bring to mind another critical aspect of fables— their humor. No doubt their humor is responsible in large part for our willingness to suspend our maturity for awhile and regress to a pleasure almost infantile. Earlier we saw the humorless plight of the self-reductive, repressed individual. A similar loss of perspective is conveyed in these last three fables whose subject is ego-inflation, or the self-aggrandizement of the little. But whereas we did not care very much about the former, the latter, if they do not earn our love, at least touch us where we are more forgiving. We cannot judge the pride of the gnat or fly too harshly, any more than we would the familiar narcissism of little children. They flatten the world they live in, turning it into a surface upon which they see their own reflection everywhere. We chuckle at such displays of ego rather than condemn them. Without being right, their attitudes— or ‘humours’ —are

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<sup>85</sup> By “urbanity” is meant, literally, “of the city.” For Aristotle, the use of maxims is appropriate only “to elderly men, and in handling subjects in which the speaker is experienced.” It is “unbecoming,” “silly and ill-bred” for a young man to use them,” “a fact proved by the special fondness of country fellows for striking out maxims, and their readiness to air them” (*Rhetoric* 1395a). “Those who joke in a tactful way are witty, show a quick versatility; such sallies are thought to be movements of one’s character... The well-bred use innuendo” (*Rhetoric* 3, 10).

far less sinister because they are displayed with such frankness, out in the open.<sup>86</sup> Here, the smallness of the gnat/naught reflects upon a larger world, one spacious enough for us to occupy comfortably. We are taught in such a way that we cannot help feeling superior.<sup>87</sup>

If in the greatest art we sometimes experience the power of the dreaming mind merging with the curbs of waking life, then in fable we decidedly do not. Its world is smaller and far removed from the grander sphere of gods and heroes, more focused on the needs of everyday life. Tribal loyalties are gone and replaced by the social contract. The song of the quest that has been sung since time immemorial is quieted, for now there is much work to be done.

It was winter-time; the ants' store of grain had got wet and they were laying it out to dry. A hungry cicada asked them to give it something to eat. 'Why did you not gather food in the summer, like us?' they said. 'I hadn't time,' it replied; 'I was busy making sweet music.' The ants

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<sup>86</sup> In a late essay, "Humour" (1927), Freud distinguishes humor from wit as that occasion when the super-ego adopts a forgiving manner towards the ego. Freud's theory of the psyche makes possible, of course, not only the splitting of the ego but its taking itself as an object. The "humorous attitude," he says, "consists in the humorist's having withdrawn the psychical accent from his ego and having transposed it on to his super-ego. To the super-ego, thus inflated, the ego can appear tiny and all its interests trivial; and, with this new distribution of energy, it may become an easy matter for the super-ego to suppress the ego's possibilities of reacting" (164). Admittedly, it is strange to think of the super-ego in this manner: "In other connections we knew the super-ego as a severe master. It will be said that it accords ill with such a character that the super-ego should condescend to enabling the ego to obtain a small yield of pleasure... The intention which humour carries out, whether it is acting in relation to the self or other people... means: 'Look! here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children—just worth making a jest about!'" Freud himself admits that, "If it is really the super-ego which, in humour, speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego, this will teach us that we have still a great deal to learn about the nature of the super-ego... [If, however,] the super-ego tries, by means of humour, to console the ego and protect it from suffering, this does not contradict its origin in the parental agency" (166).

<sup>87</sup> John Morreall sums up Aristotle's (and Plato's) view of laughter as "essentially derisive," since "in being amused by someone we are finding that person inferior in some way. To find someone's shortcomings funny... we must count them as relatively minor," or else "be disturbed by them" (14).

laughed at it. ‘Very well,’ they said, ‘since you piped in summer, now dance in winter.’

*In everything beware of negligence, if you want to escape distress and danger.* (Handford 142)

No doubt we may laugh at the ant’s pungent, witty, barb— like a clever riddle it worms its way into the mind. But how mordant, stinging, cutting, is the point of the insect fable!<sup>88</sup> How hardened to the soul of man! Here stands revealed the fable ethos in all its glory, a pattern for how the ancients survived in their brave, and brutally competitive, new world. Society this close-knit the Homeric heroes could hardly have envisioned. The diligence of the many outweighs the special gift of the one. It is almost as if, in the world that gave Aesop his freedom, individuals had simply become too close. The remedy he offers is distance, and much needed perspective. Let anyone try to stand taller than the rest— or stand apart— and he will be cut down to size, ridiculed. Playing to a popular audience, charming the crowd’s ears finely, fable fiddles the music of the average— and the future.

We may recall how epic similes, apparently in violation of that magnitude proper to an Aristotelian dramatic plot, actually worked to present a more manageable view of what, due either to a multitude of parts or a body’s excessive speed, could not otherwise be as clearly seen. They made a finite measure of what was disproportionate to the

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<sup>88</sup> Archilochus, the seventh century B.C. Greek satirist, was identified by Gaetulicus as the first who “made the Muse bitter dipping her in vipers’ gall, staining mild Helicon with blood” (*The Greek Anthology* 2.7.71). A.W. Mair quotes Callimachus as saying of Archilochus that he “drank the bitter wrath of the dog and the sharp sting of the wasp; from both of these comes the poison of his mouth” (239). In his study *The Power of Satire*, Robert C. Elliott comments: “Even today, of course, we speak of satire as ‘venomous,’ ‘cutting,’ and ‘stinging,’ although when we use these terms we may be a little self-conscious about the extravagance of what are, for us, mere metaphors. It was not always so. Our language preserves the memory of a once-powerful belief: Archilochus’ verses had demonic power; his satire killed” (4).

human individual through juxtaposition with something small and circumscribed. In this way they toned down and rendered picturesque such visions as the furious assaults of divinely-inspired warriors, or the terrifying swarming of an anarchic, arbitrary mob. The ugly, alien or unnatural was thus rendered safe and familiar, and without loss of animation. Licensed by the metaphoric convention that is signaled by the words “like” or “as,” these departures from mimesis and the human scale were exceptional, ornamental, and had a marginal relation to the narrative. Abandoning narration of action for measuring and collecting, epic similes speedily conveyed the daemonic action or array through a description consistent with the known behavior of those insects coined in the simile. The integrity of the tiny, picturesque scene and the interweaving of details together conveyed the sense of a body whose parts agreed both with each other and with the images as a whole.

Fables’ violation of magnitude appears even more radical because it occurs in a narrative rather than merely descriptive form. Actually, however, the violation is deliberate: Fables often turn on the very problems of perspective which had concerned Aristotle in his discussion of magnitude. Mere size difference helped the fabler to reflect upon incongruities of perspective, imitating moral ugliness in an amusing and childlike, hence non-threatening, fashion. Whereas insects in the epic simile helped readers see (visualize) what was beyond the human without turning away in awe, terror or disgust, insects in fable helped them see (understand) the monstrosity of certain intellectual attitudes without feeling perplexed by a labyrinthine logical argument. The tiny segmented insect, in simile and fable alike, thus rendered more manageable, poetically and rhetorically, what had too great or small a magnitude to be experienced as beautiful

and good. Epic simile reduced in order to praise and decorate a superior agency. Fable reduced in order to belittle, and fix for identification, a foolish or dangerous viewpoint.

Fables, furthermore, like the epic simile, work to present a clearer, more measured and manageable view of what, due to a multitude of parts or to a body's excessive speed, could not otherwise be seen. For instance, fables can simplify and sum up complex arguments, thereby allowing the orator to bypass a lengthy sequence of logical steps. As for speed, fables move at the speed of thought, traveling through countless human experiences that might take years just to elaborate in the time it takes the oracle to pronounce his timeless sentence. Both fable narrative and general maxim arrive at a ratio, or measure, that sums up and condenses them all into a single insightful, and poignant, saying. Both epic simile and fable may be viewed as ornamental in function, although one adorns epic narrative and the other prose oration. Whereas epic simile is illustrative of a physical action, fable illustrates the action of thought. The pleasure we take in the picturesque epic simile has a powerfully physical aspect, while that of fable is more intellectual.

Perhaps the true poetic ore of fable is to be discovered in its pungent sallies of wit or brilliant verbal formulas, especially those that work to trouble the finite measure taken by the moral. An excellent example of this is the reply of the ant to the cicada in the last fable we read. "Since you piped in summer, now dance in winter" may seem a heartless remark, yet even this hard-headed attitude achieves a felicity of expression by weaving together the cicada's and ant's incompatible sensibilities. While at root the ant's message may simply be that of the old saw "You only reap what you sow," the fabric of his tiny speech is much more richly sewn, incorporating three perspectives at once. Spoken

literally, the words “piped” and “dance” allude to physical action and are consonant with the cicada’s blithe lifestyle. Read figuratively, however, the words allude to intellectual ends and measures, and together add up to that grim sentence of doom presaged by the ant—the price of merely “piping” before is that now you must dance and Death will play the tune. The viewpoint here is reflective, heavy, ironic. The ant detaches from nature in a moment of clear seeing, as if he had read the entire narrative he was part of and could sum all up. As a privileged spectator he comments upon the death, or “winter,” of the actor. Fixing ambivalence in an image, his phrase would freeze the fable narrative (or cycle of nature) into a relation between just two points: initial and terminal.

Yet, although the ant has the last word, the imagery or ornament on which his joyous wit depends clearly belongs as least as much to the cicada as to the ant. The reader finally weighs two sets of values in the balance: on one side the ant’s prudence and cicada’s foolishness, on the other side the ant’s grim heartlessness and cicada’s joyful generosity. While the ant’s point pricks awake a consciousness never to let pursuit of immediate pleasures blind one to the long-term consequences, it simultaneously stings one’s conscience, or offends one’s aesthetic sense. Industry ought never forbid generosity, nor work be allowed to legislate against play and love of beauty.

Generated out of strongly conflicting intentions, alluding to a speechless middle, such verbal forms are pregnant with meaning. Their tiny size makes them easy to collect and memorable, the more so if they are arresting or charming. In their capacity to reflect light, many resemble the flat surfaces of transparent crystals whose fixed planes our eyes penetrate to a clear-cut end. But some are intensely refracted, and cut in such a way that their true depth eludes the eye, remaining unmined except by feeling. For the true depth

of such fables may be located only in the region of the 'or,' a space measured out by opposing facets, a spell woven between glittering reflections. Rarely does the reader of fable roam in beauty's field, but sometimes his brow is wrinkled by more than a siege of winter. And striking indeed is the occasional beat of the heart in its deep trenches.

Inwrought witticisms such as those that punctuate fable can be multiplied almost without limit in drama, which dispenses with narrative and consists chiefly of spoken fragments. Formally speaking, comedy may be viewed almost as an extended fable composed completely of dialogue. Its fricative exchanges enable us to reflect on sharply opposing perspectives as characters try to take the measure of each other. When action slows down almost to a halt, words may even threaten to take over. We shall consider this aspect of verbal weaving in the next section on comedy.

## Chapter 4    Comedy: The Insect Drama

The fable with which we concluded the last chapter, namely, that of the ant and the grasshopper, presents a perfect paradigm for people living in societies: Half the population want to sing all the time, while the other half are busily trying to make a fortune. Although the tale has a tragic dimension, the reader is protected from its full weight through the use of a biting sort of humor. The fable ends in a bitter little joke, based upon a pun on the meanings of the word “dance.” The wit of the ant, providential if not scientific, works to humiliate the clownish grasshopper. As we have seen, in most Aesopian fables the vision of life as harsh and cruel evokes neither a cool stoicism nor a warm compassion. The satirical reaction, rather, would lash out at the fool with a hysterical, if heartless, thrust. Short of expressing optimism that one might change the world by destroying its imperfections, the fable advocates that citizens correct their own vices or defects by means of insight and understanding. The outworn attitude is cracked so that a new attitude, more fit for survival, may be pieced together.

A similar method characterizes the genre considered in the present chapter, the comedy of Aristophanes, which feels curiously like dramatized fable. Aristophanes saw comedy as the correct genre in which to understand society or diagnose its ills. One reason is that Old Comedy was a highly structured literary form, a fit medium for illuminating structural stresses in ancient Athenian culture. All of his plays set forth society in systems of abstract relations (e.g., the new sophistry and science vs. the old religion, in *Clouds*; litigiousness and demagoguery vs. true justice and democracy, in *Wasps*; war vs. peace, in *Peace*; males vs. females, in *Lysistrata*). The formulaic plot or

action, usually a series of verbal battles or debates, reflects the underlying polarity of ideas.

According to Aristotle, comedy sprang up and took shape from an earlier Dionysiac or phallic ritual. In his study of the plays of Aristophanes, *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, F.M. Cornford finds supporting evidence for Aristotle's opinion in the unvarying, stiff, and ritualistic plot, the preservation of stock masks, and the outlines of primitive religious themes such as the struggle between summer and winter, or the death of the old and replacement with a new king. In the phallic procession of these earlier religious rites, the phallus was "no less a negative charm against evil spirits than a positive agent of fertilization" (49). The hero is normally an old man who "[throws] off the slough of sour and morose old age...and "[emerges] at the end carrying [his] youthful behavior to the point of scandal" (91).

In the most general sense, comic drama is an exemplary genre here since it shows how central comedy is to the tradition of the insect poem. More specifically, the key aspects of Aristophanic comedy are the cut-into and exoskeletal structure of the plot, the reduction of characters to stock masks or taxonomic types, and the vestigial traces of ancient fertility rites that connect satire to the theme of metamorphosis, or death and rebirth. As we shall see when we examine the *Clouds*, the highly structuralist aspects of Aristophanic comedy are actually the native home for showing the hyper-articulation of insects. Before we examine these, however, we must first review the 'cracked and pieced-together' nature of the insect, as well as its dependence upon radical change, or metamorphosis.

*The Insect Body Appears Cracked, Pieced together*

For those who, like the ancients, regard the human body as a standard, the insect lacks a sufficient normal wholeness of appearance. Looking like a living incongruity, an invitation to an anatomy, the insect body is broken into numerous parts and pieces.<sup>89</sup> These pieces are irregularly sized and shaped on the same individual, ranging from thin and long to short and broad. Delicate, threadlike structures protrude from small, squat masses; transparent or iridescent surfaces are juxtaposed with opaque and dully-colored, chunky plates. The body material and texture—rigid, resisting, shiny, reflecting—is simultaneously attractive and off-putting. To some the insect appears exquisitely elfin, and to others, deformed, dwarfish, and perversely misshapen. Its grotesquely large sex organ, for instance, has been noted. Aristotle observes that the sex organ “in the case of some insects appears to be disproportionately large when compared to the size of the body, and that too in very minute creatures” (*HA* 542a). An insect’s avidity to coupling is matched only by its marathon endurance. One need only try to “pull asunder flies that are copulating” to find out how much “these creatures are, under the circumstances, averse to separation; for the intercourse of the sexes in their case is of long duration, as may be observed with common everyday insects (542a). If we imagined nature as a person endowed with taste, then sometimes the insect seems her witty joke, and at other times, an obscene mistake.

Added to this general unwholesomeness or deviance in appearance is a lack of uniformity in movement. Insects creep and crawl, perversely, by means of an army of limbs. The riotous motion of antennae and legs is restricted by the rigid material out of which their bodies are constructed. Compared with that of most other animals, theirs is

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. Aristotle *HA* 531b, quoted in the chapter on simile above.

an awkward progress. Even winged insects can be cumbersome, their motion like that of ships off-keel or clumsy whirligigs. Aristotle uses this very metaphor in *De Incessu*

*Animalium*:

In winged creatures the tail serves, like a ship's rudder, to keep the flying thing in its course... Flying insects have absolutely no tail, and so drift along like a rudderless vessel, and beat against anything they happen upon; and this applies equally to sharded insects, like the scarab-beetle and the chafer, and to unsharded, like bees and wasps... The flight of insects is slow and frail because the character of their feathery wings is not proportionate to the bulk of their body; this is heavy, their wings small and frail, and so the flight they use is like a cargo boat attempting to make its voyage with oars; now the frailty both of the actual wings and of the outgrowths upon them contributes in a measure to the flight described.<sup>90</sup> (710a)

Butterflies flit back and forth in extremely erratic fashion, as if moved by chance or maddened by the wind. Insects moving on ground, meanwhile, are lowly and often graceless creatures. They churn mechanically like machines, speed like wind-up toys, jerk like automatons. In *De Motu Animalium* Aristotle describes animal motion in terms that are especially evocative of the movements of insects:

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<sup>90</sup> For Aristotle, bodily form has a bearing on the rhythms of flight. He compares the awkward flight of insects to the more graceful one of birds, "at the opposite pole to flying insects as regards their feathers, but especially the swiftest flyers among them... The rest of their bodily structure is in harmony with their peculiar movement, the small head, the slight neck, the strong and acute breastbone (acute like the prow of a clipper-built vessel, so as to be well-girt, and strong by dint of its mass of flesh), in order to be able to push away the air that beats against it, and that easily and without exhaustion. The hind-quarters, too, are light and taper again, in order to conform to the movement of the front and not by their breadth to suck the air" (*De Incessu Animalium* 710a-10b).

The movements of animals may be compared with those of automatic puppets, which are set going on the occasion of a tiny movement; the levers are released, and the twisted strings against one another; or with the toy wagon. For the child mounts on it and moves it straight forward, and then again it is moved in a circle owing to its wheels being of unequal diameter. Animals have parts of a similar kind, their organs, the sinewy tendons to wit and the bones; the bones are like the wooden levers in the automaton, and the iron; the tendons are like the strings, for when these are tightened or released movement begins. (701b)

At other times motionless, they can stare without blinking, assume a deathlike stillness. Insects sometimes seem closest to plants in soul or feeling.<sup>91</sup>

Bloodless, insects do not share in the humor common to animals. Hard, insected, and fleshless, they resemble animals less than things. Animals are born, but insects look pieced together, made. Riveting on the surface, their nature remains hidden. Too small and masked to present a face to us, insects of all creatures seem most alien. And even for those who grant them souls, insects may still provoke disquieting feelings. Perhaps the most frightening aspect of their grotesque unity is the way their parts and pieces seem arbitrarily joined together. Each part of the body is animated, independently of the whole. Aristotle makes frequent mention of the fact that insects, unlike sanguineous animals, do not die when they are cut. No sanguineous animal, “if it be divided into more

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<sup>91</sup> Aristotle himself likened insects to plants, although because of the fact that both can live on after they are cut: “The division of the body into segments is also a necessary result of there being several supreme organs in place of one; and this again is a part of the essential constitution of insects, and is a character which approximates them to plants. For as plants, though cut into pieces, can still live, so also can insects. There is, however, this difference between the two cases, that the portions of the divided insect live only for a limited time, whereas the portions of the plant live on and attain the perfect form of the whole, so that from one single plant you may obtain two or more” (*DPA* 682b).

parts can live for any appreciable length of time, nor can it enjoy the power of locomotion which it possessed while it was a continuous and undivided whole” (*DIA* 707a). On the other hand, insects, when insected, are not any less insects. Indeed, when cut into, they are almost more than they were before. They “can live a long time, if divided, in each of the severed parts, and can move in the same way as before they were dismembered” (707a). After insects are “cut in twain,” the “severed portions can move in either direction, backwards or forwards” (*HA* 532a), and the hinder portion of all these goes on progressing in the same direction as before (*DIA* 707b).<sup>92</sup>

For Aristotle, the organic norm — for the animal as for the body politic— is a unity that inheres in a single soul:

And the animal organism must be conceived after the similitude of a well-governed commonwealth. When order is once established in it there is more need of a separate monarch to preside over each several task. The individuals each play their assigned part as it is ordered, and one thing follows another in its accustomed order. So in animals there is the same orderliness— nature taking the place of custom— and each part naturally doing his own work as nature has composed them. There is no need of a soul in each part, but she resides in a kind of central governing place of the

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<sup>92</sup> The first half of the twentieth century not only saw the splitting of the atom, but the development of an elaborate theory regarding the divisibility of the individual. The idea, for instance, that the ego can be severed and still survive, like the insect body, is a critical one for psychoanalysis. As Freud writes in “Dissection of the Personality” (1933): “We wish to make the ego the matter of our inquiry, our very own ego. But is that possible? After all, the ego is in its very essence a subject; how can it be made into an object? Well, there is no doubt that it can be. The ego can take itself as an object, can treat itself like other objects, can observe itself, criticize itself, and do Heaven knows what with itself. In this, one part of the ego is setting itself over against the rest. So the ego can be split; it splits itself during a number of its functions—temporarily at least. Its parts can come together again afterwards” (58).

body, and the remaining parts live by continuity of natural structure, and play the parts Nature would have them play.<sup>93</sup> (*DIA* 703a)

In animals, this unity is represented by the blood. The insect, bloodless and insected, behaves like a creature that has many souls, many vital centres (*DPA* 682b). According to Aristotle, the reason these creatures live on after they are thus divided is that “each of them is constructed like a continuous body of many separate living beings” (*DIA* 707b). In insects, nature has been inhibited from her normal intention because the central organ or “seat of sensation” is made up of several parts:

For the aim of nature is to give to each animal only one such dominant part; and when she is unable to carry out this intention she causes the parts, though potentially many, to work together actually as one.<sup>94</sup>

Cut into parts and pieced together, the insect resembles a puppet or machine. Like a microcosm of the segmented commonwealth, it moves through the air like a ship of fools. No wonder the insect is disparaged as ugly, ridiculous.

### *An Insect Undergoes Metamorphosis*

From a certain point of view, the insect body is almost like the human body turned inside out, with a surface exterior that most closely reflects our structural interior. The outwardly visible, human body surface is mostly soft flesh and skin, supported from

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<sup>93</sup> Aristotle’s reference to the heart as the “citadel” (*akropolis*) of the body (*DPA* 670a) may be compared with Plato remark in the *Timaeus*: “The heart is the house of guard in which all the veins meet, and through them reason sends her commands to the extremity of her kingdom. When the passions are in revolt, or danger approaches from without, then the heart beats and swells (70a).”

<sup>94</sup> *DPA* 682a. The translator, William Ogle, comments that “each segment must have its own centre of vitality; the entire animal seemingly consisting of an aggregation of many animals, each with a certain individuality, which ordinarily is merged in the life of the aggregate, but is capable of asserting its existence when the segment is isolated.”

within by a rigid and mostly hidden structure or skeleton. After maturity, these fleshy materials remain flexible, facilitating continual, though gradual, growth or change. The surface of an insect, on the other hand, looks and feels to the touch more like bone or nail. Its structure is given by a hard exterior that completely hides a gushy, amorphous inside. Because this external skeleton is not flexible like human flesh or skin, growth in the manner normal to humans is impossible. Thus, the skeleton must be periodically shed or molted in order for the organism to increase in size. All insects slough off their external bodies in order to grow, because exoskeletons cannot stretch any more once they have hardened. An equally sudden but even more radical change in body structure occurs during metamorphosis, when the insect moves from the nymph or larval stage to the adult. Compared with the gradual maturation of the human being, then, the insect confronts us with the seemingly unnatural spectacle of sudden growth or physical change. The stage of the gross and gluttonous caterpillar, for example, is so radically different from that of the beautiful and delicate, winged adult that to the unscientific eye they appear to belong to different species. With their modern instruments, modern scientists have been able to understand much about this complex process that was unknown to the ancients.<sup>95</sup> Insects molt by a process of infolding. An insect first detaches itself from its skeletal skin and creates a new more folded one, dissolving the former, so that an insect virtually consumes itself. The husk-like artifact of the cicada is exemplary because its

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<sup>95</sup> In the absence of microscopes, they had difficulty viewing insect reproduction or metamorphosis, which doubtless contributed to the belief in spontaneous generation. They are believed to be generated out of bull, donkey and horse carcasses. They spring like frisky spectres out of dead or waste matter when feces or decay is impregnated by a solar spirit. Pliny himself repeats this view uncritically in his *Natural History*. Many insects, he opines, are “generated out of dirt by the rays of the sun, creatures that hop with a frisk of their hind legs, and others out of damp dust, that fly about in caves (503).

artifacts, like the cocoon of the moth and the chrysalis of the butterfly, are not self-consuming.

Not surprisingly, the stiff and unyielding exoskeleton is broken down and reformed is set in motion by hormones. Wigglesworth describes the complex process of 'molting' as:

set in motion by a secretion from special cells in the brain [which] acts upon glands of internal secretion that lie in the head or thorax [and] are thereby caused to secrete the 'moulting hormone.' Under the action of the moulting hormone the epidermal cells detach themselves from the old cuticle and proceed to grow and multiply. Of course, the sheet of epidermal cells can increase in surface area only by becoming folded, and the new cuticle that they lay down is similarly folded. When this new cuticle is nearly ready, digestive enzymes that dissolve chitin and protein are poured out into the so-called 'moulting fluid' which fills the space between the old and new cuticles. These enzymes dissolve all the soft inner layers of the old cuticle; and then the molting fluid, with these products of digestion, is absorbed through the new cuticle, and the space between the two becomes almost dry. When most of the cuticle is soft, as in caterpillars, well over 90% of the old cuticle is digested, and nothing but an exceedingly thin skin is cast off. (86)

In sum, the tiny size of the insect body necessitates a stiff and rigid body mask which, to permit movement any movement at all, must be cut-into or pieced-together. Growth and

change can only occur as the result of infolding, a sudden and intense hormone-driven process involving an attack or breakdown, and a rejuvenation of old forms.

### *From Epic to Tragedy*

In earlier chapters we saw how size, structure or form, and aesthetic response are all interrelated. In epic, for instance, a poem constructed on the largest possible scale, everything is depicted as larger, more massive, and heavier, than us. We constantly feel as if we were looking up, or out, on a vast expanse. Populating this world are godlike heroes, characters bigger than life, who are more virtuous, or at least more powerful and consequential than we are.<sup>96</sup> Relentlessly moving forward, their actions are large and graceful. They seem like lords over lesser men. The magnetism of their personalities is such that even the nonhuman environment sometimes responds sympathetically, becoming animated in their presence.<sup>97</sup>

The size of the poem and the grandness of the heroes reflect both the intentions of the poet and the dramatic unity of its structure. The epic poet praises or magnifies the actions of his heroes, heightening the reader's admiration. As heroes are inspired by the gods so, too, we who follow their exploits are invited to look up to and emulate them. Since the greatest dramatic effect is that achieved by the representation of a single and coherent action, the best plot is a model of proportion, each part of which is plausibly

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. Aristotle: "The objects the imitator represents are actions, with agents who are necessarily either good men or bad—the diversities of human character being nearly always derivative from this primary distinction, since the line between virtue and vice is one dividing the whole of mankind. It follows, therefore, that the agents represented must be either above our own level of goodness, or beneath it, or just such as we are" (*Poetics* 1448a).

<sup>97</sup> In the *Iliad*, one of Achilles' horses, Roan Beauty (Xanthus), is momentarily given voice by Hera. He lovingly "spoke up under the yoke" to warn his master of the "strong force of fate" and the "day of death" that "already [hovered] near" (Fagles 19.484-86). This marvel is checked when the Fates strike him dumb, as if reined in by Aristotle's standard of plausibility.

related to every other with all fitting seamlessly into the whole. The natural norm is a well-proportioned body ruled by a sane mind or balanced soul, such that no part acts arbitrarily but remains subordinate to the overall organism. In this respect, the ideal or standard of classical epic is the same as that of ancient Greek society: anthropocentric, virtuous, unified, and well-proportioned. Ugliness is banished and we delight in gazing upon a harmonious, living world.

A similar consideration of scale, unity, character, and authorial intention, sheds much light on the classical division between the graver and lighter kinds of dramatic poetry. If the sense of unity is great within an epic like Homer's *Iliad*, then it is even more intense in a tragic drama like Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In both cases, the unity of effect inheres in the poet's intention to represent mimetically a single action, rather than to focus in on character.<sup>98</sup> In ancient Greek tragedy, the action or event imitated tends to be mythic. The tragedian's intent is to depict the grand movement of life in the destiny of a great soul. This special priority which ancient tragedy gives to mythic types of plot necessitates a strict internal coherence. There is no room for accidents in tragedy. In its construction we get, as Cornford says, "a sense of closely knit necessity" (197). The spectators of tragedy feel that what happens *must* be.

Characters are secondary in drama not simply because the poet begins with a mythical action, but because the experience associated with the myth is so overwhelming.

The tragic poet starts with a given action, the experience of a certain group of legendary persons. These persons generally have only that one context, in which their whole being moves: they are the people who went through just that great and significant experience. (200)

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<sup>98</sup> Cf. Aristotle's remarks (*Poetics*, 1451a), cited above in the chapter on simile.

It is no accident that the tragic hero tends to be a king or princely figure, since the tragic action represents the gravest of subjects, “the destiny of man, the turning wheel of Time and Fate” (206):

[The persons in Greek tragedy] are royal because at one time to be a King was to be half a God, and these divine princes can therefore tread the same stage with the higher Gods, whose will directs the course of human life and is itself immediately overshadowed by the ultimate course of destiny. (206)

Indeed, although the scale of tragedy will undoubtedly be less than that of epic and its physical sphere of action more circumscribed, this reduction lies in inverse proportion to the dramatic intensity and deepening of the psychological effect. Cornford writes of the impact that adherence to myth had upon the tragic character:

The effect was to enlarge and deepen knowledge of human nature, by discovering possibilities of character and motive that lie within its compass, but are rarely shown in common life, and are indeed beyond the power of observation of ordinary men. (201)

Depth and largeness of scale go hand in hand. The deeper the soul, the greater the orb of influence. In a certain sense, progress for the hero is less a motion forward than a relentless recursion backwards, towards a revelation located in the past. Thus we see that the diminishment or isolation associated with tragedy corresponds not only to the kind of action imitated— namely, the *fall* of a hero— but also, to the mode of action: The drama

moves *inward* to imitate the emotions of the hero, and outward towards an exposure of what is hidden.<sup>99</sup>

*Oedipus Rex*, for instance, can be viewed as a domestic affair: After murdering his father at the crossroads or *trivium*, Oedipus makes love to his mother in the bedroom. However, the fall of the king has cosmic implications. His sins have caused a plague that afflicts the entire state. The king's home is his kingdom and, by micro-macrocosmic extension, the whole world.<sup>100</sup> Because the highest powers are being dramatically invoked, the hero must be magnified almost to a demi-god. As Cornford writes:

The human actors, whose experience we read in the awful light thrown  
upon it from those supernatural forms, must be magnified to the scale of

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<sup>99</sup> In *Oedipus Rex*, the elevation of the king renders him more visible, puts him at the exact center of our attention. We participate in his actions which are, above all, *psychological*. He does not act so much as accept the significance of who he already is. He had supposed himself a free agent, someone who could escape his fate and hide from the gods. A plague forces him to seek the single, spiritual cause for a multiplicity of physically destructive agents. As the drama proceeds, all external hints are read as pointing towards him. Suspense builds to a climax when the total significance of these details becomes clearer. Like pieces of a puzzle that fit together, their interrelation is revealed and the hero gets the whole picture. The purely accidental shell of events falls away as their inner life remains. Oedipus has been subject all along to an agency whose power is overwhelming and whose logic is inexorable.

<sup>100</sup> Insect figures emphasize the micro-macrocosmic connection in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, to take just two instances. As Lear's world falls apart and he becomes aware of himself as a peripheral, estranged creature, the stage becomes a locus for insects. In Gloucester's complaint: "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods,/ They kill us for their sport" (4.1.33-38) the flies reflect how puny man is before the powers of Fate. They reify hierarchical order even as they reflect a tragic descent in cosmic status. Such insects grant perspective on a king reduced to the all-too-human, while alluding more historically to the reduction of the aristocracy.

Insects also figure in Lear's late reverie of retirement with Cordelia—"...So we'll live,/ And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh/ At gilded butterflies..." (5.3.11-13). Here the miniaturizing of court creates an ironic distance, even as it expresses nostalgic desire for a more idyllic place and time. Isolated and reduced to an exoskeletal, segmented creature, Lear sees himself as a secret agent on a divine mission in a lunatic world breaking up into "sects": "And take upon 's the mystery of things/ As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,/ In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,/ That ebb and flow by th' moon" (5.3.16-19). Here the insect metaphor, while tempting spectators to tender hopes of a comic relief from tragic gravity, proves but a flitting fantasy. Ironically, Lear's butterflies are among the last of trivial gifts the king will give of himself to his pitying audience.

Another instance appears in *Hamlet*, when Claudius asks Hamlet the whereabouts of the dead Polonius and the prince replies: "At supper." Then he explains: "Not where he eats, but where 'a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots" (4.3.17-23). This picture of humanity, of bestial appetites that batten on the body politic, mirrors Hamlet's mother and stepfather. Hamlet's maggots also remind us, like Gloucester's flies, that no man, whatever his worldly status, can escape death.

those heroes who held converse with Gods and fought with them on the plains of Troy and Thebes. (206-07)

In *Oedipus Rex*, the hero already stands apart by virtue of his elevated status within his society. As a result of his moral blindness, however, he also becomes isolated from the gods whom he has forgotten to fear.<sup>101</sup> He is made a sorrowful example, a type of hubris offered up for our contemplation.

Indeed, scale—like power and virtue—plays a critical role in terms of the drama's psychological impact. If the hero were not indeed greater than us, then his fall into misery would not seem so precipitous or undeserved and, consequently, we should not feel much pity for him. If, on the other hand, he were too far above us, we should not feel much fear either, because his fate would not only be unjust and unreasonable but too distant to be powerfully affecting.<sup>102</sup> The suffering of such a noble hero provokes our pity; whereas, his likeness to us arouses our fear that a similar misfortune could happen to us. The catharsis undergone by the spectators of tragedy has a parallel in primitive belief in the efficacy of ritual sacrifice.

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<sup>101</sup> The tragic hero presents a problem of perspective, since he fails to see how he has been fated (“spoken for”) all along. The *Iliad* and *Oedipus Rex* may be contrasted in this regard. Both begin with a plague caused by the gods' displeasure. In the *Iliad* the oracle is consulted and insight gained; the rift between god and man is mended. What conflict then results relates to the pecking order of heroes. In *Oedipus Rex*, the oracle is also obeyed, but unwittingly. Incited with a fervor to uncover more, rectify the sin and save his people, Oedipus blindly pursues his course to the end where he discovers in himself the cause: parricide and incestuous union. These actions, although monstrous in themselves, are coupled with his failure to *see* the truth of destiny.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Aristotle: “(1) A good man must not be seen passing from happiness to misery, or (2) a bad man passing from misery to happiness. The first situation is not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply odious to us. The second is the most untragic that can be...it does not appeal either to the human feeling in us, or to our pity, or to our fears. Nor, on the other hand, should (3) an extremely bad man be seen falling from happiness into misery. Such a story may arouse the human feeling in us, but it will not move us to either pity or fear; pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves; so that there will be nothing either piteous or fear-inspiring in the situation. There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity” (*Poetics* 1452b-53a).

*From Tragedy to Comedy: The Insected Plot*

Moving from tragedy to comedy amounts to a precipitous movement down the scale. Comedy is concerned not with the representation of a dramatic action—the “turning wheel of Time and Fate” in the lives of unique and extraordinary souls—so much as with the Luck or Fortune that unpredictably upsets the best-laid plans of ordinary men. This switch in focus from the laws of necessity to the velleities of chance accounts for the relative looseness of plot construction in Aristophanic comedy. As Cornford notes: “In the construction we may demand neatness and a lightly balanced symmetry; but no one wants a sense of closely knit necessity.... [Comedy’s] bent is always towards the representation of a set of characters, turned loose to bring about the action of their interplay” (197-98). Because Aristophanes’ plots were not based upon myths, but “freely invented,” the proper term to describe them is “not *mythos*, but *logos*,” “a term which seems to mean the ‘theme,’ or ‘idea,’ of the piece.” In contrast with tragedy, in comedy “there is no suggestion of a closely spun web of incidents running all through” (199). If tragedy lives and breathes in the shadow of the Fates (powers above even the gods, and opposed to human *hubris*), then comedy rises and falls with the wheel of fortune. As Cornford says, “Fortune was the acknowledged divinity of the New Comedy; and accident has always been allowed a large place in the comic plot” (197).

Tragedy and comedy derived, according to Aristotle, from more primitive fertility rites. Tragedy originated with the Dionysian dithyramb and comedy with the phallic songs (*Poetics* 1449a). Cornford agrees, although he asserts the interim phase of a dramatic folk play: “Attic Comedy is constructed in the framework of what was already a drama, a folk play; [and behind] this folk play lay a still earlier phase, in which its

action was dramatically presented in religious ritual” (4).<sup>103</sup> Unlike tragedy, which in the course of its development adopted mythic stories, comedy preserved more clearly the substructure or sequence of fixed incidents, as well as the themes (e.g., the fight of summer and winter, the young and the old king), of the archaic ritual plot. The Aristophanic plot is fairly susceptible of analysis and may be broken neatly into two parts. The first part begins with the exposition (*prologue*), often so obviously based upon an idea that the dramatist wishes to explore that they recall the logical structure of the fable.<sup>104</sup> After this comes the entrance of the chorus (*parados*), followed by the fierce contest between the representatives of two parties or principles (*agon*). The fight or debate form is very marked in Aristophanic plays, as it is in Aesopian fable.<sup>105</sup> There

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<sup>103</sup> Cornford elaborates: “Besides the distribution of benign influence, of which Mr. Chambers speaks, these processions have also the converse magical intent of defeating and driving away bad influences of every kind. The phallus itself is no less a negative charm against evil spirits than a positive agent of fertilization. But the simplest of all methods of expelling such malign influences of any kind is to abuse them with the most violent language. No distinction is drawn between this and the custom of abusing, and even beating, the persons or things which are to be rid of them, as a carpet is beaten for no fault of its own, but to get the dust out of it.... There can be no doubt that the element of invective and personal satire which distinguishes the Old Comedy is directly descended from the magical abuse of the phallic procession, just as its obscenity is due to the sexual magic...” (50).

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Cornford: “Whereas the Euripidean prologue will foretell the whole general course of the action to the end, the prologue in Aristophanes only states the main idea. In *Peace*, for instance, Trygaeus’ slave tells the audience no more than that his master is mad and has procured a dung-beetle to carry him, like Bellerophon, to heaven... [Aristophanes’] method is to take some general theme (*logos*), such as the notion of a strike of women in favour of peace, and to illustrate it by the most amusing incidents he can devise. For such a purpose no well-knit intrigue is required. Consequently, the traditional framework of the ritual plot serves well enough” (199).

<sup>105</sup> According to Professor Butcher, “A play of Aristophanes is a dramatised debate, an *agon*, in which the persons represent opposing principles; for in form the piece is always combative, though the fight may be but a mock fight” (qtd. in Cornford 73). Cornford agrees, although he considers the term “dramatised debate” too mild: “Though the victory is finally won by argument—a term which must include all the arsenal of invective—the *Agon* is no mere ‘dramatised debate’; it ends in the crisis and turning-point of the play, reverses the situation of the adversaries, and leads not to an academic resolution, but to all the rest of the action that follows. Above all, it is, as we have said, organically related to the final marriage in which the victor is bridegroom, the triumph of the new God or the new King” (73-74).

follows an interlude by the chorus (*parabasis*).<sup>106</sup> The second part of the play, in most cases, consists of a second *agon*, a sacrifice/feast (*komos*), and a marriage.<sup>107</sup> In sum, Attic comedy is distinguished by the highly structuralist aspects—or, in our terms, the cut-into and exoskeletal nature—of the plot.

### *A Taxonomy of Types*

Comedy also differs from tragedy in its focus upon character rather than upon action. Free of the demands of a mythic plot and of conceiving a hero capable of experiencing the mythic action, the comic dramatist is at liberty to study human nature in general, or universal types. Aristotle argues that all poetic statements, as distinct from those of history, “are of the nature of universals”; i.e., “the sort of things that such and such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say and do” (*Poetics* 1451b). Comedy, however, is the one of the most taxonomical of poetic forms in that the dramatist fixes our eye upon the classification of abstract human types (*ethology*). Classification is itself

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<sup>106</sup> Like the insect body, the Aristophanic plot is tripartite, broken in two halves by the interlude of the chorus (*parabasis*). Of this remarkable insect, Cornford writes: “Of all the strange characteristics of a play by Aristophanes, the one which most forcibly strikes the modern reader is the *Parabasis* of the Chorus—a long passage which cuts the play in two about halfway through its course and completely suspends the action. This passage is almost wholly undramatic. It is delivered by the Chorus and its Leaders, and it normally opens with a farewell to the actors, who leave the stage clear till it is over, and then return to carry on the business of the piece to the end” (2).

<sup>107</sup> Cornford: “Where the ritual of a sacred marriage is performed, it is always periodic and nearly always annual, for the simple reason that the fertility of the Earth needs to be renewed after every winter. The ritual, therefore, involves a succession of human representatives, a new impersonator of the God at each festival. The new God is also a new King—a title still given to the May Kings, Leaf Kings, Grass Kings, whose marriage with their Queens is celebrated at the spring and summer festivals of modern Europe... One fundamental idea of such festivals, accordingly, is the succession of a new divine King to one who stands for the old year whose powers have failed in the decay of winter... [This] may be figured as the expulsion or death of Winter, while Summer is brought in... or, again, the God may be put to death and rise again in renewed youth and vigour” (20-21). *Clouds*, which closes with the burning of the house of Socrates, has no *komos*, yet the idea of rebirth remains, for the play “leads up, not to the triumphal *Komos* of the good principle, but to the riddance or expulsion of the evil” (11). The marriage appears “in an inverted form” since “the place of Zeus is temporarily usurped by a new-fangled deity, Dinos, who is dethroned at the end,” and “Zeus is restored” (28).

necessary because human nature is, as Cornford says, “so complex and infinitely various, that, wherever writers are not bound by the demands of a given plot, they always tend either to group people in certain classes of stock types, or to copy individual characters from the life and let them bring about the action as they will” (201).

### *Exoskeletal Masks*

Especially suited to these stock types, or stereotypes, are the ritual masks which Old Comedy preserved and tragedy discarded with the need to present highly unique individuals.

The ancient drama wisely preserved the mask, which suppressed so far as possible the individuality and the accidental features of the actor, and represented in a conventional language of signs what the poet wished to be represented—the universal character. (Cornford 204)

In addition to being typical, then, the character of Old Comedy is also external. Like the insect, whose rigid and schematic patterns of behavior are reflected externally in its exoskeleton, the psychic substructure of the comic character is constantly visible in the persona or mask that he wears. The ornament, which signifies his place in the cosmos, is out on the surface. Paired with this highly rationalized determination of character, of course, is an underlying symbolism of the ritual death and revival of quite natural forces of regeneration. The rigidity of the mask, with its grotesque and fixed expressions, must be thought of in conjunction with the rigid and over-sized, erect phalluses worn by many of the actors. There may be a world of difference between the stilted gait of these

obscene puppets from the furious stride of epic heroes, yet both partake of the perennial poetic dream of a life-affirming potency.

### *Cracked Characters*

We have already noted how large a place there is for accidents in the comic plot. An accidental plot calls, of course, for accidental characters. Unlike tragedy, comedy imitates those human mistakes, deformities and happy falls that make us crack a smile or break out into a guffaw. The comic hero is reduced in scale and lacks the inner coherence of the tragic hero. As Aristotle describes the type in his *Poetics* (1449a):

As for Comedy, it is (as has been observed) an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.

As in fable, we feel that sort of comic relief that comes of feeling superior to someone whose lack of proportion is even more obvious than our own.<sup>108</sup> We delight in abusing what is incongruous. A joke is a kind of abuse, as Aristotle says in the fourth book of his

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<sup>108</sup> Aristophanes clearly enjoyed Aesop's witty fables and references to them sprinkle his plays. As Robert Temple, a recent translator of Aesop, writes: "In the *Birds*... one of [Aristophanes'] characters complains to another that he has not heard of the ancient lineage of the birds, because [he is] a blind uninquisitive mind, unaccustomed to poring over Aesop'... And two references in the *Wasps* are interesting: at 565 Aristophanes gives some indication of how the Aesop material was conceived, when he says: 'Some tell us a legend of days gone by, or a joke from Aesop, witty and sage...' And at 1255, two characters are speaking of drinking parties, one of them complaining about the violent behaviour and hangovers which they normally entail, but the other claims: 'Not if you drink with gentlemen, you know. They'll... tell some merry tale, a jest from Sybaris, or one of Aesop's, learned at the feast. And so the matter turns into a joke...' The other character replies: 'Oh, I'll learn plenty of those tales'" (x).

*Nichomachean Ethics*. Laughter, meanwhile, is “a reaction to many kinds of incongruity, not just human shortcomings”; the ridiculous “is a species of the ugly; a mistake or unseemliness that is not painful or destructive” (*Rhetoric* 3.10). Unlike in fable, these are *human* images that twist and waver and gape at us, like the grotesque reflections of a carnival mirror. In tragedy, we watch the hero isolated from his fellow men, abused, taken apart, and inverted. In comedy, we are continually diverted from the pain of that agony by jokes that ‘crack us up,’ as well as crack the mirror of mimesis. There is no suspense to speak of when the protagonist is so rigid and predictable. In comedy, there is little of that suspense we feel in serious drama, because the hero keeps slipping on banana skins. We always see the end coming. For the same reason, we cannot fear the little that oppresses him, nor pity him when he gets what he deserves. Indeed, the initial surprise created by watching the hero bungle is lessened as we recognize the same device is being used over and over. Like the ugly and distorted mask to which Aristotle refers, the comic hero acts in ways that make him seem rigid, unvarying, and predictable.<sup>109</sup>

This is true whether he be a goofy buffoon or a sterile boor, types which Aristotle regards as popular butts of comedy that cater to gentlemen. Both are to be distinguished from wits. In the fourth book of his *Nichomachean Ethics*, while discussing the nature and use of laughter, Aristotle differentiates the comic types:

People who carry humor to excess are considered vulgar buffoons. They try to be funny at all costs, and their aim is more to raise a laugh than to

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<sup>109</sup> Comedy lifts us lightly up, long enough to vent pent-up or crazed feelings. Predictability reduces our dread of the unknown, the uncontrollable. What the audience of comedy enjoys to mock would no doubt terrify if drawn on an epic scale, with human agents that had heroic power of action, and the whole realistically depicted to create the illusion of the actual. But instead, we can poke fun at these cracked, incongruous forms, which make us crack up as well. We experience madness at a safe distance, and hoot off the stage the spectacle of the (sub) human.

speak with propriety and to avoid giving pain to the butt of their jokes.

But those who cannot say anything funny themselves, and are offended by those who do, are thought to be boorish and dour. Those who joke in a tactful way are called witty, which implies a quick versatility in their wits. For such sallies are thought to be movements of one's character, and, like bodies, characters are judged by their movements. (qtd. in Morreall 15)

Whereas the buffoon "cannot resist any temptation to be funny, and spares neither himself nor others if he can get a laugh," the boor, by contrast, "is useless in such social relations, for he contributes nothing and takes offense at everything, despite the fact that relaxation and amusement are a necessary element in life" (qtd. in Morreall 15-16).

Aristotle approves of Gorgias' prescription for the use of humor, to "kill your opponents' earnestness with jesting and their jesting with earnestness." He cautions the reader, however, that the type of jest should be selected carefully, for "Irony better befits a gentleman than buffoonery; the ironical man jokes to amuse himself, the buffoon to amuse other people" (*Rhetoric* 1419b).

The boor and buffoon are stock types in Aristophanes' comedies where, generally speaking, the protagonist is a buffoon (*bomolochos*) and the antagonist is an imposter (*alazon*). In the *Clouds*, the buffoon is an old man, Strepsiades, who is also a morose boor. He must confront an imposter (Socrates, portrayed here as a sophist and pseudo-scientist) and his son (Socrate's initiate). The imposter in this play is a special type: the 'Learned Doctor.' Socrates' effort to establish himself as the representative of the new religion—a sort of pseudo-scientific brand of sophistry—makes him the antagonist or agent of evil. Ironically, Strepsiades' foolishness is exactly what exposes Socrates'

presumption. The battle between good and evil, the new god and the old, takes place in ludic exchanges between their polar opposite sensibilities.

Satire deliberately juxtaposes opposites, making obvious the contradiction. The satirist consciously violates norms of decorum in order to rectify a sinister or insane mental attitude. He strives to inculcate good, by depicting bad, taste. Naturally, he well knows the answer to Horace's rhetorical question in *The Art of Poetry (Ars Poetica)*:

If a painter chose to join a human head to the neck of a horse, and to spread feathers of many a hue over limbs picked up now here now there, so that what at the top is a lovely woman ends below in a black and ugly fish, could you, my friends, if favoured with a private view, refrain from laughing? (1-5)

In the case of the *Clouds*, the incongruity of the down-to-earth buffoon and the hyper-rational head-in-the-clouds Learned Doctor sketches in Aristophanes' humanistic vision of a healthy mean. The real 'enemy' in the *Clouds* turns out not to be the old buffoon, but modernity, with its scientific jargon and rejection of traditional spiritual values.

### *Novelty and Wit*

This apparently reactionary fear of new cultural attitudes is belied by the comedy's ludic spirit and novelty of form. We have already alluded to comedy's liberation from the conventions of tragic myth. A few words may be spoken on behalf of the surprising fertility of the satirist's invention. Since we *expect* the comic hero to fail or fall, the source of our wonder must lie in the *variety* of incongruity, an inexhaustible ingenuity. To surprise, the joke must appear, if only thinly disguised, in a novel form.

As Aristotle says of the “startling” novelties of Theodorus, whose thought “does not fit in with the ideas you already have.” Akin to “the burlesque words that one finds in the comic writers,” the novel effect “is produced even by jokes depending upon changes of the letters of a word; this too is a surprise (*Rhetoric* 1412a).

All good poems depend upon invention, but comic invention is keenly rhetorical. To stave off sterility and boredom, the comic dramatist must constantly multiply the verbal unit’s points of reference and inflections. However silly the effect, he must be deeply involved in the production of meaning. To this end metaphors may be introduced and multiplied *ad infinitum*. Metaphor may add an arresting charm, as Aristotle says:

Metaphor, moreover, gives style clearness, charm, and distinction as nothing can... Metaphors, like epithets, must be fitting, which means that they must fairly correspond to the thing signified: failing this, their inappropriateness will be conspicuous: the want of harmony between two things is emphasized by their being placed side by side. (*Rhetoric* 1405a)

Not surprisingly, Aristophanes is a deft composer of the insect-structures we call metaphors. In the opinion of Aristotle, this is the surest sign of genius.

It is a great thing, indeed, to make a proper use of these poetical forms, as also of compounds and strange words. But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars. (*Poetics* 1459a)

As we saw in Aesop’s fable of the ant, metaphors are not only manifest in extended figures. In the case of puns, metaphor can even occur at the microscopic level of letters

of words. Thanks to a similarity in the overall spelling, the substitution of a single letter in the word expected in a given context can result in a novel and surprising conjunction of two apparently incongruous ideas. Such ambivalence can be expressive of a drive towards conflict resolution (as in the case of the ant and the cicada), or release of inhibited ideas, or both together. What appears superficially to be an accident or mistake, a stray ray cast off a mirror, can prove startlingly meaningful, as if produced by a consciously reflective, if hidden, agency. The very letters of insected words may become so animated that they appear beyond the control of their user.<sup>110</sup>

*Interlude: The Satirical Epigram*

As lean Menestratus was sitting in spring-time an ant came out and pulled him into a crevice; but a fly flew up and carried him off, just as the eagle carried Ganymede to the heavenly chamber of Zeus. He fell from the fly's hands, but not even so did he light on the earth, but is hanging by his eyelids from a spider's web. (*The Greek Anthology* 4.11.407)

The situation of the hero in comedy is analogous to the protagonist in Nicarchus' satirical epigram above. In this small-scale model of a comical narrative, the hero is

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<sup>110</sup> Cf. Freud's remarks in "Slips of the Tongue": "Now in my Interpretation of Dreams (1900a) I have demonstrated the part played by the word of *condensation* in forming what is called the manifest dream-content out of latent dream-thoughts. A similarity of any sort between two elements of the unconscious material—a similarity between the things themselves or between their verbal representations—is taken as an opportunity for creating a third, which is a composite or compromise ideas. In the dream-content this third element represents both its components; and it is as a consequence of its originating in this way that it so frequently has various contradictory characteristics. The formation of substitutions and contaminations which occurs in the slips of the tongue is accordingly a beginning of the work of condensation which we find taking a most vigorous share in the construction of dreams" (58-59).

literally beneath us. Tiny in size, he is dwarfed by insects. Like a verbal cartoon with a small number of frames, this epigram tells the funny story of a man's diminutive stature.

Menestratus' only fault is his tiny physical size, but we should not be surprised to find physical and moral aspects of stature intertwined. Smallness, for instance, automatically implies limited power of action. Everything is gigantic relative to the hero, so that he is continually beset with obstacles and unforeseen complications. Distances negligible to us are terrific heights and valleys to him. Action turns into passive reaction; he is all-too-easily elevated and all-too-easily descends. He is easy pickings for the smallest of adversaries. At the same time, one man's lack may be another man's luck: Only Menestratus' own lightness, and failure to see what's coming, prevent a deadly fall to earth. Such lack of gravity yields a humorous, but not a tragic, result.

The story is highly episodic and consists in a series of antics involving the main character and various figures, all of whom are insects or types of smallness. Structurally speaking, the epigram's plot is a tiny body that can be easily divided into three sections or scenes: beginning, middle and end— or kidnapping, lofty rise, and steep fall. The whole is schematic, like the arc of a parabola plotted along a graph. A send-up of an epic simile— with terms inverted in respect to scale — ornaments the middle section like a pair of wings. Humor is visual: An extremely incongruous image is juxtaposed to our normal experience, much as if we were to look at insects through a microscope, or at a human being through the wrong end of a telescope.

Although the hero's mishaps seem fairly accidental in nature, they follow a strict relation of cause and effect. And, despite the semblance of a unity composed of conflict, climax and denouement, the parts are actually independent and bear little or no necessary

connection with each other. There is something that appears to be a climax— the hero is lifted to a great height and, just as precipitously, falls— but it is only superficial. Apart from the lack of time for serious dramatic development, there can be no dramatic illusion when the idea pursued is so ridiculous and the action so obviously forced. The arbitrary, or unnecessary, character of the action is inscribed in an ending that leaves us hanging, and in our feeling that the series could go on forever. Unlike the serious plot that imitates a single, whole and complete human action, this one strings together jokes like a necklace of cracked beads. The logic of smallness displayed is that of a straight line, one that, theoretically, could keep going on listing a universe of items of smallness, all of which could— like dominos— be lined up to fall down.

The relationship between the sections is one of contiguity, and strongly marked by repetition. We feel we are presented with a number of silly scenarios strung together in a sequence to supply the visual equivalents of the same preposterous ratio. The species of joke exhibited here is one with which we are all familiar. An initial provocation, ‘The man was *so* small...,’ sets up expectations of an exaggerated rejoinder and provokes the inevitable reply from the audience, ‘How small *was* he?’ and the climactic, absurd answer. The repetition of this call and response results in a series of punch lines which, when stitched together, form a narrative structure.

Each punch line illustrates a proportion or relation between human and insect body. And, since there is a huge gap in size between a real human being and an insect, we are always conscious that each image really frames a *disproportionate* relation. As these images of disproportion are woven together in a sequence, it finally becomes clear

that incongruity— or rather, congruity to an unnatural species of thought and scale— is the one form of continuity in the miniature narrative.

The action moves rapidly, in helter-skelter fashion, through the twists and hazards of story that hold our interest. The time elapsed seems short, as if this were not the infamy of a day but of fifteen seconds. On the one hand, our initial shock at the incongruous juxtapositions is succeeded by more of the same, so that the action becomes increasingly predictable and we move quickly along. The epigram's brevity permits little more than a list of movements or items set in motion, without being dogged by detail. Or rather, the action is abbreviated precisely because each detail has become tremendously significant— as in a telegraph that reports— like fast-moving bullets— on a trivial catastrophe, each action cut short in order to keep moving on. Each action is triggered by a *relation* between details that are animated out of their inertia. The structure of a list is rather rigid and inflexible, and generates movements that are awkward and clumsy. But this is perfect for slapstick humor, which hinges on blunt physicality, on quick chops rather than a bog of description. Slowness and speed, friction and cohesion, are all in play when one object is literally slapping up against, or sticking to, another.

The gap-toothed plot is held together by the syntax which acts to knit the whole more closely together. Sentences are long and contiguous, built out of clauses which simultaneously pinch or interrupt the action, and extend the line's length. These sidestep monotony, amusing us with their sudden rise and fall, like the amusing oscillations of an aria singer gasping out notes in a single breath. The word "but" is repeated, stitching a much needed counterpoint within these lines. The strictly linear form of the sequence is offset by the symmetry caused by matching bodies greatly different in size. The rising

and falling rhythm is intercepted at the end, when the hero is suspended in the web, as it were between earth and air.

The extended simile, too, binds, while it severs, the narrative. As in heroic narrative, the simile here momentarily severs the action and slows the pace. Yet the simile also binds, for it calls our attention to a relationship. In the epic simile, something low and natural is used to describe something supernatural and great. The opposite is true of the simile here, which inverts, or mocks, the epic simile. Rhetorically speaking, the epigram, which pursues a low form of physical humor, seems to boast of contact with a higher plane. Poetically speaking, the epigram is weighted with a metaphorical, hence foreign element. Because of our awareness of the inversion of epic simile, however, the spiritual acquires a peculiarly physical status, as if the spiritual relation indicated by metaphor were here being treated as a physical thing. As a result, although the simile here seems, as in epic, to ornament the action, it does so with a physical rather than spiritual ornament. The ornament, as it were, is all on the surface. Thus, comic silliness acquires a kind of epic gravity, and is simultaneously laden with, and lightened by, by the simile.

The mechanical nature of the action affects our view of the hero, who seems mechanical himself. His smallness is never explained or subject to debate, aside from that which bodies butting one another produces. Like an automaton run by a program, this is just how things are expected to go. A noun propped up by passive verbs, a stick figure or wooden puppet, he is made to rise and fall by forces beyond his control. He is unlike a person, unlike anything at all in nature. He is an abstraction from nature, like a caricature. He is flattened, cut into, and one part— his smallness— is exaggerated out of

all proportion to the normal or natural sense of the whole body. Indeed, the name “Menestratus” is just a label for a man reduced to a type of smallness.<sup>111</sup> In consequence, he is both reduced and made more universal. On the one hand, the idea can stand alone, and the part stand in for the whole person. He is a fragment of a human being rather than a whole. On the other hand, he is a composite of all the tiny things that are. This makes him excessively reflective, in that everyone he meets mirrors his tininess. Since Menestratus is so small, they will be even more extremely contracted versions of himself. These tiny fragments of himself he must slough off in order for him, or at least the story, to grow.

The hero’s only progress in this series of scandalous encounters is towards increasing lightness. He finally ends up suspended between the sky and earth.<sup>112</sup> As befits one who is the image of smallness, his fate hangs on mere details. But there can be very little true suspense attaching to such a hero, despite the fact that he is literally suspended in the air at the story’s end! We are left hanging, expecting a spider to finish off what the other monsters had begun. The epigram seems to play with tragic

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<sup>111</sup> Such abstraction reaches its extreme point when an “individual” (Latin *in*, “not” + *dividere*, “to divide”) is reduced in size to an “atom” (Greek *a*, “not” + *temnein*, “cut”), i.e., made reducible no more, as in the following epigram by Lucilius: “Epicurus wrote that all the world consisted of atoms, thinking, Alcimus, that an atom was the most minute thing. But if Diophantus had existed then he would have written that it consisted of Diophantus, who is much more minute than the atoms. Or he would have written that other things were composed of atoms, but the atoms themselves, Alcimus, of Diophantus” (*The Greek Anthology* 4.11.103). Here, a human is made the butt of an immaterial concept. The satire is less physical and more intellectual than slapstick. What the epigram is *saying* is just that Diophantus is the smallest person imaginable. What the epigram is *performing*, however, is that the concepts we ourselves have generated to take the measure of nature may be used to take the measure of us.

<sup>112</sup> The smallness which the epigram chronicles literally results in scandals. The Greek *skandalon* means “trap, snare, stumbling block.” The Indo-European root, *skand*, meaning “to leap, climb” branches out into the words “scan, scansion, ascend, condescend, descend, transcend.” From *skand* comes the Latin *scale*, (“ladder, stairs”) among whose many meanings in English are “a standard of ordered marks at fixed intervals used as a reference standard in measurement”; “to draw or reproduce in accordance with a particular proportion or scale”; and “to ascend in steps or stages.”

conventions: The highest point is not when the fly has carried him into the air— the moment of greatest hubris?— but when he has fallen into the web and he hangs by a lid— the moment of discovery, when his end has become clear even to himself.

Doomed to be small, he is bound to fall. He doesn't see happiness until he hits it on the web, and even then what appears to be a safety net is probably the worse mishap yet. We cannot care for such a hero, let alone feel galvanized by pity or fear, because he does not seem to have a soul.<sup>113</sup> We simply laugh as we recognize the predicament of a man who, constructed of mere body and concept, has been reduced to the status of an *insect*.

Turning our attention from the epigram of Nicarchus to an example of Old Comedy by a master dramatist like Aristophanes is rather like moving from a flea-sized human to a human-sized flea. As an imaginative creation, a comedy is a full-blown poem, vastly more complex and realistically articulated. On par with tragedy in size if not in depth and seriousness, comedy shows how significant insects can be within a dramatic, and hyper-rhetorical, form. Whereas, in little literary forms like the epigram, or the lyrics we shall consider in the next chapter, the insect appears in a starring role.

#### *Aristophanes' Clouds*

The most obvious characteristic shared by both the epigram and Aristophanes' *Clouds* is a movement down the scale. The world that comedy imitates is greatly reduced, less idealized, unheroic, and ungodly compared with that of either epic or

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<sup>113</sup> In comic situations we feel neither pity nor fear for the hero. We undergo no agonizing catharsis, that *spiritual* experience for which the tragic mimesis was formed. Instead we are like tourists at Disneyland who swallow or buy the merest semblance, the mere skin of the original thing, as *reality enough*. Only a low-grade verisimilitude operates; a minimum of sketched-in lines suffices to point up the peculiarities of the person in question. Once we recognize the simulacrum, we respond with hysterical delight. "Hey, look, it's Menestratus! (Mickey)" we cry out, if we have properly heeded the cartoon's call.

tragedy. Small size is coupled with a materialistic perspective that turns away from the heavens and down towards the earth. The final end of this drive to materialize is abstraction. Dissection, or cutting into matter, enables one to conceptualize or caricature a natural thing. As in fable and the epigram, reduction here is not a matter of physical size only, but of moral perspective as well. When the old gods leave and the world is no longer regarded as sacred, man's view of himself and the world is utterly changed. Out of sight and mind are those gods who ensured the stability and order of the universe by personifying aspects of spiritual power, and provided a basis for heroic action and conviction—immortals whose very being supplied a beautiful because. Belief in a harmony between the physical and spiritual aspects of existence shrivels, and is regarded as outworn superstition, to be sloughed off or transcended by reason. Emptied of spirit by a materialist conception, the world is rent and reduced to a congerie of winds, particles and other forces. Only a secular cosmos remains, costumed in a dress that is tailor-made to fit a more modern and realistic taste. The result is a blurring of the divisions between divine, manmade, and natural worlds.<sup>114</sup>

If the old gods are not completely gone, they are relegated to exclamations and oaths like “Zeus almighty!” and “By Dionysus” that pop like balloons from cartoon characters' mouths, and have a nominal existence only. Even the Moon, like a public official, merely signals to Strepsiades, the play's hero, that “interest is mounting,” and the “twenties of the month” (Hadas 103) are nearly upon him, that dreaded week when creditors get their day in court. Not until the end of the play does the protagonist— like

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<sup>114</sup> By the late nineteenth century, mechanistic models were ‘cutting edge’ in medical science. For Ernst Brucke, founder of mechanism and teacher of Sigmund Freud, higher and lower life forms are both made of the same physical stuff. From this it follows that even the minds of men and insects differ only in degree of complication.

Oedipus— get perspective and see that the gods have been in control all the time. At that point, he is able to take personal responsibility for what plagues him, and heroically act. Like an urban Achilles, he gets revenge and fulfills the will of the gods.

Insects, which in epic and tragedy are more or less fictive entities confined to similes, are here real beings that exist on the same plane as the human characters. A bedbug—a domestic insect—gives us our first real sign that we are not in Troy, Ithaca, or Thebes anymore, and that the idealized hero is much diminished. In what amounts to a parody of Penelope's situation in the *Odyssey*, the hero of *Clouds* is plagued at home by parasites in the form of carping creditors, an expensive wife, and a lazy, gambling son. Strepsiades is virtually reduced to a number—the amount of money he owes his creditors—and an insect is more than a match for him.

Pheidippides: Why so upset, father? Why twist and turn

The whole night through?

Strepsiades: Some bailiff out of the mattress is biting me. (Hadas 103)

The word “bailiff” has multiple facets, is wrought to reflect more than one perspective. From one angle, we see a crotchety old man, a complainer who likes to dramatize his ills, perhaps to make himself appear more stoic than he truly is. From another angle, we see a more serious symptom of a mind unbalanced by sleeplessness and anxiety, made hysterical by feelings of being trapped or cornered by the system. Fixation on an image of the law about to take the measure of him clouds his judgment. Riddled with worry, he conflates physical with mental reality. In the metaphor “bailiff,” the hero's mind and body are cut apart and re-sewn, and then made to mirror each other in a grimacing word. This suggests a psychosomatic relation, as when someone over-reads a morally neutral

symptom to reflect upon himself, or invests a meaningless detail with daemonic significance. Strepsiades' bedbug is a complex, overdetermined image, caused by several psychological events.

The word, animated by incongruity, leaps out of the plainer semantic fabric, suggesting a mind plagued by an overactive fancy. Thus magnified, or given a medal, a bedbug becomes a petty bureaucrat. And, since the poet mocks a character somewhat like us, his metaphor doubles as a mirror reflecting us to ourselves. The effect is ridiculous, mocking the decorum of epic and tragedy. Comedy's grosser realism turns the *gravity* of tragedy into something merely physical, while the fear of its much diminished hero twists the epic hero's lightness and beauty into a grotesque flight from reality. Reduction of size entails a reduction of perspective, due to the change in the spectator's relation to the whole of which he is a part. In short, the smaller one becomes, the harder to see how one fits into the big picture, and the more threatening become the details. This is the exact opposite of the situation in the epic simile, where reduction of human-sized beings to insects in an orderly, picturesque scene actually gave perspective to the reader of epic. The alien conjunction shows off the satirist's wit, his gift at concocting rhetorical cocktails. In turn, we the spectators take pleasure in laughing from the gut and mentally stomping on these bugs that plague us average citizens.<sup>115</sup>

Such cutting as we see occurring locally is reflected at all levels of comedic structure. The Aristophanic plot is starkly segmented, as we have shown above. The

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<sup>115</sup> The comic simile inverts the movement of the epic simile— which compares something great to what is small, something strange to what is familiar, something supernatural to something natural. Here something small, familiar, natural is made to seem large, threatening, public, human and even, artificial. In aiming at a *spiritual ideal*, epic and tragedy adhere to a strict decorum. Unlike those graver forms, comedy gleefully drops decorum and revels in caricaturing the *physical real*. Battening off these well-known serious conventions, reifying epic and tragic ornament, the nature of parody is parasitical.

scenes are themselves cut into the sections we know as dialogue exchanges. These, in turn, may be cut into segments and rewoven together by incongruous words and phrases. Such is the nature of dramatic form, then, that it lends itself, to a peculiar degree, to riddling.<sup>116</sup> In the exchange above, the son asks a question and the father's answer has a monster—a deformed or compound creature—in it. The dialogue form of drama permits a multiplicity of such question and answer exchanges, unlike in epic where we are constantly reminded there is a *story* to tell and scenes to *describe*. When a question has become so obscure or confusedly intricate that the respondent feels thoroughly entwined, we have a riddle.<sup>117</sup>

A riddle is a sort of miniature labyrinth. Details are linked in a chain so that perspective is lost and the quest for a solution seems impossibly convoluted. Linear thinking is baffled because the details turn this way and that—often pointing in two or more directions—like words that pun or contain multiple meanings. Like the minotaur at its core, a riddle is deviant. As in a maze, one might find one's way through a riddle if one could obtain perspective. The problem is that one is situated at ground level, walled-in, entangled in detail. One's actions are literally “awkward”; one moves forward, but

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<sup>116</sup> On riddles, cf. Aristotle: “...the Diction becomes distinguished and non-prosaic by the use of unfamiliar terms, i.e., strange words, metaphors, lengthened forms, and everything that deviates from the ordinary modes of speech.—But a whole statement in such terms will be either a riddle or a barbarism, a riddle, if made up of metaphors, a barbarism, if made up of strange words. The very nature indeed of a riddle is this, to describe a fact in an impossible combination of words (which cannot be done with the real names for things, but can be with their metaphorical substitutes)” (*Poetics* 1458a). “Good riddles do, in general, provide us with satisfactory metaphors: for metaphors imply riddles, and therefore a good riddle can furnish a good metaphor” (*Rhetoric* 1405b).

<sup>117</sup> The classic example is that of the Sphinx, a fabulously mixed creature that was her/itself a kind of riddle. This plague of Thebes consumed all men who failed to answer the following riddle correctly: “What crawls along on no legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three legs at night?” When sure-footed Oedipus came up with the answer “man,” a solution that fit all three clues together, the Sphinx leapt over a cliff and destroyed itself. The tragedy *Oedipus Rex* begins with a recollection of this intellectual feat which had first made Oedipus a hero, and thus sets the stage for the more monstrously personal, but equally self-referential, riddle he will have to solve.

often moves backwards without knowing. The narrative structure of a riddle or labyrinth is extremely insected or *cut in*.

Without a doubt, such riddling structure helps to curb the boredom of spectators who must follow a plot generated logically out of a single *idea*. It also serves to extend the length of a plot that is always threatening to fold up like a fable. On the one hand, the relation between scenes often feels more arbitrary than necessary; on the other, causal relationships bring about unnaturally swift effects.<sup>118</sup> This is not an artistic lapse, but befits the imitation of an action driven by an unrealistic scheme. The point is that Strepsiades' idea is unnatural, completely arbitrary, in fact.

Rather than burn hecatombs to the gods or take responsibility for his plight, Strepsiades hatches a scheme to send his son Pheidippides to the "Think-shop of sage souls," a school for sophistry run by Socrates and other men who "maintain the heaven's a snuffer and we men coals" (Hadas 105). This way, he hopes, his son will help him "twist/ Lawsuits and slip from creditor's clutches" (Hadas 114).<sup>119</sup> When his son initially acts skittish, Strepsiades decides to go himself.

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<sup>118</sup> As Philip Harsh notes, in *A Handbook of Classical Drama*: "By an irregular procession the action rises to a climax at the end of the third section and the main character suffers a reversal of fortune at the opening of the fourth and final section. The play is then brought quickly to a close. Except for marking the passage of time and covering vacant stages, the chorus is little more than an encumbrance" (282). The scene after the first has no consequence, but merely furnishes an opportunity for foolery and satire of Socrates. After Strepsiades is rejected, he reverts to his original plan and persuades his son to go. The debate that later transpires between Right and Wrong Logic is more structural than dramatically useful, since the father is already convinced that his son should learn from Wrong Logic, and his opinion is not in the least affected.

<sup>119</sup> Gross litigiousness is the subject of *Wasps*, as the poet in that play states: "If any of you spectators there sit astonished and wide-eyed/ To see our middles so tightly laced, in fact waspified,/ And wonder at the meaning of our sharp-pointed sting,/ Though my IQ is low I'll explain the thing." During the glorious Persian wars, Athenians had been heroic as Homeric warriors: "Armed with spear and shield we rushed, all our stalwart swarm,/ Man to man we fought amain, our glands secreting juices warm." Now, however, the "Attic kind" are wasps of a different sort, for "no creature is... easier to irritate" and "all our business we transact in a kind of waspish state." "Into the courts" they "swarm, like wasps into their haven," and "any man we're ready to sting, in order our income to double./ Stingless drones are among us too, who without taking trouble/ Devour what the others earn" (Hadas 173-74).

At the door of the Think-shop, Strepsiades stumbles upon his first obstacle: his own profane status, which disqualifies him to hear what is there regarded as sacred lore. He gains access easily enough, though, once he assures the guard of his intention to become a member of the order. Once again, an insect surfaces, this time to ornament the great Socrates' ingenuity.

Strepsiades: It's alright to tell me. I've come to the Thinkshop  
To be a student.

Student: I will tell you, but you must treat it as a mystery.

Socrates asked Chaerephon how many of its own feet  
A flea could jump— one had bitten Chaerephon's brow  
And then jumped to Socrates' head.

Strepsiades: And how did he measure the jump?

Student: Most ingeniously. He melted wax, caught the flea, dipped its  
feet,

And the hardened wax made Persian slippers. Unfastening these,  
He found their size.

Strepsiades: Royal Zeus! What an acute intellect! (Hadas 106)

Aside from the implausible image of gingerly dipping a flea's feet in wax, this passage strikes us as funny because of other more manifest incongruities. The metaphor "Persian slippers" dresses in footwear befitting an emperor six patently noisome little feet. A flea— in reality, a bloodthirsty, clawed, hairy, creepy creature— is presented, adorned, so that the thought for sale seems more desirable, even exotic, exquisite. Each step of the

method adorns the new, inhuman perspective gained. Sheer rationality promises goods tiny enough, yet magnified in worth for being original, precious, ingenious.

Most monstrous of all is the suggestion of the new standard of measurement brought about by such insection. An utterly useless piece of information— what good to the rest of us, after all, is knowing the length of the foot of a flea?—has, by virtue of this ornament, become a sacred mystery. New standards, simply by virtue of being novel and rare, will excite our curiosity. No matter that this logic gives birth to a kind of madness of relativity, in that anything can become a new measure or standard for evaluating action. When you abandon the human scale, you have taken the leap of the flea. The leap of the flea from Chaerephon’s brow to Socrates’ suggests a parody of the birth of Minerva from Zeus’ head, and suggests how such reasoning is a mechanical debasement of divine wisdom. The riddle the solution *performs* is, will the insect, which our method boasts we shall take the measure of, take the measure of the human as well?<sup>120</sup>

But if this revelation of the seer strikes us as rather pedestrian, then Strepsiades seems to be wholly taken in. His enthusiastic praise puts the student at ease, so that he is made privy to the following mystery:

Student: What would you say if you heard another Socratic ingenuity?

Strepsiades: What was it? Tell me, I beg you.

Student: Chaerephon asked him whether gnats, in his opinion,

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<sup>120</sup> The problem of measuring a flea’s jump might be a simple matter of measuring a line, but Socrates tweaks the question into a riddle by demanding that the flea’s foot be used as the unit of measurement. Compared to the solution Oedipus gave to the riddle of the Sphinx, Socrates’ solution has changed from ‘man’ to ‘flea.’ Oedipus’ answer suggests that man remains the same, though his body changes. Socrates’ solution implies that to evaluate a remarkable leap, man must ask the flea. Ironically, despite his ingenious *leap*, the original question has been left behind or lost to sight. The obscurity of the Sphinx’s riddle had hinged partly on a distraction, the metaphorical use of the word ‘leg’ to refer to an old man’s cane. The answer to Socrates’ riddle had been a number of flea feet, a monstrous fact prettified by the exotic and precious “Persian slippers.” Had ‘clubbed foot’ Oedipus given “Persian slippers” for his answer instead of ‘man,’ no doubt he, too, would have been gobbled up by the Sphinx.

Hummed through the mouth, or through their tails.

Strepsiades: And what did he say about the gnats?

Student: He declared that the gnat's entrail is small; the breath

Therefore proceeds through it with violence toward the tail.

Hence the rump resounds with the force of the blast.

Strepsiades: So the rump of the gnat is a trumpet! Thrice-blessed

For his entrail analysis! Easily can he evade a judgment

Who understands the gnat's anatomy. (Hadas 106)

Here the insect ornaments Socrates' anatomical expertise, his occult capacity to see what is normally hidden to human beings. The uninitiated might even want to hold his nose at this one, for the mystery is a little obscene. To us, however, the wit sounds loud and clear. From the student's mouth to the gnat's rectum: The way into the labyrinth is also the way out. The immaterial thread offered by logic seems to promise the continuity of spirit, a means of eliding the unlawful, or merely indecorous, gaps in nature. Trumpeting rhetoric tries to pass off the narrative of a gnat's fart as a superhuman triumph of x-ray vision.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> An almost x-ray vision was later granted by the invention of the microscope. With its meticulous observations and curious illustrations of the details asworn in miniature worlds, Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665) created a sensation in England. Among the "little Objects" which he featured in his emblem book of microscopy—a book which he humbly dubbed a "Mite, cast into the vast treasury of *A Philosophical History*"(xxvi)—are a spider, the head of an ant, a gnat, parts of a fly, a louse and a flea. His close-up of the latticed eye of a drone-fly could serve as the inspiration for modern horror or sci-fi imagery.

More immediately, the fascination with microscopy led in the seventeenth century to satires of the Royal Society and caricatures of shallow pedants and crackpot microscopists. Indeed, Aristophanes' stock type of the Learned Doctor is alive and well in characters like Nicholas Gimcrack and Sir Formal Trifle, the creations of Thomas Shadwell in his play, *The Virtuoso* (1676). A brief sample will show the type: "Sir Formal: I do assure you, gentlemen, no man upon the face of the earth is so well seen in the nature of ants, flies, humble-bees, earwigs, millipedes, hog's lice, maggots, mites in a cheese, tadpoles, worms, newts, spiders, and all the noble products of the sun by equivocal generation./ Sir Nicholas: Indeed, I ha' found more curious phenomena in these minute animals than in those of vaster magnitude" (3.3.1-5).

But what webs the comic hero weaves. He thinks that through such reasoning he will be able to exit the labyrinth, when actually he is just moving closer and closer to the monster at the center of the play. Densely armored from the world, impervious to the truth, he must confront the image of his own son, a beast to whom he himself gave birth.<sup>122</sup> In the *Clouds*, the hero never gets wind of this fact until the very end of the play, when he realizes that he has been cut up by that anatomical method which he celebrates here. For now, however, we are spared such seriousness. We know the hero will fail in his scheme, but we are more or less in the dark about the particular involutions and evolutions of plot. We experience the above passage more immediately as a comic form of relief. We delight in seeing through the incongruity. Laughter becomes our own triumphant blast. Ironists or anatomists ourselves, we exult in cutting up the cheesy conceits of puny men. While shrill trumpeters proclaim the discovery of high and occult meaning, we see they have merely cranked up the volume on the innocent fart of a gnat.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Like King Minos, who hired the artisan Daedalus, Strepsiades hopes Socrates' hermetic insight will help him seal up the monster that plagues him. The key here is that Strepsiades has not acknowledged his responsibility for the monstrous son he has spawned. The dramatist breaks down the hero's impiety into a number of parts. Thus he can multiply, as he controls, the surfaces reflected back to the audience. Strepsiades sees his own arbitrary convictions manifested in everything he sees: impudent servants, a luxurious wife, mounting debts and legal perils, and above all, a son whose addiction to racing makes him appear part horse. The son's name, Pheidippides, like a Greek *kenning*, yokes together two meanings: "thrifty" and "horse."

<sup>123</sup> Perhaps there is nothing more incongruous or disruptive of decorum than the bilabial fricative— that sudden blast from the nether lips. In this play, Aristophanes delights in conflating anus and mouth or eye, the bestial with the celestial windows of man, the visions below and above, as in the following: "(*The interior is revealed, showing students in grotesque postures*). Strepsiades: Heracles! What manner of beasts are these?/ Student: Why surprised? What do they look like?/ Strep: Like the Spartans captured at Pylos. Why are their eyes riveted to the ground?/ Stud: They are investigating what's under it./ Strep: Onions, of course. Don't bother, you fellows. I know where there are big fine ones. But those stooping over— What are they after?/ Stud: They are researching sub-Tartarean darkness./ Strep: Then why does the rump gaze heavenward?/ Stud: His secondary interest is astronomy" (Hadas 107).

Among other things, the Think-shop is a breeding ground for atheists. When Strepsiades swears by the gods he will pay for his instruction, Socrates chastens him. Because they don't exist, "the gods are not legal tender" (Hadas 108). Yet new gods and new oracles have come to supplant the old. Above all, Socrates— sham logician, pseudo-scientist, and humbug philosopher all rolled into one— assumes the mantle of a divine seer.<sup>124</sup> As Strepsiades undergoes a ritual for initiates, this high "priest of cobweb folly" teaches him how to worship the "Lady Clouds," his patronesses, and seek the "science of subtle speech" (Hadas 112). In lofty tones, Socrates chants aloud a prayer to the "all-powerful measureless/ Air" and "Clouds eternal" (Hadas 109). Unable to match Socrates' sublimity, Strepsiades yet rises to the occasion and resounds with a gaseous effusion of his own.<sup>125</sup>

Soc: Clearly have you heard my call, ye sacred Clouds and wondrous. —

Heard you not their speech to me in mantic roar and thunderous?

Strep: I too revere your Cloudships, but your wondrous howls

I must trump with my own thunder. Fright has colicked my

bowels:

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<sup>124</sup> The Learned Doctor mingles holier-than-thou airs with pseudo-scientific acumen. His banter with the Buffoon has hilarious effects, like the following interrogation of a vegetable. Strepsiades has just greeted Socrates, who is suspended high above him in a basket: "Soc.: Why do you call me, creature of a day?/ Strep: Tell me first, please, what it is you are doing?/ Soc: I tread on air and contemplate the sun./ Strep: 'Tis from a basket then you look down on gods, not from earth. Soc: Never could I have rightly discerned matters celestial/ Did I not suspend my judgment and mingle my intellect/ With its kindred air. If I gazed upward from below, nothing/ Could I find. Earth's force draws intellect's sap to itself./ And so it is with watercress too./ Strep: How's that? Intellect draws sap into watercress?" (Hadas 108).

<sup>125</sup> Cf. Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*: "When we characterize talk as hot air, we mean that what comes out of the speaker's mouth is only that. It is mere vapor. His speech is empty, without substance or content. His use of language, accordingly, does not contribute to the purpose it purports to serve. No more information is communicated than if the speaker had merely exhaled. There are similarities between hot air and excrement, incidentally, which make *hot air* an especially suitable equivalent for *bullshit*. Just as hot air is speech that has been emptied of all informative content, so excrement is matter from which everything nutritive has been removed" (42-43).

I must treat your nostrils with sacrifice unsavoury. (Hadas 110)

In-between these booming invocations, and while the Clouds roll in, their divine benefits are enumerated.

Strepsiades: 'Fore Zeus, Socrates, I beg you, who are these beings?

Who so solemnly resound? Can they be Lady Heroes?

Socrates: No; heavenly Clouds are they, potent deities for the shiftless.

'Tis they who supply acumen and casuistry, verbal sleights,  
circumlocutions,

Quick repartee and knockout arguments.

Strepsiades: That's why, when I heard them, my heart gave a bound,

Yearning for hair-splitting logic, for debate about smoke,

To meet argument with subtler argument, to contradict and refute.

(Hadas 110)

Hearing is one thing, but if seeing is believing, then for a moment Strepsiades cannot help behaving like the outspoken child in the fairy tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes." Initially, he senses the naked truth, beneath the fanciful dress of words. Sometimes a rustic clown is best equipped to see through spin-doctors' elaborate, high-falutin terms. When the goddesses first appear, Strepsiades sees only fog and smoke, and Socrates severely corrects him in a peremptory tone. Ever serious, the boor chides the nutty buffoon.

Socrates: Look you, man, these are the nursing mothers of sophists,

Fakers, quacks, bejeweled longhairs, bards bombastical,

Chorus projectors and star interpreters; these idlers they support

For flattering them in oracular mouthings. (Hadas 111)

“Bejeweled longhairs” captures the strange mixture of artifice and animal, mind and body, reflected by the incongruous matching of such antithetical figures as Socrates and Strepsiades. With respect to the play’s thematic satire on sophists or “bards bombastical,” however, there is further evidence of a breakdown in decorum.

Socrates: It’s these then who write of “the ravaging onset

Of the moist glittering clouds,” “the hair of the hurricane

Hundred-headed,” “tempestuous typhoons,” “birds crook-clawed

Loftily soaring,” or “the clouds’ outpouring of dewy floods’:

In return they wolf down slabs of mullet and dainty thrushes.

Strep: Surely for value received. (Hadas 111)

Artificial, “poetical” speech ornaments merely airy notions, in order to imitate the surface of what is truly grand and deserving of strange description— the heroic, ideal, beautiful and good.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Socrates’ speech provides textbook examples of the epithets that Aristotle lists in his *Rhetoric* as importing “bad taste” into prose orations. At issue is a rhetor’s break with decorum, a use of poetical language where plain speech is appropriate. These include “the misuse of compound words,” “the employment of strange words,” “the use of long, unseasonable, or frequent epithets.” These latter, “lacking in appropriateness” or “spread too thickly,” “plainly reveal the author turning his prose into poetry” (1406a). A fourth type of bad taste is shown in the use of metaphors that are inappropriate either because they are “ridiculous,” such as the kind used by comic poets, or “too grand and theatrical”; these latter, if “far-fetched, may also be obscure” (1406b). Bad taste, says Aristotle, is an intemperate use of poetical language: “Of course we must use some epithets, since they lift our style above the usual level and give it an air of distinction. But we must aim at the due mean, or the result will be worse than if we took no trouble at all; we shall get something actually bad instead of something merely not good.” Instead of epithets used as “seasoning of the meat,” they are “the meat itself, so numerous and swollen and aggressive are they.” Such language “imports absurdity and tastelessness into speeches, as well as the obscurity that comes from all this verbosity.” The problem is “the epithets are not a seasoning, they are the whole dish.” They become “too crowded, too grand, and too blatant” and hence, “ridiculous.” The epithet’s “verbosity also makes it obscure; the accumulation of words which add nothing to the sense beclouds what lucidity there is” (1406a).

Old and forgetful, clumsy like a simpleton or a clown, Strepsiades means well but cannot help telling it like it is. In this solemn and sacred atmosphere, his blunders constantly overstep the rigid bounds of decorum. Again and again Socrates tries to teach Strepsiades how to mount to the vasty thoughts of philosophers, to lay down the grossness of the body and rise up on the wings of mind.

Socrates: Don't always hunch your mind around yourself;

Let your speculations range through the air, like a June bug

On a string. (Hadas 122)

Socrates exhorts him: "Splinter your thoughts fine and consider/ Your business in detail. Make your divisions exact" (Hadas 121). But all is in vain. Strepsiades is too much body, as Socrates is too abstract and speculative.

Socrates: And what have you pondered?

Strepsiades: Whether these bugs will leave a scrap of me.

Socrates: Drop dead, fool.

Strepsiades: So I have.

Socrates: Don't be a softy. Cover up. You've got to find some notion

Circumventory and deprivatory.

Strepsiades: Ah, how conjecture a notion deprivatory out of a blanket?

(Hadas 121)

The incongruous matching of abstract terms with common nouns is humorous. The physical view is more commonsensical, the abstract one seems evasive. A philosopher's use of petty jargon, his adherence to the letter rather the spirit of the law, combine to

make him an easy target for the poets of misrule.<sup>127</sup> As stubbornly down-to-earth as the sage is ascetic and otherworldly, Strepsiades cannot help but speak plainly. Physical patient and impatient metaphysician continually speak at cross-purposes.

Sophistry and the new science may seem like strange bedfellows, but together they join to displace the gods of the old religion. Belief in the gods, says Socrates scornfully, makes Strepsiades “reek of “antedeluvian ignorance” (Hadas 113). The novice must swear “to believe in no god save only our trinity— Chaos, Clouds, Tongue” (Hadas 114). He is taught that these “alone are deities, all the others nonsense” (Hadas 112). One might suppose that the old gods are rejected because they betray an anthropomorphic fallacy. Yet Socrates cannot help reverting back to the same, despite the spell his jargon weaves of an up-to-date empiricism. Nothing could be more obvious to him, for instance, that there is no Zeus and the Clouds alone rain. Unfortunately, his explanation of the process recalls nothing so much as a person urinating. Stormy turbulence, moreover, is not caused by Zeus’ ire but by “the aerial Vortex” (*Dinos*) (Hadas 113). When probed as to the cause of the rumbling of thunder, however, Socrates must invoke a comparison to the gorged stomach of a man at the Panathenaea who suffers from indigestion. The sacred mysteries of nature may be difficult and obscure to all, but similes bestowed by the scientist clarify, promise instant relief. In the end, Strepsiades learns that thunderclaps burst like a man ‘breaking wind.’

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<sup>127</sup> Grammarians and other pedants who posed as critics to parade their recondite learning were the enemies of ancient poets and taunted by satirists like Philippus in *The Greek Anthology*: “Grammarians, ye children of Stygian Momus, ye book-worms feeding on thorns, demon foes of books, cubs of Zenodotus, soldiers of Callimachus from whom, though you hold him out as a shield, you do not refrain your tongue, hunters of melancholy conjunctions who take delight in *min* and *sphin* and in enquiring if the Cyclops had dogs, may ye wear yourselves away from all eternity, ye wretches, muttering abuse of others; then come and quench your venom in me” (4.11.321).

One must transcend the demands of the body, for they weigh one down, and inhibit one's ability to speculate, or multiply reflections. But Strepsiades never manages to ascend. Reduced as he is, he is still, after all, compared to these ascetics, a body. Attaining to this purely rational method of analysis— which involves denying the human scale and breaking a person into bits— amount to an effort that is beyond him. His experience trying is comparable to being ripped into pieces by a band of marauding insects.

Socrates: Ponder your problem.

Strepsiades: Not on that bed, please. If ponder I must

Let me do it on the ground.

Socrates: The bed's the only way.

Strepsiades: Worse luck; the bugs will certainly collect this day.

Socrates: Ponder well, on your problem brood,

Put on your woolly thinking hood.

If at first you are stumped, jump to a new device;

Sweet sleep be absent from your vigilant eyes.

Strepsiades: Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!

Chorus: What's the trouble? What ails you?

Strepsiades: I'm murdered! From that sack

Fierce Corinthians creep to attack.

My flanks they chew,

My ribs they gnaw,

My blood they suck,

My genitals pluck,  
My rump they excavate,  
They'll leave me inanimate. (Hadas 120-21)

Matching Socrates' sublime account with Strepsiades all-too-human reporting results in parody both of epic siege and tragic agony. The hero cannot bear the bedbugs aswarm in the ascetic's cot.<sup>128</sup> His body is torn apart line by line. Rhyme stitches all together, but each appears short when measured by the norm of the preceding lines.<sup>129</sup> The ragged verbal fabric is even funnier when addressed to an audience familiar with the heroic uniforms mocked. When the seams show and the incongruity displayed is perfect, the spectator's sides are split by laughter. The message seems to be that, no matter how much rational man tries to objectify, rationalize and abstract himself, he will never succeed in transcending nature. Neither will Nature agree to sit quietly and suffer us to murder to dissect her. In the end all we shall accomplish is to cut ourselves into pieces.

Strangely, the comic poet himself breaks in and becomes involved in the satirical action. The implication is that he is personally, morally, involved in the action being imitated. Not only does he subject the atheism of his characters to mockery *dramatically*, but there are moments when he speaks in his own voice to chastise the audience for their

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<sup>128</sup> Satirists in *The Greek Anthology* enjoyed cracking jokes about philosophers' bad hygiene, as in the following epigram attributed to Ammianus: "Do you suppose that your beard creates brains and therefore you grow that fly-flapper? Take my advice and shave it off at once; for that beard is a creator of lice and not of brains" (4.11.156). The point seems to be that a beard does not a philosopher make, no matter how vermin-ridden.

<sup>129</sup> Aristophanes refers to his own poetic art when he mockingly refers to meter as a measure of a kind: "Soc.: Tell me, what do you want to learn first/ That you were never taught before— measures, words, rhythms?/ Strep.: Measures for mine. Lately a grocer cheated me of two quarts./ Soc: Not that at all. Do you prefer trimeter or tetrameter?/ Strep: Make mine a fifth" (Hadas 119).

impiety.<sup>130</sup> Aristophanes the humanist believes the new materialistic philosophy has an apocalyptic, rather than liberating, impact on humanity. Aristophanes the critic elides the erosion of morals with the decadence of contemporary comedy. Between scenes, in an authorial intrusion (*parabasis*), the Chorus steps forth and speaks in the poet's own voice, to praise his own play and criticize those of low morals. In this bizarre hybrid of commercial ad and vituperative sermon, the poet derides those plays which depend for their popularity on spectacle.<sup>131</sup> Then he invokes "Zeus king of gods who rules on high," as well as Poseidon, Apollo, Dionysus and others, to bless his play (Hadas 117). As the Chorus returns to the plural "we" and assumes the persona of the Olympian gods, they request the audience's attention, and protest how they have been "wronged," neglected, denied both "sacrifice and libation." Even the Moon is mentioned, as one who complained "of shabby treatment." The Athenians have benefited from her influence, "not obscurely but visibly," yet they "subvert her calendar and fail to observe her days." Among the celestials, she bears the brunt of the other gods' disgruntled mood, for "When sacred days go unobserved and defrauded gods go hungry,/ It's Moon they threaten." Modern Athenians are too busy with lawsuits to attend to holy sacrifice. While the gods mourn the death of heroes (Memnon or Sarpedon), men "feast or frolic" (Hadas 118).

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<sup>130</sup> Cf. Aristotle: "Homer, admirable as he is in every other respect, is especially so in this, that he alone among epic poets is not unaware of the part to be played by the poet himself in the poem. The poet should say very little *in propria persona*, as he is no imitator when doing that. Whereas the other poets are perpetually coming forward in persona, and say but little, and that only here and there, as imitators, Homer after a brief preface brings in forthwith a man, a woman, or some other Character— no one of them characterless, but each with distinctive characteristics" (*Poetics* 1460a).

<sup>131</sup> Cf. Aristotle: "The tragic fear and pity may be aroused by the Spectacle: but they may also be aroused by the very structure and incidents of the play— which is the better way and shows the better poet... To produce this same effect by means of the Spectacle is less artistic, and requires extraneous aid. Those, however, who make use of the Spectacle to put before us that which is merely monstrous and not productive of fear, are wholly out of touch with Tragedy" (*Poetics* 1453b).

Another way in which the play breaks utterly with dramatic illusion is when the logic of the sophists—the daemonic rhetorical engine driving the plot—is split into two halves, Right Logic and Wrong Logic, and personified as two characters with speaking parts. The human characters can then sit down and watch these two halves debate. This allows the poet not only to increase the atmosphere of the fantastic, but to magnify incongruity by rendering attitudes even more starkly antithetical than when they were voiced by human characters. Thus he exposes, without utterly flattening his human characters, the entire rhetorical enterprise as a daemonizing of words, an animation of mere surfaces. The effect is alienating, in a dramatic sense, yet wholly appropriate to a plot in which words, rather than human heroes, are the real warring agents. Unscrupulous, complacent, and completely confident in his own skill, Wrong Logic generously yields to Right Logic the right to speak first in the debate.

Wrong Logic: I yield to him. Whatever he may say I'll shout down  
With my novel formulations and fancies. Then if he's still able  
To mumble, my arguments like hornets will sting his face and eyes  
Till he's ruined utterly. (Hadas 126-27)

With this simile comparing words to insects in their fury, the contrast between comedy and epic is underscored. Wrong Logic is completely fearless of his opponent, but not because he thinks himself to be on the right side of the war. For the sophist, image is all, and he knows how to win the cheers of the audience (jury). His “novel formulations and fancies” will glitter above the heat of battle, like curiously ornamented armor, worthy of the mobs’ reward. The epic device abruptly juts. Modernity descends from heroic scale, licensing laughter at the break with epic decorum.

Wrong Logic presents only one side of the case, however, and the dramatist, like a careful physician, examines what happens to man when this illness called logic is taken to an extreme.

Right Logic: If these precepts you will heed

And to them your mind apply,

A stalwart chest shall be your meed,

Complexion bright, shoulders high,

A tiny tongue, a stout behind,

And a diminutive masculine member.

If to the new-fangled you give your mind

Your complexion will be a shade of umber,

Shoulders puny, a chest like a flea's,

Tongue enormous, bottom weak,

Full of whereases and wordy decrees,

Your only art gibberish to speak. (Hadas 129)

Having abandoned discipline and the pursuit of virtue, man keeps his body but loses his soul. With no trace of his former heroic stature, of harmony and proportion, he may not even be regarded as a whole. He is more like a flea or a caricature of a man, with body flattened to a surface and cut into pieces, each one more exaggerated or arbitrarily willed than the other. Powerless to do aught but generate words and batten off the witless, he is a parasite on society.

Through the arrogance of his characters and the fate of their futile machinations, the poet makes the audience see how the ascendancy of a merely physical cosmos in

modern times leads to the descent of an ancient ideal. In the ups and downs of the action, however, his comedy plays at evading any simple moral injunction. Meanings or values aim in two directions simultaneously, and move us both up and down the cosmic scale. The humor of comedy, which might otherwise be purely diagnostic in nature, inheres in the hilarious display of linking high and low together.

Even so, the satirist's moral aim is never clearer than when the play draws to a close and unveiled as more or less an extended fable. As the Chorus has earlier foreshadowed the end—:

Chorus: Beware of a passion deceits to weave.

The old man craves to deny his debt;

The requital he'll this day receive

Will teach him a lesson he'll never forget.

'Twas he that began the plot to deceive:

He'll be caught in the tangle of his own net.

What he long wanted now he's got—

His son is expert in gainsaying;

He can twiddle justice, he can pot,

Every decency betraying,

Saying what isn't is and what is is not.

For a son deaf-mute he'll soon be praying. (Hadas 136)

—so, too, judgment is finally passed by the Chorus, the many that speak like an oracle, just prior to Strepsiades' realization of his scheme's failure. The Clouds, worshipped by Socrates and his crew, turn out to double as the daemonic agents of the higher gods.

Strepsiades: It's all your fault, Clouds; to you I trusted all my affairs.

Chorus: You've yourself to blame, for turning to wicked ways.

Strepsiades: Why didn't you speak out before, why egg an old yokel on?

Chorus: That's what we always do when we see a man's in love with  
iniquity:

We pitch him into a mess and he learns fear of the gods.

(Hadas 140)

All along, the hero's purpose in trying to master the sophist's arts of evasion had been to weave a safety net to break his financial fall. Unfortunately, the net turns out to be a web in which he has become entangled. As soon as his son is equipped with the sophists' weapons, he turns them on his own father. Pheidippides, whom Strepsiades foolishly hoped would be his savior, becomes instead like a merciless spider. After viciously beating his father for a song, he justifies his action by spinning out a fallacious logical argument. His father bewails his fate:

Strepsiades: How we first began to bicker I will tell you very soon.

You know that we'd been feasting. I asked him for a tune,

Simonides' Shearing of the Ram, with lyre accompaniment.

Only yokels, says he, at table sing, like grandma griding grain.

Pheidippides: You earned your beating on the spot. Only a cricket's brain

To singing would apply a mouth, with victuals on the table.

(Hadas 137)

With this, Strepsiades realizes not only that his plot has failed, but that he has brought about his own fall. Awakened from his delusion of an easy solution, the protagonist finds

himself reduced to the status of an insect, like the unfortunate and foolish fiddler in Aesop's anty fable. The power of the sophists he had initially courted is such that, in a decadent society like this one, anything can be made to resemble anything else, and everything can be made to fit together arbitrarily. When the son shows by his logic that he can justify the beating of his mother as well, the father experiences a catharsis of emotions he had hitherto been repressing. His son's wounding of him has a therapeutic effect, enabling him to see how his life has been a nightmare of compulsive and repetitious behavior. The meteoric elevation of his upstart son evokes a righteous fury against the destructive mechanistic agencies operating in his society. As a result of this abreaction, he is suddenly able to take action.

Although Aristophanes denies Strepsiades the happy ending (marriage and feast, or *komos*) usual in his comedies, he turns him into a kind of mock-epic-tragic hero. He grows in stature as soon as he realizes his impiety in ignoring the gods and parroting Socrates' glib silliness. With vision clarified, he sees himself truly as a plaything of the gods. He briefly contemplates a vengeful lawsuit against the offenders, but then discards this as more cowardice. He opts instead to "pay them out/ For all their grand pretensions" (Hadas 141), taking a lighted torch and burning the Think-shop down. Like one of Homeric's wrath-filled heroes, he becomes the gods' avenger on a decadent society. The usurper is destroyed and the old Zeus is restored.

#### *Epilogue: A Meditation on 'Modernity'*

Broadly speaking, the *Clouds* is a comedy that poses serious questions about perspective and agency. How will man, dwarfed by the world in which he newly finds

himself and lacking the vision of large-scale order sanctioned by the primordial gods, still be able to envision the entire universe and his proper place within it? How shall he overcome inertia and act heroically, having become an earthbound creature once he lost the patterns of godly action to emulate? The answer offered by the play seems to be that humanity is redefined as a rational animal: Heroic vision and action are replaced by abstract reason, by the use of inference and measurement to construct ratios. The world is cut into, dissected, and logically ordered. Action is divorced from the cyclical rhythm of nature until even work becomes an empty rite. Amount of money rates an individual's worth, and assessing one's rank on the social scale becomes an easy arithmetic. Man virtually identifies himself with a number; so much hinges on a zero. The comedy seems to ask: If the gods of epic and tragedy can see the whole human and natural worlds in miniature, then why can't man see a whole world in a single part? Why not abandon the search for cosmic perspective and focus on parts instead, treating each one as a whole worthy of examination?

Poetically, this corresponds to turning from metaphor towards metonymy. In a certain sense, the rationale behind dissection is that the part reflects the whole. At the extreme, we are compelled to keep breaking down whole bodies into their parts, and go on dissecting each part into others even smaller. Where does this process of insection end, save in a galloping multiplicity? Since wholes are composites of many parts, and each part is another composite whole, the process of insection can go on *ad infinitum*. The impulse cannot be stopped unless we assign a standard of finite measurement. But however absolute this assignation seems, it must remain monstrous and self-reflective, whenever we long to recover our rapport with *nature*.

In the new, civilized and urban society depicted by the *Clouds*, war is replaced by law and tribal warriors by litigious citizens. To rein in a chariot or throw a spear with accuracy is deemed less important than to talk and argue persuasively. The new hero armors himself with logic and subordinates minor to major premise. The arms he takes up now are arguments, his weapons words hammered thinly into jargon. Lawbreakers are no longer weighed in Zeus' golden scale but arraigned by the courts. Articles, not omens, are read, and sophists— professional readers— are turned into sacred advisors.

Paradoxically, when law re-weaves the social fabric, the condition for new kinds of hatred has been set. Even kindred are liable to haul a parent into court. With so much depending on the law, and everyone tugging on a thread, the ideal form becomes one that will ever remain open to interpretation— a riddle able to spawn a multiplicity of commentaries. Thus, opinions can be generated freely. Anyone can possess the next new, bright idea. Nothing need be subordinate to a general picture. No single standard holds everything together.

With meaning abstracted from nature, change simply occurs too rapidly for man to keep up with. The newest image flits across our screen in an instant, too fast to identify with, let alone see how it has been put together. Poetics— the study of the way that a body is constructed, put together, made harmonious, given animal unity— is eclipsed by rhetoric— the art of surface packaging, putting a spin on things, supplying fresh meanings, marketing novel appearances. When appearances are taken for real, the result is utter moral relativism. Man, triumphant, has become the measure of all things.

Comedy teaches that a shrunken world must needs correspond to shrunken characters. The epic hero is like a giant in his apotheosis, with glittering eyes focused on

the gods. Half-divine by birth, inspired, set in the skies after he dies, he fears neither man nor nature. The gutless and bloodless comic hero, by contrast, turns from the heavens towards the real. Dwarfed by the world he has created, he is perpetually the victim of mundane worries. Cut off from life and experience, sealed hermetically within himself, he cannot even get perspective on what has been lost. He has traded his relation to a sacred cosmos for a spot in the margins of a manmade metropolis. Heroic warrior has become meticulous man, at home among the insects, anxious, fallen, tossed and turned about by life, consumed with detail.<sup>132</sup> Imagine a body composed of such individuals and a decadent society will emerge, in which insect madness thrives. Look at the body without a governor, with every part an arbiter, a fragment of soul.

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<sup>132</sup> The plot of Aristophanes' play, like that of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, involves the hero in a series of excoriating physical and psychological trials. Each opens with the dis-ease of its protagonist, tossing and turning in a bug-ridden bed. Strepsiades is plagued by creditors, while Gregor is harassed by his employer. Strepsiades is an old buffoon looking for an easy way out of his mess, whereas Gregor is a naïve young man who thinks that everything will be O.K. if he works hard enough. Both characters, however, live wholly in their ideas and are victims of the lies their societies are telling them. At the end of Aristophanes' comedy, Strepsiades awakens from his nightmare and undergoes a metamorphosis. Realizing the true nature of the son, he accepts responsibility for his complicity in creating him. As a result of this breakthrough, he molts his selfish and self-destructive ideas and plays an active role in freeing society of its pests. The protagonist of Kafka's tragic tale, as that of *Oedipus Rex*, awakens into a living nightmare. He has already undergone a metamorphosis, and the story takes us backwards, and inwards, to find out its cause. At the core of Gregor's strife with his employer and family, we gradually learn, is a rather Oedipal conflict with his father. Initially unselfish and optimistic, he is forced to realize that his very existence is like a guilty plague upon his family. Inverting the epiphany of Strepsiades, Gregor has to accept responsibility for keeping his entire family dependent upon him. Ironically, he had been reducing them all to insects. Kafka's tale ends with the grim sacrifice of Gregor as a kind of scapegoat bug, so that his family can emerge from their shell and embrace a more active, vital, independent existence. This final metamorphosis is figured, specifically, as the 'rebirth' or sexual maturity of Gregor's sister Greta. The reader is left, however, with little hope that she shall be able to do anything but perpetuate the horrific cycle of dependency, shame and resentment that tore apart her own family.

## Chapter 5    The Song of the Cicada

### *Pliny's Prologue: Seeing the Great in the Small*

To judge from the perspective of classical epic and drama alone, one might conclude that all insects in literature possess a merely peripheral existence, that they are confined to the margins of serious poems. While that might be the case for these larger forms, in fact, insects occupy center stage in other smaller, *non-heroic* forms. That ancient readers regarded insects as unconventional subject matter for belles-lettres may be adduced from the fact that authors displaying insects in artworks often posed as apologists. Pliny, for instance, while praising his own encyclopedic labors, is quite conscious that he is descending from the highest, that is, heroic, level of decorum. Yet, his project requires him to defend the legitimacy of studying all things, even the trivial. Sometimes he excuses himself; other times he pleads. In the excerpt below, he chides his reader to set aside conventionally heroic behavior and curb ambition. Fortune, after all, often colludes with trivial happenstance. Thus contemplating life as a philosopher of the miniature might, Pliny hopes his reader will see the great in the small.<sup>133</sup> He ornaments his thesis with a reference to the legend that Anacreon choked to death.

Thou then that presumest upon thy bodily strength, that standest so much  
upon fortune's favors and hast thine hands full of her bountiful gifts,  
taking thyself not to be a foster child and nursling of hers, but her natural

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<sup>133</sup> A remarkable modern expression of this sentiment is Ezra Pound's observation upon the human and insect worlds in the eighty-first of his *Cantos*, written while he was held prisoner in Pisa at the end of World War II: "The ant's a centaur in his dragon world./ Pull down thy vanity, it is not man/ Made courage, or made order, or made grace./ Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down./ Learn of the green world what can be thy place/ In scaled invention or true artistry./ Pull down thy vanity,/ Paquin pull down!/ The green casque has outdone your elegance" (535).

son born of her own body: thou, I say, that busiest thy head evermore, and settest thy mind upon conquests and victories: thou that art upon every good success and pleasant gale of prosperity puffed up with pride, and takest thyself for a god, never thinkest that thy life, when it was hung upon so single a thread, with so small a matter might have miscarried... if no more but the very kernel of a raisin goes down thy throat wrong, as it did with the poet Anacreon, which cost him his life. (81-82)

Remonstrating with his reader to acknowledge the force of fate, Pliny employs a topos of humility to refresh his reader's palate before the repast offered by his curious and sumptuous catalogue. The final allusion to the legend of the death of Anacreon deepens the impression of the moral: Even the trivial may prove of great consequence, fateful.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> One would think that scientists in the modern era, which has seen the splitting of the atom and the compression of a universe of information onto a micro-chip, would be completely converted to the power and importance of the small. According to James Gleick in *Chaos*, however, until the advent of chaos theory in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a majority of scientists still labored under the notion that "very small influences could be neglected" (15). Beholden to an 18<sup>th</sup> century Laplacian faith in the possibility of deterministic probability, their zeal intensified when supercomputers appeared on the scene. Used to model complex systems, these calculating machines could "[churn] through complicated, somewhat arbitrary webs of equations," and promised to turn "measurements of initial conditions... into a simulation of future trends" (20). When Edward Lorenz began making models that parodied non-linear systems like the weather, however, he soon realized that even an infinitely powerful computer would still be unable to predict the weather accurately, due to tiny fluctuations. Lorenz' finding, dubbed the "Butterfly Effect," presented a troubling image of "predictability giving way to pure randomness" due to the way that "small scales intertwined with large" (23). For a researcher intent on making models, the fall from Laplacian grace was a happy one for it taught him how to simulate the nonperiodic, unpredictable patterns of non-linear systems. Like a divine meteorological artist, he began to introduce tiny perturbations in his equations and found he could avoid generating boring, predictable cycles. The Butterfly Effect enabled him to reproduce "the rich repertoire of real earthly weather, the beautiful multiplicity of it" (23). By mapping phenomena with the aid of computers, Lorenz discovered a "fine structure hidden within the disorderly stream of data" (29). When the data was fixed in three-dimensional space, the motion of the point could be represented among the continuously changing variables, resulting in a map that "displayed a kind of infinite complexity. It always stayed within certain bounds but never repeated itself, either. It traced a strange, distinctive shape, a kind of double spiral in three dimensions, like a butterfly with its two wings. The shape signaled pure disorder, since no point or pattern of points ever recurred. Yet it also signaled a new kind of order" (30). Once Lorenz found a way to picture it, the Butterfly Effect proved to be a "strange attractor" that yielded a surprising moral: Order sometimes *masquerades* as randomness (22). Intensification of flux, Lorenz saw, exists on the edge of being absolutely clear. Indeterminacy and structure, flux and stasis, are knit together in a picture that maps out the transition between the two.

We are reminded that our lives, however great and famous or blessed, always hang upon “so single a thread.”

Scale in the miniature compels us to consider not just structure, but the life cycle and questions of time. As we saw at the conclusion of our chapter on Virgilian simile, however much the images poets make may seem to be invested with a transcendental or timeless quality, they are always involved—through their intersection with narrative, and the parodic imitation of predecessors—in the conflicts and changes of history. Indeed, it is one of metaphor’s special virtues that it is able to show, in a most economical and sensual fashion, Being perpetually involved with Becoming.<sup>135</sup>

Since ancient times, philosophers have conceived of the universe as a Great Chain of Being. Although Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution temporalized this static picture over a hundred years ago, scientists are only recently working out the implications of his theory. As part of a continuing effort to synthesize discoveries in genetics, evolution and

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<sup>135</sup> One of the most famous extended insect meditations on Being and Becoming in classical literature is the tale of Arachne in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in which a mortal weaver competes with Minerva and is reduced to a spider for her hubris. Minerva’s tapestry is hierarchical in form and manner. Central are the gods: transcendent, just, and foundational for culture. In the margins are mortals, transformed or reduced for their blasphemy. Arachne’s tapestry, more labyrinthine and metamorphic in form, depicts the gods taking animal shape to rape beautiful mortals. When Arachne’s artistry proves faultless, Minerva transforms her into a poisonous, ugly, spider. As humans blur the boundaries that divide them from divinity, they descend to a lower scale in the hierarchy. The daemonic human psyche is subject to ideology. The tale ends in an image of triumph for the divine fixation of identity.

From another perspective, however, Ovid’s yarn praises Arachne’s artistry as much as it condemns her for presumption. In *The Gods Made Flesh* (1-18), Leonard Barkan argues that all three natures in Ovid’s poem—divine, human and earthly—are ‘guilty’ of metamorphosis, scale-jumping and shape-shifting. All three share the spider’s propensity towards *reduction, in-secting and weaving*. Thus Ovid draws his lesson from nature as well as divinity. What animates the poet’s story, makes it move and come to life, is the poet’s willingness to open it out to surfaces and embroider with metaphorical threads. Ovid’s eroticization of his own canvas with the simulacra of desire gives readers a voyeuristic pleasure while keeping the moral endlessly fresh. When moral and manner intersect incongruously as in the Arachne story, they complicate the literal meaning. The *manner* of Ovid’s picturing in the Arachne story demonstrates, if *mutely*, an Arachnean affinity not to be found in his fable’s final *moral*. The poem, like a living organism, is more than what it seems to say or picture at the end. Such spinning compels a critic to think about ‘process’ in poems as well as ‘end states.’ Coherence is displayed in the whole plot, the entire life cycle, not just in the final image. The whole poem, then, has the coherence of a universe, precisely because the local expresses the changeableness of nature. In this respect, the Arachne story can be seen as a miniature of Ovid’s entire project in the *Metamorphoses*.

morphological development, even zoologists have begun to view size and time as the warp and woof of a single web. According to John Tyler Bonner in *Size and Cycle*, biological studies have, from the very earliest times (from Aristotle through Linnaeus), tended to equate organismic structure with that of the adult (5). As a result, an ‘individual’ has been taken to mean “an organism in a short instant of time— in a brief time-slice” (7). Such picturing, argues Bonner, amounts to a static system of classification. Bonner suggests instead that we take the life cycle as the central unit and classify the different parts of the cycle “on the basis of their size characteristics”; generally speaking, “large organisms have long cycles” and small ones small (10-15). Whereas the giant sequoia at 100 meters is not sexually mature for 100 years, a housefly at 1 centimeter is ready to reproduce after just 1 month (17). Size increase is also accompanied by an increase in complexity, due to the structural changes dictated by surface-volume relations (18).<sup>136</sup> By looking at the entire life cycle, instead of just the snapshot of maturity, perspective is obtained on the relation of size to lifespan, cycles of reproduction and opportunities for genetic variation. New comparisons between organisms may be made, incorporating both life history and body structure.

Poets have always been sensitive to the role time plays in our lives. Almost our main sense of the insect world—of the individual, if not the species—is that it is not going to last. In the following series of epigrams collected in *The Greek Anthology* and

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<sup>136</sup> Scientists use sophisticated devices to calibrate material differences, although humans are naturally equipped with remarkably sensitive antennae. Even the youngest of spectators perceive a relation between body size and soul, judging from reaction to the recent film adaptation of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Pint-sized viewers knowingly wink when Gandalf, locked in the tower of the warped wizard Sauramon, summons a moth to help him escape. They understand implicitly how a small winged spirit can elude the radar of an evil, hence grandiose, magician. They appreciate, too, the importance and slowness of large things. When Sauramon blithely razes the centuries-old forest surrounding his city to serve his war engine, children exult to watch the Ents— huge, ponderous, yet long-striding tree-shepherds— wreak their revenge. The eco-unconscious Sauramon lives long enough to regret the precipitous act of deforestation.

two lyrics of Anacreon, we will examine the insect in terms of two quintessential poetic motifs: the shortness of human life and desire's potency in the face of extinction. The cicada or grasshopper is celebrated as the precious singer of all that is small and sensitive, evanescent and ephemeral. As a heavenly daemon with a distinctly erotic charge, the bee figures the intensity and introversion of desire.

In this final envoi or coda to our poetics of the insect, the format we have chosen is a trefoil: first, a beautiful free translation in English verse of Anacreon's Greek lyric; next, a wreath of epigrams to serve as foil to the lyric; lastly, a straight prose translation of the original Anacreontic lyric. The straight prose translation is used as part of my ongoing theory; the beautiful lyric translation will remind the reader of my motive for the inquiry. Poetically speaking, the insectal form of the epigram makes it especially apt for this chapter. As Roland Barthes notes, speaking of La Fouchefoucauld's maxims:

[The maxim] is a hard and shiny—and fragile—object, like an insect's thorax; like an insect, too, the maxim possesses a sting, that hood of sharp-pointed words which conclude and crown it—which close it even as they arm it (the maxim is armed *because* it is closed). (4-5).

Thematically, too, the epigrams serve to show, in brief, how the several ideas contained within each lyric might exofoliate. Our poetics concludes with the lyric because it is one of the earliest forms of what we may, without reservation, dub 'insect poems.' Here is the literary insect allowed to crawl, fly, hum, on its own.

*Abraham Cowley's "The Grasshopper"*

Happy insect, what can be  
In happiness compared to thee?  
Fed with nourishment divine,  
The dewy morning's gentle wine!  
Nature waits upon thee still,  
And thy verdant cup does fill;  
'Tis filled wherever thou does tread,  
Nature self's thy Ganymede.  
Thou dost drink and dance and sing,  
Happier than the happiest king!  
All the fields which thou dost see,  
All the plants, belong to thee;  
All that summer hours produce,  
Fertile made with early juice.  
Man for thee does sow and plough;  
Farmer he, and landlord thou!  
Thou dost innocently joy,  
Nor does thy luxury destroy;  
The shepherd gladly heareth thee,  
More harmonious than he.  
Thee country hinds with gladness hear,

Prophet of the ripened year!  
Thee Phoebus loves, and does inspire;  
Phoebus is himself thy sire.  
To thee of all things upon Earth,  
Life is no longer than thy mirth.  
Happy insect, happy thou,  
Dost neither age nor winter know.  
But when thou' st drunk and danced and sung  
Thy fill the flowery leaves among  
(Voluptuous and wise withal,  
Epicurean animal!),  
Sated with thy summer feast,  
Thou retir' st to endless rest.

*A Garland of Epigrams*

Hearing some cicadas sing, an ass was charmed by their harmony and envied them their talent. "What do you eat," he asked them, "that gives you such a beautiful song?" "The dew," they replied. From then on, the ass waited for the dew and eventually starved to death. (Temple 206)

Previously we encountered, in the third book of the *Iliad*, in a vision of Helen atop Priam's tower, a memorable evocation of cicadas in the epic simile. There the poet brings into striking accord cicadas' song in summer and the raspy whispers of Trojan

elders, bedazzled by her more than human beauty. With the pause in dramatic action come a heightening and poise. The tension building towards the imminent duel of Paris and Menelaus is balanced exquisitely by this still reflection on the living, moving, cause of war. Matchless beauty and reckless acts—the glory and error of youth—wet, as they are weighed in, the dry old eyes of aged men. Themselves too weak and withered to fight, the elders are enlivened by her ambiguous radiance. By turns glowing and glowering, they wax in praise and blame of her, goddess and whore both. Their multi-layered distance from the blood-filled tumult of the field below gives them, and us, a clearer perspective on fate and the life force.

Freedom from heroic and erotic passion is also Anacreon's theme in his poem on the cicada, where he celebrates the life force in musical, or lyric, form. A chafing complaint about human strife and lust simmers just below the lyric's surface, but the poet's praise of the insect's singing casts a spell over all. The encomium is given a sharper edge by the faintly admonishing tone. Neither satirical like fable nor heroic like epic simile, the lyric seeks, nonetheless, to jar us into clarity by its rendering of a pleasing discord.

No one living among these denizens of summer will wonder why the cicada and its song are so often singled out for special praise by Anacreon. As powerful in voice as small in body, as likely to perch precariously upon the tallest of trees as waddle or stagger in the lush grass, the cicada was regarded by the ancient Greeks as one of nature's inspired singers. Perhaps we should say inspired *musician*, since the ancients regarded the cicada as mouthless. In his *Natural History*, Pliny writes that it is "the only living creature actually without a mouth," having instead "a sort of row of prickles resembling

tongues, this also being on the breast, with which they lick the dew. The breast itself forms a pipe; the singers use this to sing with” (489-91).

When we say “inspired,” of course, we mean in the usual and figurative, not original etymological, sense. Many, including Aristotle, did not believe cicadas *breathe*:

Insects, for instance, have no voice and no language, but they can emit sound by internal air or wind, though not by the emission of air or wind; for no insects are capable of respiration. But some of them make a humming noise, like the bee and the other winged insects; and others are made to sing, as the cicada. And all these latter insects make their special noises by means of the membrane that is underneath the ‘hypozoma’ — those insects, that is to say, whose body is divided; as for instance, one species of cicada, which makes the sound by means of the friction of the air. (*HA* 535b)

Marvelously, the cicada’s own body serves as musical instrument—much like the cricket or grasshopper, fiddlers whose medleys are sometimes confused with his.<sup>137</sup> Outside the city, none can remain oblivious to his loud, hypnotic lays, reverberations piercing through midsummer’s haze from far away.

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<sup>137</sup> Different species of insects— like different genres of poems— produce their music differently. According to Wigglesworth, who describes the various ‘instruments’ and musical ‘techniques,’ grasshoppers grate a washboard, crickets play a fiddle, and cicadas thump a drum: “The males of short-horned grasshoppers ‘stridulate’ by drawing a series of pegs on the hind-legs across a stiff vein on the outer surface of the fore-wing... In long-horned grasshoppers and in crickets, two modified areas on the fore-wings, forming a ‘ridge’ and a ‘file,’ are rubbed together and set the wing in motion... The males of the cicadas produce their sounds in quite a different way. They have a pair of ridged drums or ‘tymbals’ at the base of the abdomen, which are convex outwards and have a powerful muscle attached to the inner concave surface. When the drum is drawn inwards and then released, it produces sound by the same mechanism as a rounded tin lid pressed inwards by the finger” (201-02).

Not even Socrates of Plato's *Phaedrus*— a self-dubbed “lover of knowledge” and one for whom “the men who dwell in the city are my teachers, and not the trees or the country” (230)—was immune to the airy charm of cicadas or the idyll's spell. Having asked Phaedrus to guide him to the tallest plane-tree, Socrates is moved to exclaim:

By Hera, a fair resting-place, full of summer sounds and scents. Here is this lofty and spreading plane-tree, and the agnus cactus high and clustering, in the fullest blossom and the greatest fragrance; and the stream which flows beneath the plane-tree, is deliciously cold to the feet. Judging from the ornaments and images, this must be a spot sacred to Achelous and the Nymphs. How delightful is the breeze: so very sweet; and there is a sound in the air shrill and summerlike which makes answer to the chorus of the cicadae. (230)

Together with the other wizened members of his riotous band, the cicada creates a swell of criss-crossing, cutting rasps that resolve into a sound tapestry at last. Beginning in early morn, the song is low-pitched and meandering at first. But the tune grows more shrill and frenetic as the chorus heats, and rises to a feverish pitch at noon. The pitch of this song is affected by the temperature, in fact. The cyclical spiral of sounds, endlessly repeated, can be riveting; the invisible singers seem possessed or charged by a force inherent in the atmosphere. For an auditor prone to reverie, the cicada's magnetic song has a power to expel the remnants of evening sleep and summon sunlit daydreams.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> In the *Ion*, when Socrates questions the orator about his ability to move audiences emotionally by his performance, he describes the maker and reciter of poetry in similar terms. His “gift” is “not an art, but... an inspiration... a divinity moving” him like that which moves in a “magnet.” “The Muse,” he says, “first gives to men inspiration herself: and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration from them.” “Good poets... compose their beautiful poems not as works of art, but because they are inspired and possessed” like “like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers, when they are under the influence of Dionysus, but not when they are in their right mind” (223).

A eulogistic symposium might be composed out of the numerous ancient testimonies to these diminutive musicians. Cicada, locust, grasshopper— each seems to have epitomized for them a desire to possess, if not domesticate, earth's wild music. Like little cages designed to house them, epigrams describe insects kept as pets. In *The Greek Anthology* Simias writes:

This locust crouching in the leaves of a vine I caught as I was walking in  
this copse of fair trees, so that in a well-fenced home it may make noise  
for me, chirping pleasantly with its tongueless mouth. (2.7.193)

If such an epigram evokes the joys of a day, then others are epitaphs, reminding us how abruptly life is cut short. Today these songsters dwell in our hearts and home, but tomorrow we must sing their doom. Plaintive poems, like plain pots bearing heart-felt notes, mourn the music echoing through many rooms. Mnasalcas writes:

This clay vessel set beside the far-reaching road holds the body of  
Democritus' locust that made music with its wings. When it started to  
sing its long evening hymn, all the house ranged with the melodious song.

(GA 2.7.194)

In an effort to animate what has departed to the realm of the shades, Leonidas of Tarentum even throws his voice into the departed, as a ventriloquist might a locust dummy, lifting it out of the tomb:

Wayfarer, though the tombstone that surmounts my grave seems small and  
almost on the ground, blame not Philaenis. Me, her singing locust, that  
used to walk on thistles, a thing that looked like a straw, she loved and  
cherished for two years, because I made a melodious noise. And even

when I was dead she cast me not away, but built this little monument of my varied talent. (*GA* 2.7.198)

If such tokens mark the passage from life to death, they also register the liminal sentiments at childhood's end, poignant moments when much may be contained in little. The finest of these, like a bifocal lens, offer a double perspective. On the one hand, we see with the eyes of an adult looking back upon a bygone phase, in which we were naive and life seemed somewhat charmed. On the other hand, we gaze with the eyes of the grieving child, moved by present sorrow. This sentiment is expressed in the following epigram by Anyte:

For her locust, the nightingale of the fields, and her cicada that resteth on the trees one tomb hath little Myro made, shedding girlish tears; for inexorable Hades hath carried off her two pets. (*GA* 2.7.190)

Note how a metaphor—“the nightingale of the fields”—softens our judgment as it renders, with fondness, the hyperbolic attitude of the griever. In general, epigrams can range from the delicate to the mock-precious, from pathos to bathos. The most moving of the cicada poems strike a balance between tenderness and mockery, as if child and adult sensibilities were joined and the reader invited to suspend his maturity awhile. Winking across two millennia, these literary trivia focus attention on art's power to preserve. Until feeling for little things itself passes away, the longing to remember and to preserve makes even the tiniest of tombs a precious monument.

Chaste as such epigrams are with their theme of grieving innocence, they hint at the insect-as-fetish. Other epigrams are more markedly ambivalent, such as those voiced

by lovers. Meleager would substitute the insect's song for pangs of passion, welcoming its music as a *remedia amoris*, an antidote for love's intemperance:

Locust, beguiler of my loves, persuader of sleep, locust, shrill-winged  
Muse of the corn fields, Nature's mimic lyre, play for me some tune I  
love, beating with thy dear feet thy talking wings, that so, locust, thou  
mayest deliver me from the pains of sleepless care, weaving a song that  
enticeth Love away. And in the morning I will give thee a fresh green  
leek, and drops of dew sprayed from my mouth. (GA 2.7.195)

If the charm of the insect's chirruping proves too great, however, then it must, like the Siren's song, be heroically resisted.<sup>139</sup> Socrates, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, takes the cicadas' song as an admonishment to avoid sleep and engage in an energetic discourse on love. The cicadas, he tells Phaedrus:

...are talking to one another and looking down at us. What would they say if they saw that we, like the many, are not conversing, but slumbering at mid-day, lulled by their voices, too indolent to think? Would they not have a right to laugh at us? They might imagine that we were slaves, who, coming to rest at a place of resort of theirs, like sheep asleep at noon around the well. But if they see us discoursing, and like Odysseus sailing

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<sup>139</sup> A curious scholarly note on the singing Sirens is given by Gabriel Germain. Observing that the episode involves a hero who is able, unlike the Biblical Adam, to "abstain in the face of divine temptation," a promise of knowledge, Germain believes that "the very spirit of the Homeric episode points to an alien provenance" (96). An etymological exploration of the name "Siren" ("burning," "wild bee," "wasp") leads Germain into entomological speculation. Germain connects the dots between its root meanings and cognates in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin ("burning," "wild bee," "body-snatcher," "piercing spirit," "panic") and detects a possible allusion to a pre-Hellenic Cretan cult which venerated a supernatural being in the shape of a bee. The cult of the insect, which was associated with pure and diligent priestesses, used figurines of a "woman whose body tapers into a bee" (95). In contrast to Socrates' 'Siren cicadas,' Germain thus associates the mysterious Sirens, with their voices "dulcet as honey" (91), with a species of wild wasp or bee.

past them, deaf to their siren voices, they may perhaps, out of respect, give us of the gifts which they receive from the gods that they may impart them to men. (259)

The insect's raucous song has also suggested poets locked in competition with rivals.<sup>140</sup>

In the following dedicatory epigram composed by Paulus Silentiarius, a happy accident befalls the winner Eunomus who, as a token of gratitude for receiving favor, offers a brazen idol to Apollo, god of music and poetry:

To Lycorean Apollo doth Locrian Eunomus dedicate the brazen cicada, in memory of his contest for the crown. The contest was in lyre-playing, and opposite him stood his competitor, Parthis. But when the Locrian shell rang to the stroke of the plectrum, the string cracked with a hoarse cry. But before running melody could go lame, a cicada lighted on the lyre chirping tenderly and caught up the vanishing note of the chord, adapting to the fashion of our playing its wild music that used to echo in the woods. Therefore, divine Son of Leto, doth he honour thee with the gift of thy cicada, perching the brazen songster upon thy lyre. (*GA* 1.6.54)

Here the cicada stands, doubly, as a symbol of the poet's power and the totem spirit of Apollo. The cicada's relation to these immortal beings may be regarded as that of 'familiar' or attendant spirit in animal form. Similarly, when Socrates exhorts Phaedrus

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<sup>140</sup> One might expect little accord between a modern etymologist and an antique poet in their interpretations of insect behavior, yet a humanistic tendency often leads to a chorus of agreement. Thus, according to Wigglesworth, the three main functions served by insect song include the sheer pleasure of self-expression, amorous courtship, and competition between males: "the ordinary spontaneous song of sexually mature males; the wooing song of the males of many species when the female is close, which induces the female to mount the male and mate with him; and the rival duet of males— a sort of 'ritual battle,' which may be long continued before mating begins" (203).

to converse with him about love within the cicadas' earshot, he warns that they are likely to report back to the Muses like secret agents, inquisitive officers.

But the cicada just as easily might be used to boast another, more rustic, pedigree that associated him with the pipes of Pan. According to Meleager, when love needs a remedy, Dionysian intoxication may serve better than Apollonian austerity:

Noisy cicada, drunk with dew drops, thou singest thy rustic ditty that fills the wilderness with voice, and seated on the edge of the leaves, striking with saw-like legs thy sunburnt skin thou shrillest music like the lyre's. But sing, dear, some new tune to gladden the woodland nymphs, strike up some strain responsive to Pan's pipe, that I may escape from Love and snatch a little midday sleep, reclining here beneath the shady plane-tree.

(GA 2.7.196)

Indeed, for a pastoral poet like Archias, woodland sounds rival those of the city, and the cicada's song is even more beloved of shepherds than the lyre:

Once, shrilling cicada, perched on the green branches of the luxuriant pine, or of the shady domed stone-pine, thou didst play with thy delicately-winged back a tune dearer to shepherds than the music of the lyre. But now the unforeseen pit of Hades hides thee vanquished by the wayside ants. If thou wert overcome it is pardonable; for Maeonides, the lord of song, perished by the riddle of the fishermen. (GA 2.7.213)

What all these epigrams share in common, however, is a celebration of the insect's harmony with nature and joyous expression of that harmony in song.

*Anacreon's Cicada*

Let us turn now to one of the most famous lyrics attributed to Anacreon which praises this radiant sun-god's apotheosis in summer.

We count you blessed, cicada, when on the treetops, having drunk a little dew, you sing like a king: you own everything that you see in the fields, everything that the woods produce. You (spare?) farmers, robbing none of them. You are honoured by mortals as the sweet prophet of summer. The Muses love you and Phoebus himself loves you and has given you a clear song. Age does not distress you, wise one, earth-born, song-lover! You who do not suffer, you whose flesh is bloodless, you are almost like the gods. (Campbell 205-06)

The lyric is less a story than a speech, a paean or hymn. Structurally, it is a sustained metaphor that joins cicada and sun, song and ray, seemingly expressive of a will to harmonize creatural and cosmic, natural and divine, energies. The "blessed" singer's bliss goes beyond the jubilation of self-revelry. Although tiny and ugly in bodily appearance, the cicada singing reveals divine beauty, the soul's reality.<sup>141</sup>

The insect in this poem might even have won the approval of a severe moralist like Socrates. Sober though intoxicated, composed though in ecstasy, the cicada recalls

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<sup>141</sup> In reflecting upon the ever-new song of the wizened, ugly, cicada, one recalls Alcibiades' drunken tirade against Socrates in the *Symposium*: "I am to speak in praise of Socrates, gentleman, and I will just try to do it by means of similes. Oh yes, he will think perhaps it is only for a bit of fun, but my simile will be for truth, not for fun. I say then, that he is exactly like a Silenos, the little figures which you see sitting in the statuaries' shops; as the craftsmen make them, they hold Pans-pipes or pipes, and they can be opened down the middle and folded back, and then they show inside them images of the gods... Yes, [Socrates is] a more wonderful performer than that Marsyas! For he used to bewitch men through instruments by the power of his mouth... it is his tunes which alone ravish us and make plain those who feel the need of the gods and their mysteries, because the tunes are divine. The only difference between you is, that *you* do the same without instruments by bare words!" (215).

the Platonic ideal of the philosopher who is carried beyond earthly cares.<sup>142</sup> Despite being short-lived and in shriveled guise, the cicada is not distressed by age.<sup>143</sup> No matter how much he drinks, he remains beyond pleasure and pain. He covets nothing. No slave to passion, he is “bloodless.” He is pious, too; though “earth-born,” he is drawn to the light, a path leading upward towards the gods.<sup>144</sup> However alien or inhuman in appearance, his song proves him to be divine, even immortal, in nature. If Socrates was ready to admit only “hymns to the gods and praises of famous men” (607a) in his ideal republic, then he might nevertheless accept Anacreon’s lyric to the cicada as a praiseworthy poem, an emblem of the royal and well-ruled soul.

Anacreon’s rhapsody, or ‘stitched song,’ somewhat resembles the epic simile examined in an earlier chapter. Of course, Homer’s device ornaments and depends on a much larger narrative, whereas Anacreon’s is a full-fledged lyric poem, able to fly on its own. But both are, in essence, extended metaphors that weave a harmony out of what might first seem like a farfetched conceit. Homer’s compares the Trojan elders to

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<sup>142</sup> Socrates evidently admired Anacreon’s work. When Phaedrus claims for Lysias’ speech on love “especial merit,” Socrates demurs, saying: “There I cannot go along with you. Ancient sages, men and women, who have spoken and written of these things, would rise up in judgment against me, if out of complaisance I assented to you. Phaedrus: Who are they, and where did you hear anything better than this? Socrates: I am sure that I must have heard; but at this moment I do not remember from whom; perhaps from Sappho the fair, or Anacreon the wise...” (*Phaedrus* 235).

<sup>143</sup> That old age does not “distress” the cicada may follow from the observation that it sings, despite having a withered appearance. Perhaps also it alludes to the raspy, grating voice that was noted above in Homer’s simile of the elders. Davies and Kathirithamby recount the myth of the mortal Tithonus, would-be lover of the goddess Dawn. Granted immortality but not eternal youth by the gods, Tithonus was finally transformed into a cicada and a piteous figure (126). Anacreon’s cicada, on the contrary, maintains an exultant morale.

<sup>144</sup> Because their larvae seemed to emerge from the earth as fully-grown insects, cicadas were believed to be born from the earth. Davies and Kathirithamby, citing Eustathius and Hermogenes, claim this is why the cicada “became the traditional badge of the autochthonous Athenian” (125). In Plato’s *Symposium*, Aristophanes tells a curious myth to explain why humans are divided in the forms of love they pursue. Until Zeus cut them in half, most humans were hermaphroditic. Before pity led Zeus to move the privy parts of these insected creatures in front, they were situated behind. Thus, they “had begotten and brought forth not with each other but with the ground, like the cicadas” (191).

cicadas, and Anacreon goes him one better by comparing his cicada to the gods. Such forms of agreement or harmony, strange but pleasurable, have ever been one resource of metaphor. Like a symphonic phrase or sequence that harmonizes two notes or tones from vastly different scales, the lyric pleasingly oscillates between cicada and god, insect-singer and inspired poet. Playing the most trivial against the most sublime of entities, the poet draws high and low notes in one accord.<sup>145</sup> Heaven meets earth; soul is transported beyond the body.<sup>146</sup> Both lyric and epic simile depend on a device of similitude. Such similitude, while logical in nature, may be regarded as serving a mimetic function. The epic simile, in its digression from narrative, serves to image for readers the heroes' thoughts as they stray from city and war. So too, Anacreon's lyric, in its highly musical form, mimics the cicada's song, thus meaning what it says or sounds.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> If 'narrative' and 'metaphor' in fiction correspond to 'melody' and 'harmony' in music, then the melody of lyric metaphor is composed wholly out of harmonies. As W.H.D. Rouse reminds us in a footnote to Plato's *Symposium*, 'harmony' and 'symphony' had special meaning to the Greeks: "Harmony was rather the relation between single notes which sounded well in sequence, and symphony the sound those notes played together" (83). As Eryximachos says: "[Heracleitos] says, 'The One at variance with itself is brought together again, like a harmony of bow and lyre.' It is quite illogical to say that a *harmony* is *at variance* with itself or is made up of notes *at variance*. But perhaps he meant to say that it was made from the high and low notes— first at variance, then afterwards reconciled by the art of music... Just so rhythm is made from quick and slow, first differing, then brought into agreement" (Rouse 83).

<sup>146</sup> Metaphors are non-narrative, timeless pairings of entities that share certain qualities of soul. Such kinship can be expressed in an etiological myth, as when Socrates tells Phaedrus of humans so enraptured by music they were reborn as grasshoppers: "A lover of music like yourself ought surely to have heard the story of the grasshoppers, who are said to have been human beings in an age before the Muses. And when the Muses came and song appeared they were ravished with delight; and singing always, never thought of eating and drinking, until at last in their forgetfulness they died. And now they live again in the grasshoppers; and this is the return which the Muses make to them— they neither hunger, nor thirst, but from the hour of their birth are always singing, and never eating or drinking; and when they die they go and inform the Muses in heaven who honours them on earth" (*Phaedrus* 259).

<sup>147</sup> I speak here generally of lyric form, as I am unqualified to comment on the technical aspects of ancient Greek lyric. Davies and Kathirithamby point out, however, that even the Greek word for "cicada" (*tettix*) is onomatopoeic, imitating the sound the creature makes, just as the English word "cricket" (from Old French *criquet*, "to click, creak"), is derived from Greek *ker*, an echoic root. If harmony is a kind of phonic doubling, then even the Greek name is somewhat musical.

Rhythmically, though, the epic simile and the lyric show marked differences. The epic simile contains a single comparison that takes us briskly through an entire scene. The lyric, too, sets up a metaphor from the first note it strikes (“We count you *blessed*”) and pursues this for the course of the whole description. The spiritual anatomy culminates in the final simile.<sup>148</sup> Along the way, epithets proceed in a series of high-pitched beats placed at short intervals.<sup>149</sup> Or, as with an etching, the lyric is cut or etched not once but severally, with metonyms as well as similes. As a result of these intimations of divinity, we are made to *think*, or at least read more slowly. In comparing the cicada to a king, prophet, song-lover or poet, and the gods, similes supply Anacreon’s lyric with movement. The associations offered by metonyms—high perch, sip of dew, earthen birth, aged appearance, and song timed with sun at its zenith—intensify these comparisons, providing more logical, than mimetic, coherence. The space they map to place the cicada in is *conceptual*. Even as the naturalistic value of the insect is diminished, our understanding of the lyric subject’s soulful value is enhanced. Nature acts like a foil to the precious gem tightly held within. Each detail sparkles, a facet in the metaphoric comparison.

Like the exoskeleton of a real cicada, the body of Anacreon’s lyric is tiny and rigid, protecting the life of the playful conceit at its heart. Gravity is always a danger in

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<sup>148</sup> The miniature lyric of praise limns the several aspects according to which a cicada may be regarded as “blessed” or favored by the gods: 1) a kingly sense of wealth, hence, freedom from covetousness; 2) a seer’s vision, befitting the singer’s rapport with creative divinity; and 3) certain admirable soulful qualities, such as that admirable self-composure associated with stoicism.

<sup>149</sup> One reason we may not experience insect sounds as song is the speed or frequency with which insects vibrate. Wigglesworth explains that the tymbals of cicadas are set in vibration by muscle contractions that vibrate at a frequency of about 4,500 cycles per second. As a result, all we can hear is a pulse of sound. The human ear simply takes too much time to recover from one stimulus in readiness for the next. Humans can only distinguish two sounds that are separated by an interval of not less than 1/10 second, whereas insects can distinguish sounds separated by intervals as small as 1/100 second (205-06).

things remarkably small. As with a real insect, so too, with the insect poem: If it is not to collapse under its own weight, we should not expect it to extend beyond a certain volume and length. Lyrical life grows by shedding successive layers of metaphorical skins. Unlike the grand scale unrolled in the vast terrain imagined by an epic poet like Homer, Anacreon offers *depth* by a process of infolding.

Indeed, as discussed earlier, insects molt by a process of infolding. All insects slough off their external bodies in order to grow, because exoskeletons cannot stretch any more once they have hardened. Literally detaching from itself, an insect manufactures a new, folded surface below the older, outgrown cuticle. What portion remains undigested is finally cast off. The cicada is exemplary only because its artifacts, like that of the moth and the butterfly, are not self-consuming. Sojourners outside the city will have seen the perfectly molded, finely etched and transparent shells of themselves that cicadas leave clinging to tree trunks. In Anacreon's poem, many and spare incisions give the lyric body an inwrought, self-reflective appearance. Narrative is suspended while each detail foreshadows the final oracular pronouncement, or certification of status: "you are almost like the gods."

Yet even as the lyric moves its sounds and images around the mind, Anacreon's cicada encodes, like Aesop's fables, a set of moral attitudes. The reader is made to see what the cicada *means*. Each detail is freighted with significance; treetops, dew, fields, woods, farmers, summer, song, all vaguely describe a scene, but the landscape is primarily mental. The allusion to farmers suggests the fable of the covetous men turned into thieving ants. Encomia to cicadas can hardly be read without thinking back to

Aesop's fable about the worker ant and playing grasshopper. Despite its poetical form and fanciful appearance, the cicada poem shares with the fable a didactic function.

Perhaps the difference between that fable and this lyric is as much one of tone as of form: The sequence of melodious phrases amount, after all, to a species of praise, not a tale told by wiseacres to twit the dim. And if, in the lyric, the gross features of nature appear evanescent, then they also grow luminous to a life-force envisioned within. Here rational proportion grows winged and animate. Like a miniature snapshot of an earthly paradise, Anacreon's lyric perches in the mind and sings, a vibrating eidolon. His cicada frees us from the *agon* of heroic epic and human tragedy, offering a view beyond envy and loss.

## Chapter 6    Cupid and the Bee

*From Edmund Spenser's "Anacreontics"*

Upon a day as love lay sweetly slumbring,  
          all in his mother's lap:  
A gentle Bee with his loud trumpet murm'ring,  
          about him flew by hap.  
Whereof when he was wakened with the noyse,  
          and saw the beast so small:  
Whats this (quoth he) that gives so great a voyce,  
          that wakens men withal.  
In angry wize he flyes about,  
          and threatens all with corage stout.  
  
To whom his mother closely smiling sayd,  
          twixt earnest and twixt game:  
See thou thy selfe likewise art lyttle made,  
          if thou regard the same.  
And yet thou suff'rest neyther gods in sky,  
          nor men in earth to rest;  
But when thou art disposed cruelly,  
          theyr sleepe thou doost molest.

Then eyther change thy cruelty,  
or give lyke leave unto the fly.

Nathlesse the cruell boy not so content,  
would needs the fly pursue:  
And in his hand with heedlesse hardiment,  
him caught for to subdue.

But when on it he hasty hand did lay,  
the Bee him stung therefore:

Now out alas (he cried) and welaway,  
I wounded am full sore:

The fly that I so much did scorne,  
hath hurt me with his little horn.

Unto his mother straight he weeping came,  
and of his grieffe complayned:

Who could not chose but laugh at his fond game,  
though sad to see him pained.

Think now (quod she) my sonne how great the smart  
of those whom thou dost wound:

Full many thou hast pricked to the hart,  
that pittie never found:

Therefore henceforth some pittie take,

when thou doest spoyle of lovers make.

She took him straight full pitiously lamenting,  
and wrapt him in her smock:

She wrapt him softly, all the while repenting,  
that he the fly did mock.

She drest his wound and it embaulmed well  
with salve of soveraigne might:

And then she bath'd him in a dainty well,  
the well of deare delight.

Who would not oft be stung as thus,  
to be so bath'd in Venus blis.

The wanton boy was shortly well recured  
of that his malady:

But he soone after fresh againe enured  
his former cruelty.

And since that time he wounded hath my selfe  
with his sharpe dart of love:

And now forgets the cruell carelesse elfe  
his mothers heast to prove. So now

I languish till he please  
my pining anguish to appease.

*A Garland of Epigrams*

Our second lyric attributed to Anacreon tells how boyish Love/Eros, youngest of the gods, was sporting amongst the roses when he was startled and stung by a bee. Today, the euphemism that couples Love with ‘the birds and the bees’ is so hackneyed that Anacreon’s lyric might suggest little more than a quaint Hallmark card. What now seems worn was once a vogue, however.<sup>150</sup> A brief survey of its features will help blow the dust off this bee of Anacreon.

In *The Greek Anthology*, several poetical toys play at yoking the figure of Love with older, venerable, epic and mythic traditions. The god Love was, it had to be admitted, not only young and diminutive, but dreadfully powerful as well. This violation of common sense, equating power with small scale, could foster humorous depictions. One pictorial emblem shows a winged Love driving a chariot like some martial hero from the *Iliad*. Virile and triumphant, he holds a torch aloft in his left hand and manages the reins in his right. Befitting the cherubic figure’s size, the chariot is pulled not by stallions but by bees, in gentle mockery of the epic convention. Similarly mocking and audacious is the epigram by Moschus with which it is paired, describing Love the hero as an erotic farmer, tilling the field:

Curly-haired Love, laying aside his torch and bow, took an ox-driver’s rod  
and wore a bag on his shoulders; coupling the patient necks of the oxen  
under the yoke, he began to sow the wheat-bearing furrow of Demeter.

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<sup>150</sup> The bee-as-lover motif resonates through much Renaissance lyric poetry, but it was already well-known to the medieval inventors of courtly love. We need only remind ourselves that the protagonist of the famous thirteenth century dream allegory, *The Romance of the Rose* (*Le Roman de la Rose*) suffers on behalf of a symbolic rosebud.

Looking up he said to Zeus himself, “Fill the cornfield, lest I put thee,  
Europa’s bull, to the plough.” (GA 5.16.200)

But more characteristic than these emblems picturing Love in heroic or georgic labors are those lyrical, hence personal, effusions of a lover’s bittersweet experience. We might identify their underlying spirit as *carpe diem*, “seize the day,” or, in the words of Robert Herrick, “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.” Typically, bee-poet lovers feel either blissful joy or stinging sorrow in the moment.<sup>151</sup> Palladas of Alexandria writes:

This is life, and nothing else is; life is delight; away, dull care! Brief are  
the years of man. To-day wine is ours, and the dance, and flowery  
wreaths, and women. To-day let me live well; none knows what may be  
to-morrow. (GA 1.5.72)

The beloved herself could be figured as a bee, as in the following epigram by  
Argentarius, which flows, predictably, from a pun on Melissa’s name (Greek *melissa*,  
“bee,” < from *meli*, “honey”):

You do everything, Melissa, that your namesake the flower-loving bee  
does. I know this and take it to heart. You drop honey from your lips,  
when you sweetly kiss, and when you ask for money you sting me most  
unkindly. (GA 1.5.32)

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<sup>151</sup> Thus Lady Mary Wroth addresses time in the thirty-second sonnet of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*: “How fast thou fliest, O Time, on loves swift wings” (1). She pleads with Time to “Be like the Bee, whose wings she doth butt use/ To bring home profit, masters good to prove/ Laden, and weary, yett againe pursues./ Soe lade thy self with honnye of sweet joye,/ And doe nott mee the Hive of Love destroy” (10-14). Emily Dickinson describes how time flies when lovers anticipate reunion: “If you were coming in the Fall,/ I’d brush the Summer by/ With half a smile, and half a spurn,/ As Housewives do, a Fly” (1-4). The pain is exquisite, though, when the reunion remains uncertain: “But, now, uncertain of the length/ Of this, that is between,/ It goads me, like the Goblin Bee—/ That will not state—its sting” (17-20).

In the tiny space of the epigram where lover toasts beloved, amorous feeling distills nectar in delicately fingered letters. Honing his complaint with metaphor, he makes etymology and entomology twins, detecting honey in her kiss and venom in her requests. But it is really he, the mellifluous lover, who barter in flowers of speech and comes like the bee to tipple as he thrums in a miniature cup.<sup>152</sup>

Usually, however, the bee is directly associated with the lover by metaphor in these epigrams, as in the following busy one by Macedonius the Consul:

I pursue Love with gold; for bees do not work with spade or plough, but  
with the fresh flowers of spring. Gold, however, is the resourceful toiler  
that wins Aphrodite's honey. (GA 1.5.240)

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<sup>152</sup> Argentarius' Melissa wants to barter for her kisses, much like the goblin men in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* want payment for their fruits, "sweet to tongue and sound to eye" (30). Rossetti's ballad-like fantasy narrative recounts the Sapphic awakenings of Laura and Lizzie, two sisters who sleep "Cheek to cheek and breast to breast/ Locked together in one nest" (197-98), and rise each morning "When the first cock crowed his warning/ Neat like bees, as sweet and busy" (200-01). Laura is the first to be tempted by the fruit of the goblin men. When Laura tells them she has no money, they settle on a golden lock of her hair. As in Argentarius' epigram, an oral motif dominates Rossetti's poem. In the fateful moment when Laura tastes their fruits: "She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,/ Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red:/ Sweeter than honey from the rock:/ Stronger than man-rejoicing wine/...She sucked and sucked and sucked the more/ Fruits which that unknown orchard bore,/ She sucked until her lips were sore" (127-30; 134-36). Following this initial experience, ostensibly of oral sex, Laura pines away: Those who have once tasted the goblins' magic fruits never again hear them call. For love of Laura, timid Lizzie seeks out the goblin men to obtain their fruits for her. Angered by her refusal to taste them herself, the goblins force themselves upon her: "Their tones waxed loud,/ Their looks were evil./ Lashing their tails/ They trod and hustled her,/ Elbowed and jostled her./ Clawed with their nails,/ Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,/ Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,/ Twitched her hair out by the roots,/ Stamped upon her tender feet,/ Held her hands and squeezed their fruits/ Against her mouth to make her eat" (396-407). Lizzie endures this apparent rape "Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree/ White with blossoms honey-sweet/ Sore beset by wasp and bee,—/ Like a royal virgin town" (415-18). Now covered with "the drip/ Of juice that syrugged all her face,/ And lodged in dimples of her chin" (433-35), Lizzie runs home to Laura and cries out to her in the garden: "Did you miss me?! Come and kiss me./ Never mind my bruises,/ Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices/ Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,/ Goblin pulp and goblin dew./ Eat me, drink me, love me:/ Laura make much of me:/ For your sake I have braved the glen/ And had to do with goblin merchant men" (465-74). The life returns to Laura as she kisses her sister "with a hungry mouth" (492) as her "lips began to scorch" (493), all the while "shaking with aguish fear, and pain" (491). Her robe all rent (497), a "Swift fire spread thro' her veins" that "knocked at her heart,/ Met the fire smoldering there/ And overbore its lesser flame" (507-09). In a line that recalls Lord Alfred Douglas' infamous lyric to Oscar Wilde, Laura "gorged on bitterness without a name" (510).

Rossetti's poem has sometimes been read as a sociological critique, a moral fable of how Victorian women were compelled by economic pressures to a life of prostitution. This reading is rather unsatisfying, however, unless one argues that Rossetti has, ironically, shown how prostitutes are paid for the pleasure denied to respectable married women.

This nugget of wit sparkles through a series of deftly hammered metaphoric links: lovers with bees, bees with workers (not farmers), flowers with wealth, wealth with honey, honey with loving. The poet is no laborer, but a lover. As such, flowers are his pleasure and honey his busily collected treasure. His all-too-human lovers, however, measure his worth in gold. Read together with the previous epigram, shadow balances glow. We read between the lines the frustration of the out-of-work lover with little more than loving, or at best, pretty words to offer. Its world-weary advice puts the modern reader in mind of any one of countless blues songs that drone and hum, in a hypnotic rhythm: ‘Sonny, you got to have money if you want love from your honey.’<sup>153</sup>

So far we have seen the bee linked to Love through metaphor and simile, but in the next few epigrams Bee-Love flits or flirts more independently. The metaphor in the following epigram by Meleager originates in the bee’s own erotic propensity. Personified or embodied as the bee, the lover’s desire can alight on the beloved’s body, explore more sensual possibilities. The voyeuristic fantasy seems so real, the poet is stung by feelings of envy:

O flower-nurtured bee, why dost thou desert the buds of spring and light  
on Heliodora’s skin? Is it that thou wouldst signify that she hath both  
sweets and the sting of Love, ill to bear and ever bitter to the heart? Yea,

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<sup>153</sup> Bee-love is old news in the blues, where it oozes with innuendo. The blues tune “King Bee,” for instance, is attributed to James Moore (1924-1970), a.k.a. Slim Harpo, but has been covered by artists from Muddy Waters and the Rolling Stones to Syd Barrett, founder of the psychedelic band, *Pink Floyd*. The lyrics, with minor variations, are as follows: “I’m a King Bee, buzzing round yo hive (2x). Well, you know I can make good honey, let me come inside.// I’m a King Bee, buzzin all night long (2x). Well, when you hear me buzzin, there’s some sting goin on.// Well, I’m a King Bee, I want you to be my Queen (2x). Well you know when we get together, we’re gonna make honey the world never seen.// I’m a King Bee, buzzin all night long(2x). Well, I can make you plenty honey, when your man is not at home.”

meseems, this is what thou sayest. “Off with thee back to thy flowers,  
thou flirt! It is stale news thou bringest me.” (GA 1.5.163)

The metaphoric bee here has a two-pronged ontological status: bee as bee and bee as human lover’s frustrated desire. This status is amusingly rationalized as an epistemological (and entomological) mistake: The bee is misled by the beloved’s youthful beauty, by her seeming proximity to, or association with, the natural beauty of springtime’s flowering buds. In conjoining two realms, the lover’s complaint offers the reader a curiously double perspective. Superficially, we are led to view the lover as pathetic, jealous of a mere insect that can physically possess what the human can only muse upon, look at from a distance. More deeply, however, the poet compels our attention to his capacity to yoke together physical and intellectual planes aesthetically. In the mere allusion to *trompe-l’oeil* effects we may discern a mini-allegory of mimesis.<sup>154</sup> The bee’s error or perception recalls that of the birds of Zeuxis, the famed Grecian artist who painted grapes so lifelike that birds pecked at his canvas. In Meleager’s epigram, such likeness is not actually drawn for us but merely suggested by the poet’s account of the bee’s attraction. In this conceit or extended metaphor, the bee originally inhabits the realm of nature but has erred to enter the realm of art (i.e., the plane of the human body), attracted by the ornaments it finds there. For the poet, art, like love, must remain a momentary conflation of two realms destined to remain separate. With the similitudes he culls, the bee-poet threatens to deflower as he adorns, be disillusioned or rejected by, the

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<sup>154</sup> Cf. Angus Fletcher: “When a painter wishes to draw attention to his creative act in reproducing the ‘real world,’ he frequently uses the device of *trompe-l’oeil*... By drawing attention to himself, or to an imagined spectator... the artist immediately starts a critical train of thought. One interprets the scene from the imagined spectator’s point of view; the double view amounts to an allegorizing of an imitation. Mimetic art, Aristotle had seemed to say, need not introduce such double perspectives; even the author can stay out of his fiction, and in fact Aristotle counted his absence a beauty of Homeric composition” (102).

object of his love. At the point when his metaphoric envoy strikes too close to home with its painful “news,” its bittersweet signification, the poet himself brushes it away. The bee’s reputation as stinger, like a reality-principle, intrudes on, and poisons, his purely pleasure-driven or idyllic fantasy. As fictive agent, the bee is both separate from, and part of, the speaker. Here is a fragment of his soul or mental fantasy, animated just enough to sketch the symbolic dance of Love-as-Bee.

Viewed metacritically, we might describe the above complaint as the problem of engaging the reader, sensually as well as intellectually, in the brief space afforded by epigrammatic form. The epigram’s coy rhythm, approximation followed by distancing, can be seen in other cases that explore sexual intimacy. Poetic intimacy and secrecy are often at issue when insect agents are star and center stage, for they can inhabit miniature space.

For sexual liaisons, a blood-sucking mosquito may pimp quite as well as a honey-quaffing bee. Unlike the bee above who reports back unfavorably on Heliodora’s state of mind, the mosquito below who visits the beloved Zenophila will hopefully bear good tidings back to the lover: news of an assignation.

Fly for me, mosquito, swiftly on my message, and lighting on the rim of Zenophila’s ear whisper thus into it: “He lies awake expecting thee, and thou sleepest, O thou sluggard, who forgettest those who love thee.”  
Whrr! Away! Yea, sweet piper, away! But speak lowly to her, lest thou awake her companion of the night and arouse jealousy of me to pain her. But if thou bringest me the girl, I will hood thy head, mosquito, with the lion’s skin and give thee a club to carry in thy hand. (GA 1.5.152)

As the envoy of a lover, both bee and mosquito can be tiny, swift, sugar-and-heat-seeking.<sup>155</sup> But here the mosquito is even more apt than the bee. Evening's marauder, the mosquito is invisible and quiet *en route* to its destination. Then its close and incessant whinings suggest the blood-lustly yearnings of the lover. The word "lowly" expresses the lover's desire for intimacy and need for secrecy, as well as his purely animal intentions. As a reward for completing this labor, Meleager will decorate the fly with the bestial uniform of Heracles: a hood, lion's skin, and club. These conventional insignias, however, may be read as a cloaking device by which the poet slyly conveys a *double entendre* or mixed message to his reader. In promising to decorate his good soldier, the poet turns the mosquito into a thinly disguised figure for his own penis, which shall be 'hooded' for protection and penetration, and as stiff and massive as the "club" of a demi-god.<sup>156</sup>

Fashioned so by nature to elude the prying eyes of jealousy, the fly ensures the lewd lovers' secrecy. Many a lover has longed to be 'a fly on the wall' of the bedroom of his beloved, and here, through the poet's art, he *can* be. A lover's desire to be near his sweetie is projected into physical form: an insect that is part courtly lover and part secret

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<sup>155</sup> Cf. Robert Herrick's "The Present: or, The Bag of the Bee": "Fly to my Mistresse, pretty pilfring Bee,/ And say, thou bring'st this Hony-bag from me:/ When on her lip, thou hast thy sweet dew plac't,/ Mark, if her tongue, but slyly, steale a taste./ If so, we live; if not, with mournfull humme,/ Tole forth my death; next, to my buryall come" (1-6).

<sup>156</sup> In a seventeenth century essay, "Of Poetry," Sir William Temple makes an observation concerning the phallic provenance of the epigram in antiquity: "But the modern poets, to value this small Coyn, and make it pass, tho' of so much baser Metal than the old, gave it a New Mixture from Two Veins which were little known or little esteemed among the Ancients. There were indeed certain *Fairyces* in the old Regions of Poetry, called *Epigrams*, which seldom reached above the Stature of Two or Four or Six Lines, and which, Being so short, were all turned upon Conceit, or some sharp Hits of Fancy or Wit. The only Ancient of this kind among the *Latins* were the *Priapeia*, which were little Voluntaries or Extemporaries Written upon the ridiculous Wooden Statues of *Priapus* among the Gardens of *Rome*" (qtd. in Spingarn 3.99-100).

agent. A less rosy and sanguine view is given in another epigram, where the insect's bloodlust has a daemonic quality:

Ye shrill-voiced mosquitoes, ye shameless pack, suckers of men's blood,  
Night's winged beasts of prey, let Zenophila, I beseech ye, sleep a little in  
peace, and come and devour these my limbs. But why do I supplicate in  
vain? Even pitiless wild beasts rejoice in the warmth of her tender body.  
But I give ye early warning, cursed creatures: no more of this audacity, or  
ye shall feel the strength of jealous hands. (GA 1.5.151)

In his epic similes, Homer famously used swarms of flies to depict raging hordes of warriors. Here, as in the two preceding epigrams, Meleager uses mosquitoes to figure the relentless jealousies that plague the mind of a lover, especially when daemonized by distance from the beloved. Even as the poet warns the "shameless" bloodsuckers of what they will suffer at "the strength of jealous hands," he cannot conceal his envy of their privileged access to the inner sanctum. Unlike him, these "pitiless wild beasts rejoice in the warmth of her tender body."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> A brand of wit similar to Meleager's can be found in Ovid's *Amores* where the poet tells of growing so jealous of the ring he has given his "fair lady," that he longs to undergo a metamorphosis by the magic of Circe or Proteus: "Ah, might I suddenly become that gift, by the arts of her of Aeaea, or of the ancient one of Carpathus! Then when I desired to touch my lady's breasts and place my left hand within her tunic, I would slip from her finger, however tight and close; I would grow loose with wondrous art and fall into her bosom" (2.15.9-14). The object of such sexual jealousy was happily converted by Renaissance poets to insects. R.O. Jones credits Petrarch's *farfalla* mentioned above, which describes the poet's love/death wish. This motif, Jones believes, was picked up and transformed by another Luigi Tansillo (1510-68), in a series of nine madrigals devoted to the death of a butterfly that had gotten entangled in a lady's hair and was killed by her. Jones writes: "*Morire* was a very common erotic metaphor in Italian poetry of this period, and I think the metaphor is at work here" (168). The exact flight of the *topos*, of course, would be hard to trace. One source of inspiration, certainly, was the *Pulex*, a medieval Latin poem written by Ofilius Sergianus, but attributed to Ovid in the Renaissance. This voyeuristic fantasy, which had a wide circulation in the sixteenth century, describes the glee of a flea free to explore every nook and cranny of a woman's body. Envy of the flea becomes a virtual vogue in France, as in Pierre de Ronsard's *Livret de Folastries* (1553): "Que pleust a dieu que je puisse/ Pour un soir devenir puce" (6.35-36). After Ronsard, a group of lawyers collect similar trifles in Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, gathering them in a book titled *La Puce de Madame de Roches* (1582). Marcel Francon gives an extended account of the flea fetish in France.

When subterfuge becomes necessary, due to a jealous spouse or other obstruction to satisfaction, insects often earn their day in the sun. Nor does the clandestine employment of insect agents signify a compromise of erotic pleasure either. Again and again we are reminded that, in the miniature realm, smallness intensifies the values of the desired. As we reflect that intimacy is a matter of privileged mental, as well as physical, space, we may recall how often secrecy will sweeten the victors' spoils. The smallness

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Like the sonnet form itself, the flea motif hops over the channel and crops up in English poetry. In Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1604), Pride brags: "I am like to Ovid's flea: I can creep into every corner of a wench. Sometimes like a periwig I sit upon her brow, or like a fan of feathers I kiss her lips. Indeed I do. What do I not? But, fie, what a scent is here!" (2.3.108-11). In English the most famous treatment is John Donne's. Whether Donne's "The Flea" is, in fact, one in a long line of Tansillo imitations, as Jones suggests, or a five-finger exercise à la the pseudo-Ovidian *Pulex*, a certain shared bloodlust joins the recusant Catholic's religious-erotic flea with the pagan Greek's heroic-erotic mosquito. Donne's tightly knit, bawdy joke is just long enough to plead his case against his lady's chastity. Tripartite and syllogistic in structure, its extended simile *performs* a thinly disguised cut-up of the profound mystery of the Trinity. Like other examples of *discordia concors* or so-called 'metaphysical conceit,' Donne's flea yokes the divine and animal, sublime and trivial, without any effort to cover the slippages or seams. It creeps downward cosmically as if to mock Petrarch's *farfalla* with its ethereal evocation of love's agony. Donne's theme is metamorphosis — the change that may or may not occur as a result of a woman's losing her chastity. A flea becomes the poet-lawyer's witness— a Circean metaphor, a sort of metamorphic freeze— as he makes a witty, paradoxical plea regarding the coincidence of stasis and change. Moreover, since in the sprightly flea figure all three worlds— divine, human, animal— are conjoined, there is scarcely any need for the lady to dwell on a 'Fall' as divine as it is natural.

The human fly fantasy resurfaces in twentieth century America in surrealist art and science fiction film. *The Fly* (1970), by Japanese American artist Yoko Ono, mimics the theme, but leaves out the words and ideas, of Donne's collapsed allegory. This black and white film follows a housefly as it explores the surfaces of a sleeping nude. The tableau is vaguely clinical: A woman lies supine upon a sheeted table in a plain room, sublimely still and oblivious to the goings-on, as if anaesthetized or dreaming. In reality, both the woman and the flies (all told, two hundred were employed) had to be sedated with a special gas during filming. The camera sees everything, however. For nineteen voyeuristic minutes we accompany the fly in his/her/its meandering around her body from tip to toe. Relishing the oblique angle as well as the overhead perspective, the camera predictably zooms in to capture the familiar sight of the fly's rubbing its palms together in apparent anticipation of a pleasurable feast. Indeed, the fly had been 'bribed' by a coat of sugar water painted over the length of the body of the woman, a New York actress named Virginia Lust. Sometimes the fly appears like an alien touching base in a sort of lunar landscape, a chiaroscuro of white hills and valleys, shadowy craters and crevices, punctuated by black bristly hairs. The scale of it recalls the giantesses Gulliver meets in Brobdingnag, and those described by Charles Baudelaire and Charles Bukowski. The scene is also peculiarly overheard. Ono's soundtrack, a weird splice of high-pitched and staccato screaming noises (anxious? ecstatic?), is ambiguous in reference and could be taken to represent the voice of the fly, the sound of its movements, or the subliminal reaction of the dreaming woman.

A more well-known example is David Kronenberg's *The Fly* (1985), a full-length remake of a 50s sci-fi film of the same name. The Jekyll-Hyde tale plots the horrific, gradual, metamorphosis of a well-meaning scientist into an immoral insect after a housefly accidentally enters his "teleporter" with him, resulting in the fateful splicing of their DNA. The emerging man-fly soon proves to have an insatiable appetite for sugar (with a special affinity for jelly donuts) and a prodigious sexual capacity.

of the bee is not the least of reasons why poets use it to limn love's pleasures. When secret sex is sweetest, the small may be reckoned richest, as Paulus Silentarius declares:

Let us steal our kisses, Rhodope, and the lovely and precious work of  
Cypris. It is sweet not to be found out, and to avoid the all-entrapping  
eyes of guardians: furtive amours are more honied than open ones.

(GA 1.5.219)

Such forbidden love is flirtatious; that is to say, it is magnified by the dangerous presence of "guardians." Perhaps when insects and their associations (sweetness, honey) are used as ornament, they too are flirtatious. In violating the taboo that separates human and insect, such metaphors have power to make prosaic speech more striking and "precious," even delicious.

The portrait of Love, personified as a human with bee-like qualities, may range between a positive and negative extreme, depending upon whether the love is regarded emotionally or philosophically. The former gives us an unflattering portrait of Love, emphasizing its all too-human, irascible, qualities, as in this soliloquy by Meleager:

Sell it! Though it is still sleeping on its mother's breast. Sell it! Why should I bring up such a little devil? For it is snub-nosed, and has little wings, and scratches lightly with its nails, and while it is crying often begins to laugh. Besides, it is impossible to suckle it; it is always chattering and has the keenest of eyes, and it is savage and even its dear mother can't tame it. It is a monster all round; so it shall be sold. If any trader who is just leaving wants to buy a baby, let him come hither. But

look! It is supplicating, all in tears. Well! I will not sell it then. Be not afraid; thou shalt stay here to keep Zenophila company. (GA 1.5.178)

Here is Love, Eros, or, as we have better come to know him, Cupid: beggarly urchin and the beloved's monstrous pet, equal parts devil, unwanted baby, and humanoid bee.

On the other hand, there is Plato's image of Love, more ethereal than gross. In the *Symposium*, Socrates asserts that, even if Love is neither beautiful nor good in himself, then he is a spirit who pursues the beautiful and the good. In his conversation with the wise Diotima, he learns that the god Love is neither mortal nor a god, but a daemon (*daimon*), something in between. Socrates begins:

'What is he then, Diotima?' 'A great spirit, Socrates; for all the spiritual is between divine and mortal.' 'What power has it?' said I. 'To interpret and to ferry across to the gods things given by men, and to men things from the gods, from men petitions and sacrifices, from the gods commands and requitals in return; and being in the middle it completes them and binds all together into a whole. Through this intermediary moves all the arts of divination, and the art of priests, and all concerned with sacrifice and mysteries and incantations, and all sorcery and witchcraft. For God mingles not with man, but through this comes all the communion and conversation of gods with men and men with gods, both awake and asleep; and he who is expert in this is a spiritual man, but the expert in something other than this, such as common arts or crafts, is a vulgar man. These spirits are many and of all sorts and kinds, and one of them is Love.' (Jowett 202)

But if Love is, like the philosopher, a winged seeker of the beautiful, then so, too, the poet must be.<sup>158</sup> Socrates famously employs the metaphor identifying poet and bee in the *Ion*, when he wants to define the business of the poet as divine, and neither conscious nor artful. As “the poets themselves tell us”:

...they gather their strains from honeyed fountains out of the gardens and dells of the Muses; thither like the bees, they wing their way. And this is true. For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles. (224)

Here Socrates plays on the resemblances between the Greek words for “song” (*melos*), “honey” (*meli*), and “bee” (*melitta*). If a cicada’s chirrup can stir up images of harmony in a poet’s soul, then a bee may— like a poet— buzz with heaven’s sweetest music.<sup>159</sup>

Numerous epigrams from *The Greek Anthology* attest that such comparisons were already a commonplace by Plato’s time. A talented poet named Erinna is described as gathering the ‘Muses’ flowers.’ Although she dies in mid-career, plucked from the earth

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<sup>158</sup> In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that every soul is winged, for “the wing is the corporeal element which is most akin to the divine, and which by nature tends to soar aloft and carry that which gravitates downward into the upper region, which is the habitation of the gods; the divine is beauty, wisdom, goodness, and by these the wing of the soul is nourished, and grows apace” (251-52). Socrates waxes lyrical in describing the wing’s growth, under the influence of the beautiful: “...someone whose initiation is recent, is amazed when he sees the godlike face or form; he looks upon her face as of a god he reverences him, and sacrifices to his beloved as to the image of a god; the reaction is: the shudder passes into an unusual heat and perspiration, the wing moistens and he warms, the parts out of which the wing grew, hitherto closed and rigid, are melted, they begin to swell and grow; when parted from the beloved, the soul’s orifices dry up and close, and being shut up with emotion, throb as with the pulsations of an artery, prick the nearest aperture, and at length the entire soul is pierced and maddened and pained” (255).

<sup>159</sup> Poets, like bees, “live by the quaffing” (1) as Dickinson says in her poem “We—Bee and I—live by the quaffing—”. Bee-inebriation is the theme of her “I taste a liquor never brewed”: “Inebriate of Air—am I—/ And Debauchee of Dew—Reeling—through endless summer days—/ From inns of Molten Blue—// When “Landlords” turn the drunken Bee/ Out of the Foxglove’s door—/ When Butterflies—renounce their “drams”—/ I shall but drink the more!” (5-12).

by an envious god like the fabled Persephone, the memory of her sweet music survives her death. Her place in the “poets’ quire” is fixed, for she will ever sing in a ghostly bee-like band. Leonidas writes:

As Erinna, the maiden honey-bee, the new singer in the poets’ quire, was gathering the flowers of the Muses, Hades carried her off to wed her. That was a true word, indeed, the girl spoke when she lived: “Hades, thou art an envious god.” (*GA* 2.7.13)

Especially those poets idolized by the ancients were honored by being blazoned with the bee. The following anonymous epigram, describing fifth century B.C. statues, illustrates the convention:

And the clear-toned Pierian bee sat there at rest, Sappho of Lesbos. She seemed to be weaving some lovely melody, with her mind devoted to the silent Muses. (*GA* 1.2.65)

The bee’s honey suggests ambrosia, the gods’ nectarean drink, and the poet makes her immortal poem when inspired by a divine frenzy. By association with such divinity, then, her poem is likened to the “dripping honey-comb” —a gift from god to human as golden as it is sweet. Personified as a bee, the great lyricist exemplifies a power less of sight than of sound. In daydreams provoked by miniatures some poets hear music beyond the range of mere mortal hearing.

Such sound-images may function as tributes to the plastic artist, of course. Even silent statues seem to come alive when well-sculpted, as the following anonymous art critic describes:

Homer's statue seemed alive, not lacking thought and intellect, but only it would seem his ambrosial voice; the poetic frenzy was revealed in him... [On his cheeks] sat innate Modesty, the fellow of the Graces, and a Pierian bee wandered round his divine mouth, producing a dripping honey-comb.

(GA 1.2.83-85)

Like a chiseled statue that “[seems] alive,” the epigram engraves, has a monumental quality. The silence of the miniature *intensifies* poetic values, enfolding layer within layer: The ideas of poetic frenzy, heavenly ambrosia, personified emotion, are all cells inhabited by the metaphor of the inspired Bee-Poet. Precisely where, one wishes to ask, in this representation—itsself a string of representations that describe a maker of other representations, within the epigrammatist's representations—is the work of art animated? The poet's fame and the sculptor's excellence must be made vivid through the rhetorical skill of the miniaturist. So much depends upon the artifice of the bee, divinely busy here.

Another anonymous epigram repeats the well-known belief that bees behave like oracles to prophesy a great poet's destiny. Like winged messengers, or spirits moving between god and man, they alighted upon the mouth of “melodious” Pindar at his birth.

There stood the Heliconian swan of ancient Thebes, sweet-voiced Pindar, whom silver-bowed Apollo nurtured by the peak of Boeotian Helicon, and taught him music; for at his birth bees settled on his melodious mouth, and made a honey-comb testifying to his skill in song. (GA 1.2.89)

Alluding to a well-known legend, the bee marks the merging of divine and human agencies in the great poet, while reflecting glory upon the anonymous sculptor who has evoked the laureate's aura. As above, the bee in this epigram takes its seat among varied

ornaments. Sappho, Homer and Pindar all are decorated with flowers of speech, epithets metaphorical and iconic in nature, befitting their status as idols. These epithets function like medals to recall a legendary history and allude to their deathless poetry. Alluding to nature, the bee-artifice animates as it sets in relief the sculpted cameo of the artist.

Being small, epigrams are handy, easy to preserve and distribute, pre-eminently collectible. A sort of fame is due the one who gathers into poetic wreaths, selects and classifies for posterity, the varied species of miniature eloquence. In this way, the maker of literary garlands is born. In the proem that Agathias Scholasticus of Myrina writes “In Praise of Justinian,” the bee ornaments even the anthologist’s legacy:

Come, blest Theodorus, and let us institute a contest of poetic skill and start the music of the singer’s dance. I performed this task for you; for you I prepared this work, collecting in one volume the sweet merchandise of the bee that visits many blossoms; gathering such a bunch of varied flowers from the elegy, I planted a wreath of poetic eloquence to offer you. (*GA* 1.4.3)

Here the anthologist serves as beekeeper or gardener. Adorning his busy labors with the emblem of the bee, he presumes to bask in its song and dance, sweet honey, flowers and fragrance. His gift, like the bee’s, is his poetic collection.

A large number of epigrams like these survive, suggesting a vogue in late antiquity for minor, and dependent, creations. The majority of these did not, of course, limit themselves to remarking upon lost works of art. Indeed, some seemed self-consciously to focus on themselves as works of art. As independent as the statues they decorated, at once occasional and ‘for all time,’ epigrams could, like tiny verbal flags

chiseled in stone, stand as public declarations. They could create an impression both public and intimate, like unforgettable quips overheard in a crowded room. Preserved as artifacts worthy in their own right, their authors used them to brag of their art, how in tiny space they had wrought a deathless monument. Sometimes the bees starred in such forms, as in the following in which the Roman poet Martial describes the denizen of an amber drop:

Shut in Phaethon's drop, a bee both hides and shines, so that she seems imprisoned in her own nectar. She has a worthy reward for all her sufferings. One might believe that she herself willed so to die. (1.4.32)

Attracted to sweetness, a bee caught in amber is caught or "imprisoned" its own soulful labors, which the epigram exists to preserve. Poetry's native sweetness has congealed into immortal artifice.

True, Latin epigrammatists like Martial traded in more than sugar and spice, and his metaphors often exuded bitter venom.<sup>160</sup> In the following epigram, however, he seems to be alluding to his art as much as to the objects of its satire:

While a viper crawled among the weeping branches of the Heliads a drop of amber flowed onto the creature in its path. As it marveled to find itself stuck fast in the viscous liquid, it stiffened, bound of a sudden by congealed ice. Be not proud, Cleopatra, of your royal sepulcher, if a viper lies in a nobler tomb. (4.59)

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<sup>160</sup> For a more withering sampling of Martial's wit: "You have three hundred consuls, Vetustilla, and three hairs and four teeth, with the bosom of a grasshopper and the leg and complexion of an ant. You bear a forehead more wrinkled than a stole and breasts like spiders' webs. Compared with your jaws a Nile crocodile has a narrow mouth, the frogs of Ravenna croak more agreeably, and the gnat of Atria hums sweeter" (3.93).

Aside from the apostrophe to Cleopatra, a stinging reminder to puncture vainglory, Martial may be mocking authors who bestowed bombast and fanfare on matters deserving of little note. In its dextrous blend of pastoral, romantic, and heroic savors, however, a curiously poetical candy is formed.<sup>161</sup> Giving notice to the nuanced, delicate handling of the author, the epigram may be read as a self-reflective artifact, working to disarm critics of the tiny epigram form itself.

### *Anacreon's Bee*

We have seen how the bee could be used to decorate statues of famous poets, to ornament verbal descriptions. As we turn now to Anacreon's lyric, we are no longer gazing upon statues but neither are we looking at fictively represented flesh-and-blood humans.

Love once failed to notice a bee that was sleeping among the roses, and he was wounded: he was struck in the finger, and he howled. He ran and flew to beautiful Cythere and said, "I have been killed, mother, killed. I am dying. I was struck by the small winged snake that farmers call 'the bee.'" She replied, "If the bee-sting is painful, what pain, Love, do you suppose all your victims suffer?" (Campbell 207)

As with the examples with which we opened this section— Cupid ploughing a field or driving a chariot— this lyric creates the impression of a verbal cartoon. We might begin

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<sup>161</sup> Cf. Herrick's "The Amber Bead": "I saw a Flie within a Beade/ Of Amber cleanly buried:/ Th Urne was little, but the room/ More rich than *Cleopatra's Tombe*" (1-4). Also, cf. Herricks' "Upon a Flie": "A golden Flie one shew'd to me/ Clos'd in a Box of Yvorie:/ Where both seem'd proud; the Flie to have/ His burial in an yvory grave:/ The yvorie tooke State to hold/ A Corps as bright as burnisht gold./ One Fate had both; both equall Grace;/ The Buried, and the Burying-place./ Not *Virgils' Gnat*, to whom the Spring/ All Flowers sent to'is burying./ Not *Marshals Bee*, which in a Bead/ Of Amber quick was buried./ Nor that fine Worme that do's interre/ Her selfe i'th' *silken Sepulchre*./ Nor my rare *Phil*, that lately was/ With Lillies Tomb'd up in a Glasse;/ More honour had, then this same *Flie*;/ Dead, and clos'd up in *Yvorie*" (1-18).

by noting the strange status of its figures, how heterogeneous is their arrangement together. The poet sets Olympian goddess, impish personification, and common garden-variety bee on the same plane.

Insects in epic similes also partook of an ontologically in-between status. Hypothetical, ideated, they were suspended above the narrative realm of ‘historical’ events and characters, even as they gestured toward the common and familiar, everyday experience of the reader. In these images sequestered from time, artifice strove with nature. Heroes compared with insects wore emblems signifying powers both greater and less than human. In Anacreon’s lyric, however, it is as if the bee has transgressed the bounds of simile, or as if simile itself has been magnified into a world, a cosmic form capable of including all categories of being. Seen alongside the epic simile, the lyric employs a metaphorical entity, a device of similitude that was formerly consigned to a narrative margin, as a vital and significant character. If classically narrative had isolated god, human, animal— kept them in separate compartments— then here that strict decorum has been loosened by a heterodox fantasy.

Unlike the epic simile, the protagonist of Anacreon’s ‘tale’ is neither human nor god quite, but the demigod Love. An attribute, power or daemon of the Cytherean goddess, Love is a segment of her soul that assumes corporeal form. Yet, in his grievous wounding at the hands of a bee, he certainly seems closer to a mortal than his mother ever was. Akin to Diotima’s “intermediary spirit,” Anacreon’s Love seems a spirit “neither god nor mortal” but “something in-between.” Like the bee in the ‘middle’ of the many metaphors we have looked at, he is an “intermediary” that “completes them and binds all together into a whole.”

This intermediary status may be extended to the garden that serves as lyrical setting. Love dwells in a region neither natural nor Olympian, but somewhere in-between. Diotima says that realm is animated by “arts of divination,” by “mysteries and incantations, sorcery and witchcraft.” What name might be given to this realm between the gods of myth and the human heroes of epic?

The term ‘romance’ is traditionally applied to extended narratives in verse or prose in which a hero undertakes a quest and has fantastic adventures. An early, and well-known, example of romance is Lucius Apuleius’ *The Metamorphoses*, later called *The Golden Ass*. This second century Latin picaresque follows the adventures of a man transformed by witchcraft into an ass. Set inside this tale of marvels, like an allegorical jewel in a pagan pilgrim’s progress, is the story of how winged Love himself fell hopelessly in love with Psyche (in Greek, “soul” or “butterfly”), the mortal maiden he was commanded by Venus to punish. Apuleius spins tale after tale in his spell-besprent book, whereas only a whiff of romance wafts through Anacreon’s poem. Yet ‘mythical romance’ may well describe his fantasy garden so far below Olympus, yet so beyond the earthly, that the offspring of a goddess may be brutalized by a bee.

As in the epigrams we have seen, the lyric reiterates the commonplace that both Love and bees can sting. But Anacreon’s lyric contains the novel reflection that from love’s painful experience, no one, not even Love, is free. As in mirror-like fables that end upon moral reflection, Love’s irrational reaction at being stung provokes Cythere’s sentence of reason. Perspective, absent when projected on a large scale, is more than occasionally obtained on the small. But Anacreon’s lyric is more playful, self-conscious, and parodic: Love is stung, if not by himself exactly, then by his entomological emblem.

But how charming, how humanizing, is Love's use of metaphor — “little winged snake” — to describe the bee that bit him: Curiously, a personification, speaking to a mythical figure, uses a metaphor to describe a metaphorical entity!

If ‘romance’ is the word that best conveys the flavor of Anacreon's lyric, then ‘allegory’ identifies its mode or structure. Traditionally defined as an extended metaphor, “allegory” derives from Greek *allos*, “other” + *agoreuein*, “to speak in an assembly”; one who speaks allegorically literally speaks in *other* terms. Anacreon's narrative, like one of Aesop's fables, invites dismemberment or dissection into parts in order to draw a simple, clarifying ratio out of an ambivalent emotional situation. If both the epic simile and Anacreon's lyric are extended metaphors, then they differ in their degrees of specificity. Homer's epic simile will spin a scene far afield of its initial parallel, whereas the lyric more meticulously weaves together several points of similarity: sting, poison, honey, flowers, wings, divine gift, inspired frenzy, smallness and secrecy, all knit Love to the bee. Anacreon's lyric is no single posy but a bouquet stuffed or crammed with flowers. As with Anacreon's grasshopper, it is the aggregate of meaningful signs in his bee lyric that most distinguishes it from the epic simile.

Love— though pleasurable, irrational and blind— can be bittersweet and painful, bring about self-knowledge. The goddess of myth, having given birth to a personification, is made to disclose the nature of that offspring to itself by means of metaphor. She plays the part of interpreter or commentator on the fictional action, normally provided by the oracle at the end of a fable. As Love's licentious flower-thieving nature is curbed, the pain of being stung is tempered by the goddess' cutting,

miniaturizing, and heterogeneous reflection. Love looks into a living metaphor and sees an insect-sized version of himself. The miniature is the site of self-reflection.

Set against the epigram tradition we have sampled, a tradition that associates bees and flowers and honey with love-making and poetry, Anacreon's lyric raises the question of poetic license. Cythere's retort may be seen as an attempt to mediate, while it medicates, the painful difficulties Love encounters as he performs his role in the mortal, or natural, realm. The *agon* of this amusing miniature allegory dramatizes the problem of maintaining separate and distinct territories.<sup>162</sup> Ironically, the common bee defends its garden against the hubris of a godlike personification, as against a swarm of similitudes spawned by poets of late antiquity. Heroically defending nature against the lust for artifice and novelty, the bee stings Parnassus' youngest, most impudent god.

The playfulness that winks at us through Anacreon's lyric becomes a commonplace of later, Alexandrian, poetry. By the first century B.C., Love will be aggrandized to appease the popular taste. Virgil, in his *Aeneid*, had chosen the son of Venus for his hero, but Ovid, more audaciously, makes Love himself the deity and driving force of his *Metamorphoses*. Early on in that epic, in the tale of "Apollo and Daphne," Ovid establishes the pattern with a quarrel between Apollo and Cupid. Concealing jealousy with scorn, Apollo calls Cupid a "silly youngster" (17) to play with bow and arrows, weapons more suited for grownups. Finally, he warns, "Do not meddle with honors that are mine!" (17). But Cupid punishes Apollo for his hubris by making

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<sup>162</sup> The theme of unlawful violation of boundaries is more pronounced in Theocritus' version of Anacreon's bee in his nineteenth *Idyll*, where Love stomps around like an angry Rumpelstiltskin: "Love the thief was once stung by a wicked bee, as he filched a honeycomb from the hive, and all his finger-tips were pricked. It hurt, and he blew on his hand, stamped the earth, and skipped about; and he showed his hurt to Aphrodite, complaining that the bee is but a tiny creature, but it causes such wounds. And his mother laughed: 'What! Are you not like the bees, you who are also little, but cause such great wounds?'" (qtd. in Hutton 1036).

him fall in love with the water nymph Daphne. Ovid's encyclopedic epic, grlarded with tales of erotic metamorphoses, carries on in this subversive vein— all fall prey to Love's charm. The Alexandrian and later, widespread Renaissance vogue for Anacreon's bee witnesses a fall both from heroism and from stolid philosophical sagacity.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> As James Hutton's survey "Cupid and the Bee" shows, Anacreon's bee was a favorite among Renaissance translators and poets. Cf. Dickinson's "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers": "Light laughs the breeze/In her Castle above them—/ Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,/ Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence—/Ah, what sagacity perished here!" (7-11).

## Chapter 7 The Renaissance Flowering of the Insect Miniature

### *The Butterfly and the Leviathan*

If ever a poet felt free to defy Aristotle's criterion regarding the proper magnitude for dramatic action, then that was the Elizabethan Edmund Spenser, whose work lodges an assault on anthropocentric literary norms at both ends of the scale. His masterpiece, *The Faerie Queene* (1590/6), is surely the longest poem in the English language that is of any importance. Today the standard picture of the English Renaissance is that the drama is the most important literary art form, yet sixteenth century critics were united in granting epic the first place. Notwithstanding that dramas are also large works, even a massive drama like *King Lear* could fit like Noah inside Spenser's whale. Indeed, Spenserians like to joke about how long this leviathan might have been had the poet finished his poem. In the scheme described in his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, Spenser projects his epic to last twenty-four books, or, fully four times the number that we now have. Such a plan seems hard to fathom. As it stands, complete or no, Spenser's stanzaic narrative— or, what he dubbed his “continued Allegory, or dark conceit” (Hamilton 714)— is so constructed that even an attentive reader feels himself drifting through a “world of waters wide and deepe” (*FQ* 1.1.392). Enormous in size, encyclopedic in content, intricate in form, Spenser no doubt intended his poem to reflect a cosmic scope and importance.<sup>164</sup> He also hoped it would make him famous and remembered forever.

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<sup>164</sup> As Angus Fletcher once pointed out to students, readers can make it through the entire work in a mere six weeks by reading two cantos (~100 stanzas) for each of six days and resting on the seventh. Of course, to delve to any depth in the universe that is *The Faerie Queene* would take a vastly longer stretch of time!

In this, he undoubtedly succeeded. In recognition of this most sublime and celebrated of his works, Spenser earned the epitaph “prince of poets” in his time.

Far less known is that Spenser also wrote a number of marvelous shorter works, including the *Muiopotmos: or The Fate of the Butterflie* (1591). How much shorter this work is may be gauged simply by measuring the one alongside the other. The approximately 34,000 lines of *The Faerie Queene* must be squeezed to fit a thousand large-sized pages. The *Muiopotmos*' 440, on the other hand, stretch roomily across ten small leaves. We may also compare them for sheer heft. The fairy tome sinks on the scales like a heap of armor, as befits a work intended to serve as a public monument. The fairy fascicle, on the other hand, looks made to flit, dip and hover in the air for fifteen minutes— and then suddenly be gone. A similar impression is obtained when we compare their plots. The plot of the epic is so interlaced and allusive that one goes to the farcical *Cliff Notes*— as to Ariadne's thread— in vain. The plot of the little poem— a butterfly flits among the flowers, gets swept into a web where he is killed by a spider— is slight enough to be scanned in a line.

One might not think this singular, short-lived event capable of provoking more than the slightest of spasms in a reader. Yet Spenser's tale of the metamorphosis of a butterfly and spider, although tissue-thin, is wondrously wrought. Its felicity of language, gorgeous imagery, and inwrought handling of theme—the fate of innocence, beauty, and a purely poetical existence—have been an inspiration to romantic artists.<sup>165</sup> Nor have poets been alone in their admiration, for scholars continue to be tempted to explicate its surprisingly intricate web. Seemingly little more than a metaphor animated and extended

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<sup>165</sup> Sherry Zivley and Mildred K. Travis a direct influence of Spenser's poem, for instance, upon “The Artist of the Beautiful,” a short story by the nineteenth century American allegorical romanticist.

to the length of a narrative, yet Spenser's miniature evades, even as it flirts with, the most ingenious attempts at reduction. Spenser has made his butterfly live on and flutter in the mind long after he is gone.

*Animation and the Allegorical Cocoon*

Of course, Spenser is by no means alone in his fascination with little creatures. Nor are the English alone in entertaining a kind of entomophilia. Many among his contemporaries play at turning Nature's atomi into winged works of art. Admittedly the Renaissance, or 'rebirth' of classical art and learning, is an extremely large and varied historical phenomenon that encompasses different countries and time periods. Much as we might like to, it is practically impossible to pin down the author chiefly responsible for, or to locate the exact moment of, the Renaissance flowering of the insect. We may, however, identify the nature of this flowering as a species of animation. By 'animation' we mean the imputation of rational purposes or higher-order emotions to less than rational beings, or, what John Ruskin in the nineteenth century would label "pathetic fallacy." To a certain degree animation seems to be an inherent property of metaphor, something that poetry simply cannot live without. We ought, however, to distinguish such 'animation' from strict allegorical personification, insofar as the former refrains from allowing the reader to be fully privy to the inner life of creatures. Allegory, such as we find in many Aesopian fables, typically puts words in the mouth of Nature. Creatures are flattened into character types and basically stand in for human beings. The animator, however, aims not so much to illustrate ideas or picture material objects as to graft these together. The resulting sensual hybrid *means* the way all living and motivated entities do,

yet is possessed of an ultimately unknowable, *soulful*, essence.<sup>166</sup> Among the more fascinating literary phenomena to watch is the emergence of the insect in the Renaissance from the allegorical cocoon in which it had lain throughout the Middle Ages.

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<sup>166</sup> Ruskin uses the term in the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1856) to describe certain metaphorical utterances. Having dismissed the “tiresome and absurd” (175) opinion of subjectivist philosophers that “it does not matter what things are in themselves, but only what they are to us; and that the only real truth of them is their appearance to, or effect upon, us” (173), Ruskin proceeds to examine the beautiful and pleasurable fallacies with which “our favorite poetry...[is] full” (175). In Aristotelian fashion, the English aesthete first distinguishes between the fallacy of the “wilful fancy,” which “involves no real expectation that it will be believed,” and the fallacy “caused by an excited state of the feelings, making us for the time, more or less irrational” (175-76). The former, which results in an improbable (non-mimetic) expression, is to be distinguished from true pathetic fallacy. It is to the latter that he lends his critical consideration, to that “temperament,” “mind and body in some sort too weak to deal fully with what is before them or upon them; borne away, or over-clouded, or over-dazzled by emotion.” The pathetic fallacy indicates “a more or less noble state, according to the force of the emotion which has induced it” (178).

Indeed, a stoic, heroic ideal underlies Ruskin’s notion. If he rejects philosophical “egotism, selfishness, shallowness and impertinence” (173), he also gives scant credit to the merely factual man, that one who “[sees] truly” or “is not morbid or inaccurate in his perceptions” simply because he “has no strength of feeling to warp them,” he who “perceives rightly, because he does not feel, and to whom the primrose is very accurately the primrose, because he does not love it.” Ruskin is more interested in those “of higher capacity and stand in the ranks of being,” whose emotions are indeed “strong enough to vanquish, partly, the intellect, and make it believe what they choose” (178). He divides these into three classes, according to the intellectual resistance or emotional susceptibility (“alterability”) displayed.

The first type “perceives wrongly, because he feels.” To him, “the primrose is anything else than a primrose: a star, or a sun, or a fairy’s shield, or a forsaken maiden.” He belongs to the “second order of poets,” those who “feel strongly, think weakly, and see untruly.” The second class consists of those who “feel strongly, think strongly, and see truly.” In this class may be found the poet of the “first order,” “who perceives rightly in spite of his feelings.” To him, “the primrose is for ever nothing else than itself—a little flower, apprehended in the very plain and leafy fact of it, whatever and how many soever the associations and passions may be, that crowd around it” (179). These types differ as “the great and less man,” and “chiefly in this point of *alterability*.” That is, the great man “knows too much, and perceives and feels too much of the past and future, and of all things beside and around that which immediately affects him, to be in any wise shaken by it... his ways are steadfast; it is not this or that new sight which will at once unbalance him. He is tender to impression at the surface, like a rock with deep moss upon it; but there is too much mass of him to be moved.” On the other hand is “the smaller man,” who “with the same degree of sensibility, is at once carried off his feet; he wants to do something he did not want to do before; he views all the universe in a new light through his tears; he is gay or enthusiastic, melancholy or passionate, as things come and go to him” (180). Ruskin’s third class consists of those prophetic or inspired men who, “strong as human creatures can be, are yet submitted to influences stronger than they, and see in a sort untruly, because what they see is inconceivably above them.” Such may well be “brought into the inaccurate and vague state of perception, so that the language of the highest inspiration becomes broken, obscure, and wild in metaphor, resembling that of the weaker man, overborne by weaker things” (179).

Ruskin’s essay raises a series of questions not only about the propriety and taste of strong metaphorical utterances, but also, about the power (strength, mass, weight) of the sensibility expressed by them. The difficulty for many critics in assessing the value of Spenser’s *Muiopotmos* is its apparent lack of ‘weight.’ The poet that Milton famously called “sage and serious” is, for once, not serious or sad (< ME *sad*, “grave,” “full,” “heavy”) enough. With respect to Ruskin’s “pathetic fallacy,” the question might be put thus: Is the poet being continuously prophetic, merely pathetic, or curiously *both* at the same time?

Recently, scholars have begun paying more attention to the rise of miniatures in the Renaissance. Miniatures exemplify how beholden artists in Italy, France, and later, England, are to matters of delicacy and form. Artists work from Nature, imitating her miniatures, while simultaneously working from the artwork of predecessors. Shrinking a predecessor's poem may seem like diminution, yet the resulting proliferation of details often reveals an intensification of values. Miniaturists vie with each other to express an ever-increasing refinement and sensuality in their work. Their exuberance often manifests as a voyeuristic curiosity, an amazement at mysteries hitherto hidden from sight. Such poets seem, somewhat like scientists, for the first time to be exploring new worlds or discovering the infinite in the midst of the ordinary.

*A Cabinet of Curiosities: Eros and the Insect Theater*

It is a commonplace of literary history that microscopists and other so-called 'virtuosi' are widely satirized by poets in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. What often goes unrecognized is how such proto-scientists themselves follow—in what often seems unconscious parody—the lead of late sixteenth century artists in their exploration of miniature form. Decades before zealous microscopists probe the body of Nature with the aid of magnifying spectacles, dissecting her minutest parts, trading metaphor for measurement—poets like Spenser, Shakespeare, and Drayton are imagining the miniature world in their poetry. While the microscopist will train his eyes upon Nature, dissecting her parts while waxing aloud on the majesty of the invisible Creator, the poet—whose art “nothing affirms” (103), as Sir Philip Sidney says in his *Defence of Poesie* (1595)—is picturing Nature's phenomenal aspects as well. More than

a field of objective or material data, Nature is represented as infolded and mirroring. The miniature emphasizes both the fixity and volatility of worlds as they are being filtered through the lens of an emotional and error-prone percipient. ‘Curious’ Nature is perceived by even more ‘curious’ spectators.

The law of the miniature seems to be not ‘seeing is believing’ but ‘seeing is *desiring*.’ Moreover, seeing rebounds upon the seer. As in courtly love, seeing is far more than a physical act. The sight or glance of the beloved can awaken the feeling that one’s existence is fated. Corresponding to the intensity of desire is an increase in the need for order and control. Such fatedness is often expressed by an abundance of daemonic machinery. Miniaturizing machinery may express either an ironic treatment or a concentration of the gaze upon the underlying spiritual reality of physical manifestations. A psychologically complex emotion like love can be broken into discrete parts, and each one assigned a tiny ruling deity.<sup>167</sup>

One way that miniaturists have figured this curiosity is as a kind of prurience. But even where such moral judgment is withheld, miniatures seem compelled—almost as an aesthetic imperative—towards scopophilia. At once infantile and carnal, they breathe the language of a toylike eroticism. Thus we may laugh at, even as we play with

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<sup>167</sup> Romance, in particular, is nourished by dream and tolerant of supernatural marvels. Even in a tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet*, insects wink and leer and leer at us from their miniature fairy realm. They seem to want to reduce to a manageable and pleasurable scale, feelings of a frightening and daemonic nature. Mercutio’s Queen Mab, fairy “midwife,” comes “in shape no bigger than an agot-stone/ On the forefinger of an alderman,/ Drawn with a team of little atomi/ Over men’s noses as they lie asleep./ Her chariot is an empty hazel-nut,/ Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,/ Time out a’ mind the fairies’ coachmakers./ Her waggon-spokes made of long spinners’ legs,/ The cover of the wings of grasshoppers,/ Her traces of the smallest spider web,/ Her collars of the moonshine’s wat’ry beams,/ Her whip of cricket’s bone, the lash of film,/ Her waggoner a small grey-coated gnat,/ Not half so big as a round little worm/ Prick’d from the lazy finger of a maid” (1.4.50). Beginning as a spoof on gullible lovers, Mercutio’s speech turns to raving. His cataloguing of the innumerable waking realities controlled by invisible daemons seems obsessive and Romeo has to intervene to break the spell. Only then are we made privy to Romeo’s misgivings, his fears of an impending rendezvous with death. Mercutio’s fanciful mockery deflects the feelings of possession, compulsion, and fatedness projected by the main characters.

or let ourselves fantasize about, the trivial matters that consume the characters. The larger spectacle of the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, permits us to entertain a belief that we are superior to the blindness of erotic desire or the pattern of emotional disorder being dramatized. Whereas, the inset miniature production of the fairy realm ironically reveals us to be involved in, metamorphosed, even fashioned by, what we see. Poets like Spenser and Shakespeare seem to accept the fact that human beings live very much in their ideas, projecting them erroneously onto the so-called 'real world.' Even when their works contain satire, they tend to remain ironic even about what it would mean to be ironic. Moreover, their deftly-managed incorporation of error seems part of a larger design framed to animate hypothetical entities. They would sooner blur—or perhaps, mend—the lines between human fixations and the mutable forces of nature, than simply illustrate old saws or reduce real historical persons to the butts or Bottoms of satire.<sup>168</sup>

Hand in hand with the Renaissance zeal for novelty is a seemingly fond or regressive return to the literary, historical, psychological, past. The poems of the most innovative poets— even the writings of a Francis Bacon— are ornamented with tropes,

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<sup>168</sup> In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom typifies the mutable and projecting, yet lovable fool. When he, having begun to relish his new-found bourgeois lifestyle, grows foppish and adopts a decidedly continental tone, insects ornament the shift in diction: "Mounsieur Cobweb, good mounsieur, get you your weapons in your hand, and kill me a red-hipp'd humble-bee on the top of a thistle; and, good mounsieur bring me the honey-bag. Do not fret yourself too much in the action, mounsieur; and, good mounsieur, have a care the honey-bag break not, I would be loath to have you overflowen with a honey-bag, signior" (4.1.9-17). Here, insects mark the line between miniature charm and affected preciousness.

Elsewhere in the play, insects inhabit the borders between reality, nightmare and daydream. Ugly and mean-spirited bugs figure in the apotropaic roundel the fairies sing: "Weaving spiders, come not here;/ Hence, you long-legg'd spinners, hence!/ Beetles black, approach not near;/ Worm nor snail, do no offense" (2.2.20-24). More luscious and lovely are the insects in the grocery list which Titania gives her fairy caterers Cobweb, Peaseblossom, Moth and Mustardseed to fulfill Bottom's every desire and need: "Feed him with apricocks and dewberries,/ With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries;/ The honey-bags from the humble-bees,/ And for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs,/ And light them at the fiery glow worm's eyes,/ To have my love to bed and to arise,/ And pluck the wings from painted butterflies/ To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes" (3.1.173-80).

figures, and apothegms culled from the ancients. Despite, or perhaps because of, the eloquence of people like Bacon, science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries remains of the Plinian variety. Writers exhibit an (for us) incredible reluctance to let go of the older view in which creatures belong to folklore. Even Sir Thomas Browne, a medical doctor who debunked superstitions, unearths as many mysteries as he lays to rest. In his *Religio Medici*, he pauses in his ruminations to muse in an attitude of wonder:

Out of this rank Solomon chose them object of his admiration; indeed, what Reason may not go to School to the wisdom of Bees, Ants, and Spiders? What wise hand teacheth *them* to do what Reason cannot teach *us*? Ruder heads stand amazed at those prodigious pieces of Nature, Whales, Elephants, Dromidaries and Camels; these, I confess, are the Colossus and majestick pieces of her hand: but in the narrow Engines there is more curious Mathematicks; and the civility of these little Citizens more neatly sets forth the Wisdom of their Maker. Who admires not Regio-Montanus his Fly beyond his Eagle, or wonders not more at the operation of two Souls in those little Bodies, than but one in the trunk of a Cedar? (21)

Browne's "curious Mathematicks" are of the Pythagorean rather than Galilean or Newtonian sort. For Browne, as for Pliny, the heart and reason of God's Nature are nowhere more plainly revealed than in the bodies and customs of her minutest creatures. Consider, for instance, the following observation from *Hydriotaphia: Urn Burial*:

*Civilians* make sepulture but of the Law of Nations, others doe naturally find it and discover it also in animals. They that are so thick skinned as

still to credit the story of the *Phoenix*, may say something for animal  
burning: More serious conjectures finde some examples of sepulture in  
*elephants, cranes, the sepulchrall Cells of Pismires, and practice of Bees;*  
which civill society carrieth out their dead, and hath exequies, if not  
interments. (461)

Despite our wish to read early modern developments in science thus strongly or  
proleptically— a perspective that serves to flatter us with our own image— the fact of the  
matter is that Renaissance wonder is very slow to get trapped in the web of the new  
mathematics or abstracted out into the instrumentality business with which we are  
familiar. On the contrary, in Browne and his contemporaries we observe an odd  
intermeddling of observations and hearsay, facts and figures drawn from personal, natural  
and literary histories. The personal is ornamented with the impersonal, the singular with  
the universal. Along with a discriminating sense of taste which fastens on a single thread  
or epigram, comes a custodial wish to store the plethora. We have already alluded to the  
obsessive cataloguing that is part and parcel of the microcosmic drive towards  
thoroughness. Sometimes the catalogues are so aswarm with references that the modern  
reader wants to cry, “I give up!” A sample from the librarian and vicar Robert Burton:

As already, we shall have a vast chaos and confusion of books, we are  
oppressed with them, our eyes ache with reading, our fingers with turning.  
For my part I am one of the number, *nos numerus sumus*: I do not deny it,  
I have only this of Macrobius to say for myself, *Omne meum, nihil meum*,  
‘tis all mine, and none mine. As a good housewife out of divers fleeces  
weaves one piece of cloth, a bee gathers wax and honey out of many

flowers, and makes a new bundle of all, *Floriferis ut apes in saltibus omnia libant* [as bees in flowery glades sip from each cup], I have laboriously collected this cento out of divers writers, and that *sine injuria*, I have wronged no authors, but given every man his own; which Hierome so much commends in Nepotian, he stole not whole verses, pages, tracts, as some do nowadays, concealing their authors' names, but still said this was Cyprian's, that Lactantius', that Hilarius', so said Minucius Felix, so Victorinus, thus far Arnobius: I cite and quote mine authors (which, howsoever some illiterate scribblers account pedantical, as a cloak of ignorance, and opposite to their affected fine style, I must and will use), *sumpsi, non surripui* [I have taken, not filched]; and what Varro, *lib. 3 de re rust.*, speaks of bees, *minime maleficae nullius opus vellicantes faciunt deterius* [they do little harm, and damage no one in extracting honey], I can say of myself, Whom have I injured? (24)

Burton's ornate, taxonomic style seems expressive of an almost pathological, obsessive need to buttress or vindicate. In its martialling of quotes, its compulsive backward-looking, we may detect an urgency to preserve the past— or the present— against an imminent assault or final dissolution. On the other hand, viewed more constructively, Burton's manic articulation of minutiae is clearly girded by a great fund of sympathy and care. Note his painstaking effort to translate the past without betraying it. Burton's swarming, labored phrases may be— like Aesop's ants— storing up nutriment in preparation for another spring. Perhaps he collects for the sake of building, in which case his manner suggests a kind of wondrous baroque architecture. One may regard them as

excessively artificial and gilded. Or one may watch as Burton pollinates, like the tireless bees to which he refers, his present opinion with flowers and figures culled from ancient authorities. Is Burton's style an adjunct to the rise of print culture, a reaction to a contemporary movement towards a purified or 'plain style' of speech? His syntax challenges us to wonder about the exigencies of 'hearing' versus 'seeing' text on the printed page.

In the miniature, where space is practically the governing aesthetic principle, we can expect to revel in the feelings of a topophilia. Space becomes the field of vision in which past and present creations may be gathered and newly combined. In the precious miniatures that artists fashion and which connoisseurs begin collecting in cabinets—time seems to cease while space expands and becomes all-consuming. In miniature space a poet is compelled to concentrate his imagination and revolve around a center. Dissenting from propaganda that propel us toward an idea of modernity, a concentric poet happily defers the forward march towards a progress of some sort. He seems to wing his way back and forth between *image* and *story* a movement as paradoxical as it is winding.

In Spenser's *Muiopotmos*, for example, the freewheeling narrator (like the narrative agent) seems free to luxuriate in detail, to plumb the depths of an imagined scene in all of its glorious immediacy. In his fascination, however, a particular detail or image will soon compel him to regress to a more archaic or primal sort of story. Such a myth will provide a center or point of origin from which the image may emerge and appear to radiate, endlessly. At the same time, that image is revealed to be embedded in a divine, human, and natural, history. Having been, as it were, armed with this knowledge that the image/moment ornaments history, the reader is returned to the present or the

main narrative where the agent seems even more free— yet no more wittingly— to wink in a momentary ecstasy. In the miniature, the luxury, license and freedom of the agent is extreme, yet balanced by its being fixed within a larger narrative pattern or history.

In addition to such back-and-forth movement between present and past, there is often movement between surface and interior. If the miniature is an art of discovery, then it is equally an art of disguise. Like Machiavelli's prince, the artist often masks his secrets and cloaks his motives. Like the chivalric knight of romance whose identity can only be known by heraldic emblems and other surface devices, an author and his intention is often hidden beneath ornament or other kinds of armor. Mask, cloak, armor, are all exoskeletal forms, to use the technical term we have employed in our analytics of insect poetry. No doubt the Renaissance fascination for the insect, as for the miniature in general, partly relates to a desire to protect (while alluding indirectly to) meanings too controversial, or emotions and intimacies too private and precious, to publish more openly. Fables have, in every age, been a means of speaking to those 'in the know' while passing under the radar of repressive censors. In the Renaissance, when even apparently trivial ornament may possess a serious historical dimension, insect poetry can be used to mirror shifts in how authors see themselves or, equally, how they see the universe in which they live. When microcosm reflects macrocosm, biography can be indistinguishable from cosmography. Indeed, we can easily locate in the poetry of the period ornaments of privacy that are expressive of subjectivity even when they are not demonstrably biographical. Or rather, they may express subjectivity *precisely* when they are intended to be more deeply *bio*-graphical.

We have already referred to the new picture of Nature that appears during the Renaissance as one that would praise her virtues, yet refuse to air her mysteries. If so, then the poet's art may be regarded as rivaling Nature to the degree that his artifact appears to have a chaste or innocent— i.e., quiet or secret, independent— relation to its maker. In Castiglione's *The Courtier*, for instance, *sprezzatura* is praised: The art should be concealed so as to leave an impression of spontaneity, naturalness, and ease. The freshness of the image is paramount, no less so when the poem is a parody carved from commonplaces, a novel variation woven on a well-worn theme. Would the artist dwell and take pleasure in the tiny universe he creates to the degree that a consciousness seems to stir from within, he might set it free of all readers and makers.

Like their accomplished rivals on the continent, poets in England aspire to cultivate such finesse. In the sixteenth century we can see this camouflage, or orderly mimicry of disorder, as early as "Philip Sparrow," John Skelton's gently mocking requiem, written in the voice of a young girl who grieves on the occasion of the death of her beloved pet bird:

It had a velvet cap,  
And would sit on my lap,  
And seek after small wormes,  
And sometime whitebread-crumbes;  
And, many times and oft,  
Between my breastes soft  
It woulde lie and rest;  
It was proper and prest!

Sometime he would gasp  
When he saw a wasp;  
A fly, or a gnat,  
He would fly at that;  
And prettily he would pant  
When he saw an ant!  
Lord, how he would pry  
After a butterfly!  
Lord, how he would hop  
After the gressop!  
And when I said, "Phip, Phip!"  
Then he would leap and skip,  
And take me by the lip.  
Alas, it will me slo,  
That Philip is gone me fro!

*Si in i qui ta tes...*

Alas, I was evil at ease!

*De pro fun dis cla ma vi,*

When I saw my sparrow die! (120-46)

Here, an ostensibly tragic subject is softened into homely scene. The tableau is animated by a lively foray after details, the cherished souvenirs of the grieving nymph's departed

creature. It is as if she would lead her sparrow back to the here and now by means of minute footfalls love has etched upon her memory. The irregular, repetitious rhyme and meter echo a mood at once whimsical and obsessive. The catalogue of insect prey, like a compulsive formula, seems almost an attempt to keep the tiny specters from circling the corpse. When parody colors the elegy, a naive, childlike affection is interwoven with an adult knowledge of harsh reality. Underneath all lurks predatory nature, red in tooth and claw.<sup>169</sup>

Not until the mid-sixteenth century, however, does the insect emerge in its own right from the allegorical cocoon in which it had lain throughout the medieval ages. In particular, the spring of 1554 is marked by a literary event which greatly excites poets in France and abroad: Henri Estienne's publication of the *Anacreon*. There follows an outburst of translations and imitations of the epigrams from *The Greek Anthology* and other poems of Latin origin. A flurry of *encomia* and *blazons* appear devoted to tiny creatures, such as those penned by Pierre de Ronsard, Joachim DuBellay, and other members of the Pleiade. The English poets follow their lead, imitating these precious novelties, gaining greater access to poetic values, looking at nature with a new zeal. Even commonplace ideas and trivial objects are treated with exquisite care and invested with a novel freshness as eyes begin to open to the miniature's charm. Aspiring to make

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<sup>169</sup> Some readers find Skeleton's poem—with its disjunction of matter and manner, incongruous mixing of pagan and Christian elements—a poor example of Renaissance form. His predilection towards irregular meter and repetitive rhyme scheme led no less an authority than Alexander Pope to call Skeleton "beastly" in the first epistle of the second book of Horace ("To Augustus" 38). Yet other critics have found in the "Sparrow" a perfectly natural inconsistency, exemplifying what I have referred to as order masquerading as artlessness. C.S. Lewis, notably, in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, calls it "our first great poem of childhood," its mood "too light to require strict consistency." The metrical helter-skelter of its lines is "essential to its perfection. Their prattling and hopping and their inconsequence, so birdlike and so childlike, are the best possible embodiment of the theme." The poem, however trivial, is "great," since "perfection in light poetry, perfect smallness, is among the rarest of literary achievements" (138).

poems in which content mirrors form, the imitators of Anacreon are increasingly drawn to miniature creatures. The plodding elephant cannot compete either with the fickle butterfly or the nimble bee.<sup>170</sup>

One of the greatest of these Anacreontics in English, Richard Lovelace's "The Grasse-hopper," will not appear until the seventeenth century. This rhetorically splendid ode mirrors in its facets the cavalier poet's struggle to sing a joyful note amidst the discord and incoherence of Civil War. Like Anacreon's, Lovelace's grasshopper would distill the joys of the present—

O thou that swing'st upon the waving haire

Of some well-filled Oaten Beard,

Drunk ev'ry night with a Delicious teare (1-3)

and inhabit a private and secure retreat, a space hospitable to reverie, a realm where metaphor may interweave both natural and manmade ornaments:

And, when thy Poppy workes thou dost retire

To thy Carv'd Acron-bed to lye. (7-8)

Like the beggar at the ant's door in Aesop's fable, Lovelace's aristocratic singer must face the sorrowful fact of impermanence. Yet, in Lovelace's miniature— as in Anacreon's— the insect triumphs by means of the timeless spirit reflected in the poet's glass. Even present chills may brace us for a toast to what the times cannot blast. The spirit thus expressed— one scholar has deemed it a Horatian ethos linked to a Christian

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<sup>170</sup> While an elephant serves well enough in fable, there is little room for elephants in Anacreontics. When an elephant appears in a 'dream vision' of the young Spenser (from "Vision of the World's Vanities"), the ponderously religio-political theme is mirrored in the verse's leaden form: "Soon after this I saw an Elephant,/ Adorn'd with bells and bosses gorgeously,/ That on his backe did beare (as batteilant)/ A gilden towre, which shone exceedinglie;/ That he himselfe through foolish vanities,/ Both for his rich attire, and goodly forme,/ Was puffed up with passing surquedrie,/ And shortly gan all other beasts to scorne./ Till that a little Ant, a silly worme,/ Into his nostrils creeping..." (1-10).

metaphysic— endows the agent with a greater rapport with nature.<sup>171</sup> In this respect at least, the grasshopper is a miniature, singing version of the Green Man of folklore. He is, as in the line by Dylan Thomas, “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower” (1). Like the fairy creature in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a magical entity who arises reborn as soon as he is beheaded, the green hopper is associated with the regeneration and renewal of spring:<sup>172</sup>

Poor verdant foole! and now green Ice! thy Joys  
Large and as lasting as thy peirch of Grasse,  
Bid us lay in ‘gainst Winter, Raine, and poiꝛ  
Their flouds, with an o’reflowing glasse. (17-20)

In the tragic fall of his miniature aristocrat Lovelace imagines a shift away from an epic stance— heroic, national, public, and full of conflict— towards a more private, intimate,

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<sup>171</sup> With surprising ease, the Renaissance poet alludes to Christian transcendence while employing classical pagan ornament. In *Image and Meaning*, Don Cameron Allen sees an Horatian/Christian elision in Lovelace’s poem, whose “solution... is based on privacy and withdrawal. The aristocratic poets may be the victims of a frosty fortune, but they can create ‘A Genuine Summer in each others breast,’ a summer that inwardly is more real than the winters of Nature and Fate. So when December comes lamenting the usurping of ‘his Raigne,’ the ‘his’ means both the King of England and the King of Christmas. To emend this tragic state, Lovelace and Cotton can make bowers in each other’s breasts where the two rejected kings may dwell with them. By this act of the imagination, Christian in its import (for ‘the Kingdom of Heaven is within you’), they will privately establish a reality greater than the facts allow” (161). Lovelace not only weds an Horatian defiance of will to a Christian metaphysics, but situates the present political moment within a larger context of literary history.

<sup>172</sup> The Green Man makes a wonderful appearance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a medieval romance that juxtaposes Christian chivalry with pagan myths of seasonal death and rebirth. The titular hero wears the armor of a Christian knight, blazoned with the mystical sign of the pentangle, symbol of all the allegories involving the number ‘5.’ Whereas, the silken garments worn by Bercilak, his invincible and good-humored fairy antagonist, are embroidered with emblems *earthly* and *celestial*. They include butterflies and birds among the precious stones: “And alle his vesture verayly was clene verdure,/ Bothe the barres of his belt and other blythe stones/ That were richely rayled in his aray clene/ Aboutte hymself and his sadel, upon silk werkes,/ That were too tor for to telle of tryfles the halve/ That were enbrauded abof, wyth bryddes and flyghes,/ With gay gaudi of grene, the golde ay inmyddes” (161-67). By the end of that poem, Gawain too may be described as a “verdant fool”— garbed as he is in the morally ambivalent fairy green girdle.

soulful amity. The value of such friendship is elemental, affirming each mortal's status as a microcosmos:

Thou best of *Men* and *Friends*! we will create  
A Genuine Summer in each others breast;  
And spite of this cold Time and frozen Fate,  
Thaw us a warme seate to our rest. (21-24)

Note that while it preserves the micro-macrocosmic connection within its layered literary and scriptural conventions, the poem also points to the moment in which the poet lives. The ornament here is not 'mere' ornament, nor is it 'pure' ornament in the sense of being detached from history. Indeed, the ornament in Lovelace's poem adorns history like a jeweled necklace.<sup>173</sup>

Of course, like England's break from Rome, the movement inward and the transformation of poetic form are slow to take hold. In hindsight, Richard Lovelace's jeweled hopper springs from the most unlikely of beginnings. If we journey back a hundred years before Lovelace's death, we find John Heywood writing a mock heroical epic, *The Spider and the Flie* (1556). For sheer size and verbiage, Heywood's is the undisputed champ—the 'Goliath beetle,' one might say—of allinsect poems.

Extending to an astounding 7,600 lines of verse, the Tudor playwright's prolix allegorical narrative is by no means as coherent, nor its verse as controlled, as the cavalier's incisive

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<sup>173</sup> Lovelace's ode exemplifies the "trivial" representations of selfhood described by Patricia Fumerton in *Cultural Aesthetic: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (1991). Studying Elizabethan and Jacobean miniatures, Fumerton considers how "historical context appeared to the aristocratic self as radical disconnection" and where "the luxurious bric-a-brac of... everyday life was one with a cosmos in which even central historical configurations seemed broken apart and marginalized in incoherence, and where self was thus fixed in fracture" (1).

and poignant lyric.<sup>174</sup> Despite efforts on the part of literary historians to install Heywood as an important commentator on social and ecclesiastical disorder, most literary critics will agree with Hyder Rollin's assessment of this "least-read major [poem] of the sixteenth century," as an "unreadable allegory of an unpopular [Catholic] cause" (121). Within the tradition of the insect poem, Heywood's allegory is a babbling leviathan, an Aesopian fable run amok. Its insects suffer from logorrhea and the reader struggles for clarity amidst the interminable torrent of words. Structured as a battle form with chapter after chapter of about-faces, the plot is really a monotonous debate, an all-too-realistic parody of lawyerly logical hair-splitting. The only relief comes in the form of an occasional sparkle of true wit and the remarkably surreal woodcuts. When the debate reaches an impasse, the author resolves it by means of a *deus ex machina* (Queen Mary, presumably, in the form of a housemaid) who sweeps away the cobwebs to deliver a 'final' justice. Unfortunately for the author, Elizabeth became queen soon after publication and it was Heywood who had to flee! Heywood may have had in mind the mock-heroism of Virgil's gnat or the satire of rhetoric in Lucian's fly, but his *Spider* overly depends upon an allegory whose names are forgotten. The verse is too leaden and the insects too garrulous to suspend the disbelief of readers.

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<sup>174</sup> In the minds of many sixteenth century critics, especially the defenders of poetry, orderly rhyme scheme and metrical control virtually amount to a moral imperative. The honor of poetry must be protected against lazy, disorderly, licentious, lousy poets. Richard Stanyhurst, for instance, in the dedication to the Lord Baron of Dunsanye for his translation of the *Aeneid*, speaks as if he had a bee in his bonnet: "Good God, what a frye of such *wooden rythmours* dooth swarme in stacioners shops, who neaver enstructed in any grammar schoole, not ataynng too thee paringes of thee Latin or Greeke tongue, yeet lyke blynd bayards rush on forward, fostring theyre vayne conceites wyth such overweening silly follyes, as they reck not too bee condemned of thee learned for ignorant, so they bee commended of thee ignorant for learned. Thee reddyest way therefore too flap these droanes from thee sweete senting hives of *Poetrye* is for thee learned too applye theym selves wholye (yf they be delighted wyth that veyne) too thee true making of verses in such wise as thee *Greekes* and *Latins*, thee fathers of knowledge, have doone, and too leave too these doltish coystrels theyre rude rythming and balducktoom ballads" (1.141).

Only at the end of the century does the most colorful or ‘golden’ insect poetry flower in the garden of English letters. In the 1590’s, particularly— the same decade when sonnets are ‘all the rage’<sup>175</sup>— the literary entomologist uncovers a hotbed of activity, specimens ranging from the poetical to the natural historical, and all species of hybrids in-between.<sup>176</sup>

At an opposite extreme from Heywood’s epic— as much in size as in execution— is John Donne’s witty, carnal flea. Like Heywood’s spider, Donne’s flea belongs with the bugs of satire. Ovid and Catullus are in the air; their racier humor lends spring to the flea’s leap. Donne’s tightly knit, bawdy joke is just long enough to plead his case against his lady’s chastity. Tripartite and syllogistic in structure, Donne’s extended simile performs a tap dance upon sex, love, marriage and the profound mystery of the Trinity. Like other examples of *discordia concors* or ‘metaphysical conceit,’ Donne’s flea yokes the divine and animal, sublime and trivial, without any effort to cover the slippages or seams. It creeps downward cosmically as if to mock Petrarch’s *farfalla* with its ethereal evocation of love’s agony. Donne’s theme is metamorphosis, the change that may or may not occur as a result of a woman’s losing her chastity. A flea becomes the lawyerly poet’s witness as he makes a witty plea regarding the paradoxical coincidence of stasis

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<sup>175</sup> Hyder E. Rollins writes: “The rage for sonnet sequences, commonly deprecated as the most unfortunate development of late Elizabethan literature, was mercifully short-lived” (495). The word “rage” might as well be described as a “plague,” for Pierre de Ronsard alone published nearly a thousand sonnets. Rollins cites Sir Philip Lee, who estimated that over 300,000 sonnets were written in sixteenth century Europe (496).

<sup>176</sup> Among the versified natural histories is Thomas Moffet’s *The Silkworms and their flies* (1599)— a manual of worm husbandry decked out in taffeta dress. Although best remembered as the father of the legendary Little Miss Moffet, Moffet graduated from the same class at Cambridge as Spenser, was chosen to be the personal physician of the Sidney family, and compiled the century’s most complete insect encyclopedia, *The Theater of Insects: or, Lesser Living Creatures* (pub. 1658). Recent scholars have classified his silkworm poem, a versified didactic treatise bearing marks of the ‘paradoxical encomium’ (e.g., after Lucian’s “The Fly” and Erasmus’ *The Praise of Folly*) as England’s first georgic, in the same tradition as Virgil’s *Georgics* and Marco Girolamo Vida’s *Silkworm*.

and change. Donne's flea functions like a Circean metaphor, a sort of metamorphic freeze. Since in the sprightly flea figure all three worlds— divine, human, animal— are conjoined, there is scarcely any need for the lady to dwell on a 'Fall' as divine as it is natural.

Clearly a large part of the appeal of insect poetry in this period was the rich vein of erotic feeling which it was seen to contain. Whereas Donne collapses his sacred/profane allegory to fit into three stanzas, Thomas Cutwode, author of *Caltha Poetarum; or, The Bee among the Marigolds* (1599), extends his to forty pages. Cutwode's pastoral and Ovidian poem is a tale of love with metamorphosis at its heart. In its ostensible theme, the love affair of insects and flowers, Cutwode's epyllion looks forward to Erasmus Darwin's *Loves of the Plants* (1789). As moral as it is ribald, Cutwode's charming *jeux d'esprit* should appeal to any voyeurs for whom sex makes sweet the moral. Like Heywood's insect poem, Cutwode's *Caltha* is a taxonomy. Unlike Heywood's compendium of rhetorical abuses, however, Cutwode stocks his poem with erotic topoi from classical mythology. Far more charming than Heywood's, Cutwode's insect allegory manages to animate its flora and fauna.<sup>177</sup>

Ovid's flea and Anacreon's bee tickle the fancy of other English poets, notably William Drummond and Robert Herrick. William Drummond of Hawthornden sprinkles insects about his *Madrigalls and Epigrammes* in close, sometimes stiff, imitations of Pierre de Ronsard, Torquato Tasso and other neo-Latinists. The more delectable Herrick,

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<sup>177</sup> An intriguing explication of Cutwode's allegory appears in Leslie Hotson's "Marigold of the Poets" in *Essays by Divers Hands, being the Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature*, vol. xvii, (1938). Among other conjectures, Hotson speculates that "Cutwode" is a pseudonym for Tailboys Dymoke, the wanton raconteur and wayward brother of Sir Edward Dymoke—and the original for Shakespeare's Mercutio! See C.L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* for his discussion of Tailboys Dymoke, whom he calls a "free-wheeling wildhead" ("Misrule as Comedy; Comedy as Misrule" 36-57).

following Meleager and Martial, fixes insects in the amber of his epigrams and, more memorably, among his fairies. His fairies, like those of William Browne of Tavistock in *Britannia's Pastorals*, are insectal in size and insect-bejeweled.

So, too, are the fairies of Michael Drayton's mock-romance, the *Nymphidia, The Court of Fayrie* (1627). The exquisiteness of Drayton's darling miniature— a kind of cabinet of curiosities unto itself— is mimicked by that of the fairy dwelling and accoutrements he describes. The walls of the fairies' palace “of Spiders legs are made,/ Well mortized and finely layd” (4-42). The gift that Queen Mab accepts from the knight Pigwiggen is “a Bracelett made of Emmotts eyes” (102). En route to their adulterous assignation, the queen journeys in fine entomological style:

Foure nimble Gnats the Horses were,  
Their Harnasses of Gossamere,  
Flye Cranion her Chariottere,  
Upon the Coach-box getting.

Her Chariot of a Snayles fine shell,  
Which for the colours did excell:  
The faire Queene *Mab*, becomming well,  
So lively was the limming:  
The seate the soft wooll of the Bee;  
The cover (gallantly to see)  
The wing of a pyde Butterflee,  
I trowe t'was simple trimming.

The wheelles compos'd of Crickets bones,  
And daintily made for the nonce,  
For feare of ratling on the stones,

With Thistle-downe they shod it. (133-48)

The meter and rhyme scheme are a perfect fit to the frolic and antics that ensue. The entire escapade involving the fairies in Drayton's poem strongly suggests that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Imagine, though, that the music of the latter were played at three times the speed, with Puck presiding instead of Theseus and Oberon. Packed into its eighty-eight 8-line stanzas is a delightful hodgepodge of ornaments, devices, and machinery drawn from large-scale epic and romantic narratives. Instead of Greek warriors or chivalric knights, furious Oberon battles a wasp, glow-worm, ant, bees and assorted grubs. The voyeuristic reader is treated to a smorgasbord of erotic and heroic frenzies, precious dainties, and even black magic. However, all are rendered innocuous by the small scale, humorously drawn characters, and gay, jaunty rhythms.<sup>178</sup>

Another erotic but less comical example, drawn from Thomas Carew's "A Rapture," will serve to illustrate the rich resources of the insect/flower *double entendre*:

Then, as the empty bee, that lately bore  
Into the common treasure all her store,

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<sup>178</sup> Some readers deem Drayton's poem too precious for their taste, a sort of defective fantasy. C.S. Lewis speaks of "the degradation of the Fairies from their medieval vitality into the kickshaws of Drayton or William Browne" (*Discarded Image* 138), while J.R. Tolkien writes: "The diminutive being, elf or fairy, is (I guess) in England largely a sophisticated product of literary fancy... Yet I suspect that this flower-and-butterfly minuteness was a product of 'rationalisation'" (*Monsters* 109-61). Clearly, Drayton's poem is lacking in the strong satire of Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* or Swift's *Battle of the Books*, yet it enjoyed great popularity in its own day and later influenced Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. Drayton's miniature was popular, too, with Victorian fairy painters in the nineteenth century. Fans find in the *Nymphidia* a tincture of the same charm and whimsy that graces Spenser's *Muiopotmos* and Shakespeare's *Dream*.

Flies 'bout the painted field with nimble wing,  
Deflowering the fresh virgins of the spring,  
So will I rifle all the sweets that dwell  
In my delicious paradise, and swell  
My bag with honey, drawn forth by the power  
Of fervent kisses from each spicy flower.  
I'll seize the rose-buds in their perfumed bed,  
The violet knots, like curious mazes spread  
O'er all the garden, taste like rip'ned cherry,  
The warm firm apple, tipp'd with coral berry... (59-66)

More polished than Cutwode's rough-hewn lines, Carew's condense into lyric the latter's extended allegorical conceit. Unlike 'Ovid's Flea' or its lawyerly imitations, Carew's bee-simile aims to charm or at most make blush, not to mock, shock, or abuse. With its natural grace, lightness of touch and delicacy, his mini-fable of the insect-rake eludes the charge of pornography.

By Carew's time, the threat of such a charge was a real one, for the Puritans would soon shut down the theaters. The rumblings had already begun in the day of Spenser and Sir Philip Sidney, however. In his defense of poetry against the likes of Stephen Gosson—the otherwise forgettable author of *The Schoole of Abuse: Containing a plesaunt invective against Poets, Pipers, Plaiers, Jesters and such like Catterpillars of a Commonwelth* (1579)—Sidney argues for an allegorical reading of much literature that superficially seems immoral. One must read poetry so as to penetrate beneath the sensuous surface, or, what we have been calling its *exoskeleton*. Such allegorical

translation (akin to a readerly ‘molting’) is described by Richard Stanyhurst, another Elizabethan translator of the *Aeneid* (1582), when he speaks of the “deepe and rare poyntes of hydden secrets” that appear to a reader who endeavors “not onlye by gnybling upon thee outward ryne of a supposed historie, but also by groaping thee pyth that is shrind wythin thee barck and bodye of so exquisit and singular a discourse” (1.136). He himself always seeks to “cling more neere too thee meaning of myne authoure, in slising thee husk and cracking thee shel, too bestow thee kernel upon thee wyttye and enquisitive reader” (1.136).

Sidney’s dignified, reasoned defense is not the only response to the puritanical assault. Satire is also employed. Thomas Lodge, in *A Defence of Poetry* (1579), argues that to believe poetry lacks serious moral value is to ignore the example of those ancient philosophers who regarded Homer as “*Humanus deus*”:

...yf poets paynt naughte but palterie toyes in vearse, [the philosophers’] studies tended to foolishnesse, and in all their indevors they did naught else but *agendo nihil agree*. (1.64)

Having invoked the precedent of those whom modern moralists ought rather to emulate, Lodge then ridicules Gosson and his sort of reader. All such are rendered silly by virtue of how threatened they feel by the sensual surfaces of mere “toyees”:

Lord, howe Virgil’s poore gnatt pricketh him, and how Ovid’s fley byteth him! He can beare no bourde, he hath rayzed up a new sect of serius stoikes, that can abide naught but their owen shadowe, and alow nothing worthye but what they conceive. Did you never reade (my over wittie friend) that under the person of beastes many abuses were dissiphered?

Have you not reason to waye that whatsoever ether Virgil did write of his gnatt or Ovid of his fley was all covertly to declare abuse?... these are toyes, because they savor of wisdom which you want. Marke what Campanus sayth: *Mira fabularum vanitas, sed quae si introspiciantur videri possunt non vanae*. The vanities of tales is wonderful; yet if we advisedly looke into them they wil seme and prove wise. (1.65)

Lodge's counterattack shows the curious place that insect miniatures occupy in the war between the poets and the *mysomousoi*, the label Sir Philip Sidney applies in his *Apologie* (100) to the "poet-haters." On one side, there is the most obvious scapegoat: the contemporary theater. With its bigger-than-life spectacle, realistic characters, sensational effect and grotesqueness of form, drama is most easily charged with arousing emotions of terror and wantonness. On the other side are arrayed the insect miniatures. These, according to Lodge— with their trivializing of grand epic, divine, or erotic, subject matter— betoken a satirical, hence diagnostic and ultimately ameliorative, function.<sup>179</sup> Sensuous ornament may seem licentious at worst and cosmetic at best, yet still have a serious moral, cosmic function. Though Cupid plays wantonly in the external form, any reader with wit enough can perceive a profitable wisdom buried within the poem. Indeed, when the erotic veneer is wanting, the moral doctrine may even be vitiated, as John Milton explains when he applies the famous epithet "sage and serious" to

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<sup>179</sup> It would be wrong to view this battle as between 'the poets and the moralists,' since poetry's most eloquent defenders— i.e., Ascham, Sidney, Spenser, Puttenham— take a *moral* stand. One is tempted to invoke Plato's distinction between the rhetoricians and the philosophers. Certainly, many among the 'poetry-haters' regard poetry as inspired madness at best, hence a danger to the commonwealth, and at worst, a false 'simulacrum,' a web of lies twice removed from the truth. Implicit in such a view is an unfavorable comparison of poetry with history, since both depict what is or has been. Poetry's defenders, however, see poetry, as did Aristotle, as *more philosophical* than history. Poetry portrays not what *is*, but what *might* or *should* be.

Spenser.<sup>180</sup> Truth and beauty couple in the intimacies of miniature form. In “A General Censure” (1589), a preface to Robert Greene’s *Menaphon*, Thomas Nashe writes:

I woulde not have any man imagine that in praysing of Poetry I endeavour to approove *Virgils* unchast *Priapus*, or *Ovids* obscenitie: I commende their witte, not their wantonnes, their learning, not their lust: yet even as the Bee out of the bitterest flowers and sharpest thistles gathers honey, so out of the filthiest Fables may profitable knowledge be sucked and selected. (G. Smith 1.332)

Having first commended, Nashe begins to castigate, showing an awareness of psychological mechanisms that antedates the projective satires of Jonathan Swift:

I would there were not any, as there be many, who in Poets and Historiographers reade no more then serveth to the feeding of their filthy lust, applying those things to the pampering of their private *Venus* which were purposely published to the suppressing of that common wandering *Cupid*. These be the Spyderys which sucke poyson out of the hony combe and corruption out of the holiest things, herein resembling those that are troubled with a Fever, in whome divers things have divers effects, that is

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<sup>180</sup> For Milton, the highly aestheticized *surfaces* of Spenser’s allegory, which present vice with all its titillating, if shallow, allure, prove a superior testing-ground for the “true wayfaring Christian,” desirous of a more than “excremental” (i.e., external) virtue. The context for his praise of Spenser’s art appears in his *Areopagitica*: “He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure; her whiteness is but an excremental whiteness; which was the reason why our sage and serious poet Spenser, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas, describing true temperance under the person of Guyon, brings him with his palmer through the cave of Mammon and the bower of earthly bliss, that he might see and know, and yet abstain” (223-25).

to say, of hote things they waxe cold, of cold things hote; or of Tygers,  
which by the sound of melodious Instruments are driven into madnesse, by  
which men are wont to expell melancholie. (G. Smith 1.333)

Even in a journalist like Nashe, a veritable cosmos divides his discriminating reader-bee from the secretly lust-filled spider who would project webs of his own inward corruption upon the poem's blameless, because ideal and inwardly illuminated, rendering of nature.

## Chapter 8 Spenser's *Muiopotmos: or The Fate of the Butterflie*

"If we are to call the High Fairies in any sense 'spirits,' we must take along with us Blake's warning that 'a Spirit and a Vision are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour or a nothing; they are organised and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce.' And if we call them 'supernatural' we must be clear what we mean. Their life is, in one sense, *more* 'natural'—stronger, more reckless, less inhibited, more triumphantly and impenitently passionate—than ours. They are liberated both from the beast's perpetual slavery to nutrition, self-protection and procreation, and also from the responsibilities, shames, scruples, and melancholy of man."

C.S. Lewis *The Discarded Image* (134-35)

### 'A Pleasing Analysis of All'

The foregoing survey should suffice to give the reader a sense of the variety of insect poetry in England from the early sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries. Spenser's *Muiopotmos* is neither the longest nor the shortest, the raciest nor the chastest, among them. It is not even Spenser's only insect poem: As a young man he had translated the pseudo-Virgilian *Culex*, a mock-heroic poem.<sup>181</sup> What sets the *Muiopotmos* apart from all the rest, however, is the manner in which he takes epic and compresses it into miniature form. Like Nicholas Hilliard, the famed miniaturist painter at Queen Elizabeth's court, Spenser takes a large portrait and turns it into a miniature. It is as if this author of the largest of all poems had thought to squeeze his immense epic down so that the reader could get the whole picture, see what he was trying to do all at once.

Indeed, Spenser's method of fashioning his miniature corresponds, albeit on a much smaller scale, to that of his epic. Action is insected, or, broken into three segments.

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<sup>181</sup> In *Virgils Gnat*, Spenser apparently follows Marco Girolamo Vida's advice in *De Arte Poetica* (1527) to young epic poets to practice first on a smaller and pastoral canvas: "A youngster, unskilled in matters poetic, ought not to venture to compose long *Iliads*, but should gain experience little by little, making his debut by playing on the shepherd's slender pipes. Soon he will be able to tell in verse of the fearsome fates of a gnat, or of how in boundless battle the murderous mouse dealt death to the croaking troops of marsh-loving frogs, or weave a tale of the stratagems and webs of the subtle spider" (Williams 33).

The poet, as he writes in his letter to Raleigh, “thrusteth into the midst, even where it most concerneth him, and there recouring to the things forepaste, and divining of things to come, maketh a pleasing Analysis of all” (Hamilton 738). Note that Spenser, an allegorical poet, is quite comfortable analyzing and feels no compunction departing from the magnitude Aristotle considers proper for dramatic tragedy and epic poems. His concern is not whether his poem is too large to be experienced as a whole or too small to make a dramatic impression. In the miniature anatomy, epic is treated, to quote T. S. Eliot’s *Prufrock*, like “a patient etherised upon a table” (3). Unlike in tragedy and epic, deeper emotions of pity and fear are not aroused in the spectator but reflected off the surface.

*Butterfly Narrative: Metaphor as Similarity and Change*

Such analysis will have a major impact on the plot. This should not surprise, seeing how epic is the poem of action par excellence. What proves startling is the degree to which compressing epic narrative concentrates and heightens temporal values. In brief, epic narrative, normally a grand, leisurely movement of agents through *time*, is speeded up. Aristotle had said that every action has a beginning, a middle and an end. Compressing epic knits more tightly together the action’s beginning, middle and end.

This temporal compression is disclosed right away in the proem, where present, past and future are squeezed together. No sooner has the narrator-as-bard invoked the present tense in all its immediacy— “I Sing of deadly dolorous debate” (1)— than he becomes detective or psychoanalyst, reverting to first causes and origins:

The roote whereof and tragicall effect,

Vouchsafe, O thou the mournfulst Muse of nyne,  
That worst the tragick stage for to direct,  
In funerall complaints and wayfull tyne,  
Reveale to me, and all the meanes detect (9-13)

Since in his beginning is his end, everything oracularly anticipates the protagonist's final status:

Through which sad *Clarion* did at last declyne  
To lowest wretchedness (14-15)

Finally, he closes the circle with a return to the present tense:

...And is there then  
Such rancour in the harts of mightie men?<sup>182</sup> (15-16)

The entire narrative proceeds in this tense-troubled, herky jerky vein. The manner corresponds to the fable's overall theme of mutability or flux. As to the effect on the reader, he will either feel pleasantly diverted or rudely shuttled from room to room.

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<sup>182</sup> Don Cameron Allen ("On Spenser's *Muiopotmos*") was one of the first critics to focus in on the disjunction between the epic question posed here and the ensuing narrative, which superficially seems concerned with insects rather than human beings. Taking this as a clue to read the poem as an allegory of man's Fall, Allen was able to show how "serious Spenser" was actually being in weaving what seems to be mere caricature. If we focus, however, on the simulacral aspect of the question Spenser poses, we see a self-conscious concern with image, hear a voice fretting before its reflection in a mirror, its 'original' in Virgil's *Aeneid*: "Can Heav'nly Minds such high resentment show;/ Or exercise their Spight in Human Woe?" (Dryden 1.17-18). What gets lost in Spenser's translation of Virgil, of course, is the gods; his reformulation reduces daemonic agency from divine to human beings. Doubtless, this shift in literary register from myth to fable is bound to elicit a more allegorical, or rationalizing, than mimetic frame of mind in the reader. However, the continually parodic nature of the *Muiopotmos* suggests, alternatively, an allegory of mimesis. Unlike Allen I would emphasize how in fact Spenser's sketch does introduce the gods, albeit retrospectively, as a function of its deeply etiological or 'genetic' drive. The gods are curiously present in Spenser's poem, much as poets like Virgil and Spenser themselves are: as *creators* limning the souls or spiritual templates of its heroes, rather than as characters capable of controlling or dictating their present actions. As a consequence, Spenser's creatures are made to seem more truly animate than any strictly allegorical fable would allow.

From another perspective, Spenser's epic question is, in a sense, 'Janus-faced,' not only looking backward to Virgil but forward to Alexander Pope in *The Rape of the Lock*: "In tasks so bold can little men engage,/ And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage?" (1.11-12). Pope's couplet makes explicit a theme that had been subsumed in Spenser's narrative: the translation of the heroic into the feminine. His sylphs, like Spenser's insects, are hybrids of a kind: supernatural projections of humanoid/natural agencies.

Indeed, the stanzaic— hence, segmented and disjunctive— body of narrative also instantiates the larger theme of flux. It is as if the poem were continually ending and beginning anew. Less random than the aforementioned narrative digressions are these regular interruptions of the stanza, with its predictable commencement and fall. This in turn becomes the precondition for exploring the feeling or state of continual emergence. Narrative closure overall is forestalled, despite the local closure implied by each tightly-knit stanza. In the spaces between stanzas the mind is made to leap or swerve. Stanzas distance the poem further from drama, whose action is more seamless, and whose scenes are far longer than the breaks between them. Action in the miniature is presented as in a primitive film: One perceives the gaps between separate snapshots flipped in rapid sequence.

With the reader forced to flit or change direction from stanza to stanza, the shifts in perspective are sometimes so sudden and incongruous that, despite the simplicity of the plot overall, the reader temporarily loses the thread and finds himself backtracking to reread preceding stanzas. The reader's experience follows from the narrative procedure, which reflects upon itself in a very curious way. At the very moment when the narrator seems to lose himself in picturing the moment, he suddenly shifts direction either to tell a story about an action in the distant past or to prophesy about the future consequence. Generally speaking, the narrative shift follows upon the discernment of similitude, as if one's free associations to a Rorschach blot were being translated into story.

A perfect example is when the narrator describes the butterfly's body. Mounting praise leads, by means of metaphor, to hyperbole in the case of the wings. The narrator's fear that Eros (Cupid) may envy the comparison and seek revenge leads him to apologize.

Having flit from insect to god, he pauses to reflect upon courtly love— a mechanism of erotic attraction, deferral, and projection of desire so cruel it would employ the dissected butterfly’s wings as a fan. As in the *blazon*, such looking would dismember the body to praise it, cut the living body into a concatenation of ornaments. Having thus dynamized his metaphor, he leaps into full-scale myth and rationalizes his fear by telling the tale (“report”) of the butterfly’s metamorphosis.<sup>183</sup> Metaphor is further animated, or inwoven, to become metamorphic tale.<sup>184</sup>

Returning now to our description of the miniature narrative, the agent who carries the action is hyperactive, hectic, frenzied. Despite the unfairness in his family history, however, butterfly is ‘furious’ not in the sense of being angry or maniacal (this describes Spenser’s and Ovid’s spider, rather), but rather, in the elemental sense of being filled with, or related to, fire:

The fresh yong flie, in whom the kindly fire  
Of lustfull yongth began to kindle fast,  
Did much disdain to subject his desire  
To loathsome sloth, or houres in ease to wast;

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<sup>183</sup> This change occurs through a devious web of interactions between Venus and her attendant nymphs, who compete to do her honor, picking and weaving the choicest flowers they can find into a wreath to adorn her. When Astery wins, the desire to emulate shifts demonically and downward, turning to envy in the hearts of the losers, who project their own demeaned self-image in the form of gossip or “rumor.” The contest or battle had begun as cosmetic enhancement, the simulation of divine beauty through the mediation of natural-artificial imagery (flowers fashioned into a wreath). It devolves into waspish battle, a zeal to defeat the rival by ruining her reputation, staining her virtue— the ornaments of her soul. The nymph, with her guiltless desire for rapport with the goddess, is accused of a blasphemous plot to equal and replace her. Sadly, Venus falls prey to the nymphs’ machinations. Remembering Psyche, her erstwhile rival or double, she begins to regard Astery as another Psyche. To thwart her, or contain her erotic power, Venus reduces the guiltless nymph into a butterfly, setting the flowers she has gathered into her wings.

<sup>184</sup> Ironically, Spenser figures the goddess’ error as a kind of literalism. In butterflying the innocent soul she took for Psyche’s double, she seems guilty of taking a pun as reality (*Psyche* in Greek means both “soul” and “butterfly”). Astery, a living soul— her name suggests a starry entity— is betrayed by the translation of a Greek word. Thanks to a case of mistaken identity, she is reduced to a purely nominalistic existence.

But joy'd to range abroad in fresh attire  
Through the wide compas of the ayrie coast,  
And with unwearied wings each part t'inquire  
Of the wide rule of his renommed sire. (33-40)

Not surprisingly, action in the miniature epic is aligned with the diurnal, rather than with the annual or seasonal cycle. The movements— and the majesty— of the protagonist mime the rise (and finally, the fall) of the sun:

So on a Summers day, when season milde  
With gentle calme the world had quieted,  
And high in heaven *Hyperions* fierie childe  
Ascending, did his beames abroad dispred,  
Whiles all the heavens on lower creatures smilde;  
Yong *Clarion* with vauntfull lustie head,  
After his guize did cast abroad to fare;  
And theretoo gan his furnitures prepare. (49-56)

Yet if the poem's winged protagonist carries this mythical burden, being aligned with that god or solar energy that animates matter, then he also bears the marks of a mortal hero. Allusions to his race, name, and present status establish not only that he is noble but a creature born:

Of all the race of silver-winged Flies  
Which doo possesse the Empire of the aire,  
Betwixt the centred earth, and azure skies,  
Was none more favourable, nor more faire

Whilst heaven did favour his felicities,  
Then *Clarion*, the eldest sonne and haire  
Of *Muscaroll*, and in his fathers sight  
Of all alive did seeme the fairest wight. (17-24)

Unlike an immortal being, whose nature is fixed, Clarion is a figure of promise, a being becoming. Drawn to excite our sympathy rather than awe, he is more like one of us.

This sympathy is projected onto Clarion's father, the fly Muscaroll:

With fruitfull hope his aged breast he fed  
Of future good, which his yong toward yeares,  
Full of brave courage and bold hardyhed,  
Above th'ensample of his equall peares,  
Did largely promise, and to him forered  
(Whilst oft his heart did melt in tender teares)  
That he in time would sure prove such an one,  
As should be worthie of his fathers throne. (25-32)

At the same time, the miniature protagonist is also like an airy Odysseus, a daring pilot of the winds of change:

For he so swift and nimble was of flight,  
That from this lower tract he dar'd to stie  
Up to the clowdes, and thence with pineons light,  
To mount aloft unto the Christall skie,  
To vew the workmanship of heavens hight:  
Whence down descending he along would flie

Upon the streaming rivers, sport to finde;

And oft would dare to tempt the troublous winde. (41-48)

The butterfly's identity, like the body of a true 'in-sect,' is compound, not simple.<sup>185</sup>

When we further learn, from an etiological myth, that he descends from a flower-gathering nymph who has a fateful run-in with Venus, his status becomes clearer.

Neither quite god nor human, he is enough like both to have made a goddess feel threatened and to have earned the narrator's sympathy. On the one hand, he is, like Eros in Plato's *Symposium*, a daemon: He occupies an intermediate position between god and man. He is a curiously mixed figure: part human, part animal, part vegetable, and part nature-deity. He seems designed to draw humanity closer to the presence of the divine within the natural world. This may be why, the more *natural* the miniature is, the more *artificial* it is. Clarion, we might say, seems a materially real image of the ideal.

Although youthful, he is ever-new. Although alive, he is timeless. He is both open and closed.

From such elemental beginnings, it is a short leap to the aesthetic realm and considerations of taste. The senses may be regarded as bodily apertures that look out upon the world of matter and inward towards the soul, but here Spenser depicts taste as a

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<sup>185</sup> Spenser has an instinctive habit of insecting or cutting the human figure into segments. In the Castle of Alma, for instance, he imagines the human being/soul as a house divided into various "chambers" such as that of Phantastes or Imagination: "And all the chamber filled was with flyes,/ Which buzzed all about, and made such sound,/ That they encombred all mens eares and eyes,/ Like many swarmes of Bees assembled round,/ After their hives with honny do abound:/ All those were idle thoughtes and fantasies,/ Devices, dreames, opinions unsound,/ Shewes, visions, sooth-sayes, and prophesies;/ And all that fained is, as leasings, tales, and lies" (*The Faerie Queene* 2.9.51.1-9). The soul's oneness and discipline are ever threatened by the schismatic forces of multiplicity and disorder. The Castle of Alma is besieged by a riotous army of villains led by Meleager, a demonic phantom. Spenser compares their charge to a swarm of insects: "As when a swarme of Gnats at eventide/ Out of the fennes of Allan doe arise,/ Their murmuring small trompetts sownden wide,/ Whiles in the aire their clustring army flies,/ That as a cloud doth seeme to dim the skies" (2.9.16.1-5). Indeed, the entire *Faerie Queene* may be conceived of as an insected figure. As Spenser says in his letter to Raleigh, the epic's six separate sections or books are knit together in order to image or to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline" (Hamilton 714).

dynamic, active faculty. Continual change keeps the narrative agent “fresh,” “readie,” “franke,” “light,” pleasing:

The woods, the rivers, and the medowes green,  
With his aire-cutting wings he measured wide,  
Ne did he leave the mountaines bare unseene,  
Nor the ranke grassie fennes delights unride.  
But none of these, how ever sweete they beene,  
Mote please his fancie, nor him cause t’ abide:  
His choicefull sense with everie change doth flit.  
No common things may please a wavering wit. (153-60)

Always on the move, and with ‘good speed,’ the butterfly is fanciful and free from feelings of envy. This is itself ironic, since the transforming power of envy, the envy of Venus and her nymphs, has allegedly resulted in his present insectal form. Such irony has a destabilizing effect. Like the butterfly’s identity, the nature of his flitting is hard to pin down or categorize. Does it show that he has a catholic taste that transcends divisions of high and low, or that he is gluttonous and indiscriminate? Is he nobly detached or just too fickle to linger? Is he an uncommonly free spirit, or simply an incorrigible flirt, a reckless saboteur of commitment? The poet’s own opinion is not clear. Unlike in drama where ideas get articulated in the dialectic of repartee, here ideas are subsumed into narrative and description. Unlike either Aesop or the satirists, Spenser refrains from putting words in the mouths of his insects. Like a real animal— human or otherwise, his insect is complicated, mixed.

As has been observed earlier, paradoxically, the one constant in this hyper-  
animated world is flux, movement, flight, variety. If Clarion's identification with the  
sun/"sonne" stresses his future potential and promise, then he is also a figure of  
incredible kinetic energy. Consider, for instance, his dance around the garden:

There he arriving, round about doth flie,  
From bed to bed, from one to other border,  
And takes survey with curious busie eye,  
Of everie flowre and herbe there set in order;  
Now this, now that he tasteth tenderly,  
Yet none of them he rudely doth disorder,  
Ne with his feete their silken leaves deface;  
But pastures on the pleasures of each place. (169-76)

Clarion acts but his action is, properly speaking, a "survey," as much a form of looking as  
of doing. He is a miniature sun, a sort of photoelectric cell, the physical embodiment of  
that light of awareness that streams through the portals of the senses. He is a mobile  
sphere all right, but most like a winged eyeball.<sup>186</sup> Where the agent is involved in a kind  
of perceptual ordering, a perpetual sampling or tasting, the action of the hero's senses  
becomes the main subject and we get the narrativizing of a sensorium. Spenser's  
butterfly imagines a world in which a look or glance may qualify as an action. As in the  
state of dream, the body may be motionless save for the flutter of rapid-eye movements,

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<sup>186</sup> Emerson wrote in his journal for 1846 the following enthusiastic appreciation of Spenser's art: "Poets do not need to consider how fruitful the topic is, for with their superfluity of eyes every topic is opulent. Spenser seems to delight in his art for his own skill's sake. In the Muiopotmos see the security & ostentation with which he (still improves elongates) draws out & refines his description of a butterfly's back & wings, of a spider's thread & spinning, of the Butterfly's Cruise among the flowers, 'bathing his tender feet in the dew which yet on them doth lie,' — it is all like the working of an exquisite loom which strongly & unweariedly (does) yield fine webs, for exhibition, & defiance of all spinners" (9.453).

yet the restless mind weaves one narrative after another. The worlds described by the miniature are phenomenal, unabashedly simulacral.

In the miniature, intentionality is called into question. Epic ought to lead us somewhere; its action is intended to have a purpose and its agents have something to prove. Epic convention leads us to expect something similar of Clarion, a figure of potential and promise. But he (like the digressive narrator who tells his story) seems to forget he has a goal. The miniature hero is so active, meandering, and errant that he loses the very sense of goal-oriented behavior. We may recall how the hero of Homer's *Odyssey* travels so long, experiences so many wondrous sights and sounds, that he nearly forgets to return home after the war. Only at the end of that romantic narrative is the reader returned to an *Iliad*-like purposefulness and fury. Similarly, Clarion seems entranced by the exotic flowers he sips from in his mazy garden. In his bliss he forgets his father's anxious desire. He perches with "tender feete" on delicate isles, languorous spots of time the poet carves amidst narrative seas of change:

And evermore with most varietie,  
And change of sweetnesse (for all change is sweete)  
He casts his glutton sense to satisfie,  
Now sucking of the sap of herbe most meete,  
Or of the deaw, which yet on them does lie,  
Now in the same bathing his tender feete:  
And then he pearcheth on some braunch thereby,  
To weather him, and his moyst wings to dry. (177-84)

If a miniature may speed up epic until it resembles a cartoon, then it also loads every rift with ore, plying descriptive details to stop and hold the reader. The alternately hectic and languid pace is Spenser's own. For a modern parallel, imagine an animation unable to settle between the styles of Walt Disney and Hayao Miyazaki.

In some sense, miniature epic is always already a metaphor, thanks to its conjunction of great and small. In its compression of narrative, however, the miniature reflects metaphor's special propensity to display *similarity* and *change*. The butterfly carries the viewer towards one extreme of narrative flux and instability. Like Anacreon's grasshopper, Clarion figures celestial freedom and divine attraction to the earth. In his dalliance with the flowers or 'children' of the earth, he expresses the pure vivacity of the life force. In the realm of this pagan prince, everything stays the same and yet everything is endlessly fresh and new. Acting as if one with nature, the butterfly is uninhibited by, or lacking in, the reality principle that slows down and constricts human-sized epic and tragic heroes. In the insect world over which he reigns, heavenly, earthly, animal, and human worlds are conjoined.

This conjunction, common to every metaphor, but especially pronounced when a poem's protagonist is an insect, is most blatant in the description of the butterfly's armoring, which is elided with the anatomy of its body. In the orgy of *in-section*, metaphor and simile run rampant; everything about the protagonist reminds the narrator of something or someone else:

His breastplate first, that was of substance pure,  
Before his noble heart he firmly bound,  
That mought his life from yron death assure,

And ward his gentle corpes from cruell wound:  
For it by arte was framed, to endure  
The bit of balefull steele and bitter stownd,  
No lesse than that, which *Vulcane* made to sheild  
*Achilles* life from fate of *Troyan* field.

And then about his shoulders broad he threw  
An hairie hide of some wilde beast, whom hee  
In salvage forrest by adventure slew,  
And reft the spoyle his ornament to bee:  
Which spredding all his backe with dreadfull vew,  
Made all that him so horrible did see,  
Thinke him *Alcides* with the Lyons skin,  
When the *Naemean* Conquest he did win.

Upon his head his glistering Burganet,  
The which was wrought by wonderous device,  
And curiously engraven, he did set:  
The mettall was of rare and passing price;  
Not *Bilbo* steele, nor brasse from *Corinth* fet,  
Nor costly *Oricalche* from strange *Phoenice*;  
But such as could both *Phoebus* arrowes ward,  
And th'hayling darts of heaven beating hard.

Therein two deadly weapons fixt he bore,  
Strongly outlaunched towards either side,  
Like two sharpe speares, his enemies to gore:  
Like as a warlike Brigandine, applyde  
To fight, layes forth her threatfull pikes afore,  
The engines which in them sad death doo hyde:  
So did this flie outstretch his fearefull hornes,  
Yet so as him their terrour more adornes. (57-88)

Together, Clarion's body forms a taxonomy of elements drawn from myth, romance, epic, elegy and even, in the contemporary allusion to a warlike Brigandine, history. The butterfly embodies the rhetoric of praise in several literary genres. What all these metaphors serve to do, however, is simply to reveal the butterfly as the spirit of change embodied.

Clarion embodies a kind of natural or sympathetic magic. Within the narrative, such metaphoric likeness is personalized as a daemonizing of *liking*. In the same way as the sun radiates over all, whether good or bad, high or low, the butterfly is promiscuous in his liking and finds value in all. In the course of tasting, he never mars nor seeks to alter. Nor does he commit to anything. From this point of view, he may be compared to the very spirit of flirtation—a refusal to commit to any thing, including to commitment itself. As the poem's surfaces open out like petals to the miniaturist's aesthetic processing, the butterfly might be viewed as superficial, if not dangerous. It is difficult to say, for certain, however, since the reader is not allowed to penetrate beneath the public

mask that he wears.<sup>187</sup> In a sense, he remains, like the aristocrats that Nicholas Hilliard limns in his private/public miniatures, hidden by body, his cosmic costume. Although he will trace his butterfly's lineage in a myth of his own invention, the poet does not quite publish his thoughts, his feelings, his inner soul. Paradoxically, of course, everything in the miniature world of natural artifice *alludes* to it.<sup>188</sup> In Spenser's butterfly, as in Lovelace's grasshopper, Nature's creatures retain their mystery.

On a sadder note, in proportion to the protagonist's visibility is his propensity to a tragic outcome. As solar deity, he is destined to set. As heir apparent of a king, he is more subject to a fall. Partly, this is what makes Clarion such a fascinating creature. Like the heroic figures that epic similes describe, he possesses a power and freedom that is almost superhuman. Squeezed, epic is pushed closer to myth, a condensed narrative mode whose agents are gods with supreme control over their natural environment.

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<sup>187</sup> As the spirit of eroticism and flirtation, Clarion recalls the titillating Acrasia: "Upon a bed of Roses she was layd,/ As faint through heat, or dight to pleasant sin,/ And was arayd, or rather disarayd,/ All in a vele of silke and silver thin,/ That hid no whit her alabaster skin,/ But rather shewd more white, if more might bee:/ More subtile web *Arachne* cannot spin,/ Nor the fine nets, which oft we woven see/ Of scorched deaw, do not in th'ayre more lightly flee" (*FQ* 2.12.77.1-9). In her loving of Verdant, Acrasia almost seems like another version of Clarion among the flowers: "And all that while, right over him she hong,/ With her false eyes fast fixed in his sight,/ As seeking medicine, whence she was stong,/ Or greedily depasturing delight:/ And oft inclining downe with kisses light,/ For feare of waking him, his lips bedewd,/ And through his humid eyes did sucke his spright,/ Quite molten into lust and pleasure lewd;/ Wherewith she sighed soft, as if his case she rewde" (2.12.73.1-9). Acrasia, however alluring, is painted as a villain in the Book of Temperance. Perhaps Clarion's truest double is the less harshly judged Helenore of the Book of Chastity, who is a parodic double of Homer's Helen. Since both are daemons of Venus, it is in Clarion's as much as in Helenore's nature to flirt, to give themselves freely to Nature's insatiable satyrs and flowers.

<sup>188</sup> Spenser's portrait of Clarion, the butterfly prince, recalls Patricia Fumerton's remarks on the social-psychological dynamic expressed in Nicholas Hilliard's aristocratic miniatures: "The public self that gave outwards upon cultural exchange was the medium of expression for a private self forever 'loath' to give itself up in exchange— forever creating its very sense of itself... through acts of withholding full assent to publicness" (69). "The aristocratic self" says Fumerton, "arose in a sort of reflex of retreat, an instinct to withdraw into privacy so pervasive even in the most trivial matters that there never could be any final moment of privacy." The limner's art in these miniatures mirrors the Elizabethan "private self," which "withheld itself paradoxically by holding forth in ostentatious, public showcases of ornament... precious, gemlike decorations that hid the self's 'secrets' behind a series of gorgeously ornate public rooms, cabinets, lockets, frames, paints, metaphors..." (70).

Spenser's butterfly stops short of being a god, however, in that he is not deprived of his mortality. He is rather *like* a god who enjoys a magical *rapport* with nature. He embodies metaphor not as identity but as likeness, or that creativity born of erotic attraction.

In this respect, the mode of the miniature is akin to that of romance, a realm of dream and wish-fulfillment. In terms of waking reality, the liminal state of dream may be viewed as dangerous because uncertain, magical, duplicitous. On the other hand, it may also be viewed as liberating, an emotional resource from which to draw or picture the ideal.<sup>189</sup> Prior to his being judged by the spider, Clarion must be viewed by the reader as an unself-conscious and uninhibited protagonist, oblivious to the frustrations which plague human readers in waking life. In Freudian terms, he is pure libido or 'id,' allowed to range free of the censorious restraints of the 'superego,' his pleasure unmolested by the 'reality principle.' A winged creature, he is clearly more than mere insect. On the other hand, it is an overstatement to claim— as some do, who read this poem as a strict allegory— that he is an idea. He is neither a merely physical entity nor a purely spiritual one; indeed, he exceeds the human in his capacity to concentrate matter and spirit. A figure able to yoke the modes of epic/tragedy and pastoral romance, he unites in his being the two halves that Cartesian philosophy would presently split to produce satire's all-too-human individual. He is that "great and true *Amphibium*" of whom Sir Thomas Browne will later speak in *Religio Medici*, a paradoxical and metaphysical creature able

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<sup>189</sup> Unlike Redcross, hero of the first book of *The Faerie Queene*, Britomart— knight of Chastity and hero of the third— is capable of embracing dream or vision as something auspicious. Keeping the image of her beloved she has seen in Merlin's mirror alive in her heart, Britomart also has a firmer grasp on her own self-image. Her virtue— stronger by far than that of either Redcross or Guyon— allows the erotic image to remain fresh and alive within the heart. In the feminine hero, beauty and truth, love and war, are perfectly balanced. A life-affirming eros is integrated with an heroic sort of loyalty.

to live in “divided and distinguished worlds” (49). In folkloric or literary terms, he is rather like an elf or fairy.

*Spider Image: Metaphor as Fixity and Meaning*

As radical as the effect that the miniature has upon *imagery*, or patterns apprehended instantly by the eye or mind, is the effect that it has upon *narration* or temporal change. When action is sublimated as description, we get the movement of the eye through *space*. In small space, things get squeezed together, conglomerate, incongruous. The narrative is crowded with details, devices, machinery. With compression of imagery comes a daemonic rage towards order and keeping things separate, as if the mind is reacting to feelings of claustrophobia, to a fear of blurring differences. Objects are delineated with surreal vividness. Description is enumerative, taxonomic in character. Compare, for instance, the flitting of the butterfly mentioned above with the static, temple-like structure in which the flowers themselves are housed:

And then againe he turneth to his play,  
To spoyle the pleasures of that Paradise:  
The wholesome Saulge, and Lavender still gray,  
Ranke smelling Rue, and Cummin good for eyes,  
The Roses raining in the pride of May,  
Sharpe Isope, good for greene wounds remedies,  
Faire Marigoldes, and Bees alluring Thime,  
Sweete Marjoram, and Daysies decking prime.

Coole Violets, and Orpine growing still,  
 Embathed Balme, and chearfull Galingale,  
 Fresh Costmarie, and breathfull Camomill,  
 Dull Poppie, and drink-quickning Setvale,  
 Veyne-healing Verven, and hed-purging Dill,  
 Sound Savorie, and Bazill hartie-hale,  
 Fat Colworts, and comforting Perseline,  
 Colde Lettuce, and refreshing Rosemarine. (185-200)

The proliferation of names recalls Burton's text-driven catalogue in *An Anatomy of Melancholy*. Within the artifice of the stanza, like a garden or cabinet, is an array of natural jewels, healthy for body and soul. The describer revels in being thorough, with making his an orderly, if organic and minute, universe.

The etiological myths which serve as the backdrop for the main narrative underscore such meticulousness. The developing mood is a fearful one; it is as if every detail were consequential, freighted with an overarching cosmic significance and consequence.<sup>190</sup> The story is told as if in a state of emergency, as if busyness alone could enable the narrator to achieve his ends. Such busyness can be viewed as a means of forestalling the tragic end, the return of the repressed. On the other hand, it also takes the form of an overriding compulsion to return to an origin where one cannot remain. Narrative progress can only occur through a backwards recursion, a repetition or recapitulation of an earlier event or scene. To cite just one example, the first butterfly is

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<sup>190</sup> This culminates in the hero's death, of which the narrator says: "The dreerie stownd is now arrived,/ That of all happines hath us deprived" (415-16). The extrapolation of global consequences from a trivial local effect or variation may be a case of literary hyperbole, but it recalls the phenomenon that chaos physicists like James Gleick and others in our own time have dubbed "the Butterfly Effect."

created when his mother Astery is caught in a web of lies woven by Venus' jealous nymphs. At the end of the poem, Clarion dies when caught in the web woven by the jealous spider Aragnoll. But Aragnoll is caught in a web of his own: He is compelled to weave a web much as his mother Arachne had when contesting Minerva. Insofar as Arachne is reduced to a spider upon seeing the butterfly Minerva weaves into the margins of her tapestry, her son 'Aragnoll'—his very name is an obvious simulacrum—is caught in a vicious cycle of resentment and defeat. The action is thus circular; it is as if the epic cartoon were meant to run forward and backward simultaneously. Monotony is avoided because the repetitions are constantly being varied. The technique employed is of themes and variations: gradual, slight, retakes of an idea or relationship.

The stanzaic, or segmented, body of narrative itself enhances this effect of takes and retakes, or snapshots. That is, global repetition in the narrative is mirrored by local, internal repetition in each stanza. With only three rhymes in eight lines, each stanzaic cell is a highly uniform and reiterative structure. Action stops, is continuously broken or insected, made extremely symmetrical and regular.<sup>191</sup> The patterned use of regular rhyme

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<sup>191</sup> Spenser could never have written *Paradise Lost* because he relied upon the stanza as his poetic unit of composition. His predilection for small rooms, in-sected forms, seems to have been a psychic necessity, as he declares in *The Shepheardes Calendar*: "Forth was I ledde, not as I wont afore,/ When choise I had to choose my wandring waye:/ But whether luck and loves unbridled lore/ Would leade me forth on Fancies bitte to playe:/ The bush my bedde, the bramble was my bowre./ The Woodes can witenne many a wofull stowre.// Where I was wont to seeke the honey Bee,/ Working her formall rowmes in Wexen frame:/ The grieslie Todestoole growne there mought I se/ And loathed Paddocks lording on the same./ And where the chaunting birds luld me a sleepe,/ The ghasstlie Owle her grievous ynne doth keepe" (*Dec* 61-72). In "The Structure of Imagery," Frye describes this framing propensity: "Spenser is not, like Coleridge, a poet of fragments. Just as there is a touch of Pope himself in Pope's admiration for 'The spider's touch, how exquisitely fine!,' so there is a touch of Spenser himself in Spenser's admiration for the honey bee 'Working her formal rooms in waxen frame.' He thinks inside regular frameworks—the twelve months, the nine muses, the seven deadly sins—and he goes on filling up his frame even when his scheme is mistaken from the beginning, as it certainly is in the *The Tears of the Muses*" (69-70). Spenser's instinctive compositional behavior recalls the spider chided by Fabre and quoted above, who sometimes "loses her head in her difficult trade, when some trouble disturbs the peace of her nocturnal labors." "Disturbed at the moment of discharging her eggs," she will "miss the mouth of the little bag and drop them on the floor," yet continue to weave the bag "around nothing, as accurate in shape, as finished in structure" (97).

and meter in English poetry is historically associated, as in Chaucer's day, with the fall out of fashion of the older alliterative verse. In Spenser's poetry, however, the repetitive character of the strictly rhymed and metered stanza is doubled by the high incidence of alliteration. The narrator, like the reader, is embedded in the metrical and rhyming patterns, in the figures and colors of rhetoric. Both are continually diverted from the dreadful march towards narrative closure. The whole point seems to be to suspend the reader, make him hover for as long as possible before grounding him in the tragic end. The miniature epic, in its compression of imagery, shows how metaphor speaks the language of *identity* or *stasis*.

Thus enters upon the stage the spider, Aragnoll, the antagonist of Spenser's narrative, a figure obsessed with a mission, a being desirous of awakening from the nightmare of history. An engine of motive and meaning, he works by projection. Aragnoll drives the viewer towards an extreme of moralizing determinacy, where action stops and is viewed as a picture or timeless state. His goal would seem to be to avenge the insectalizing of his humanity, perhaps to undo his mother Arachne's traumatic fall into Nature. Under his gaze, narrative is exposed as repetitive and circular.<sup>192</sup>

The spider embodies the desire for fixity. Indeed, he is fixated and also desires to fix the soul of the object of his gaze. He is associated with weaving, containment, the

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<sup>192</sup> The fall into nature or history is imagined as a loss of virginity. When Aragnoll's mother Arachne is reduced, she is described as "dismaid" (341)— recalling the metamorphic reduction of Malbecco, who "quight/ Forgot he was a man" (*The Faerie Queene* 3.10.60.8-9). Jealous Malbecco is vainly trying to regain his unchaste wife; Aragnoll, too, is trying to undo his mother's 'fall.' Both are trying to regain an original unity. By eliding Aragnoll's final victory with Aeneas' savagery, Spenser seems to be saying that, in epic of empire at least, such retrieval is illusory. Arachne's picture itself displays — albeit critically— the cosmic fact which her son seems unable to accept, for her Europa is a virgin raped by *divinity*.

violence and irony of the spectacle.<sup>193</sup> Opposed to the solar, public, Clarion, the spider is a shadowy figure of the night. Even his web is designed to be so subtle as to be almost invisible. Yet the web, paradoxically, as a dramatic projection, an attempt to destroy through making inward private feelings the “spoyle” of public spectacle, is more deeply imbued with, and hence, publishes, his own backward-looking moods, his innermost feelings of resentment.<sup>194</sup> As *bug*, the spider embodies the rhetoric of dispraise, and hence, of ironic and satirical literature. Notice, for instance, how negative ornament adorns him in the following sequence of moralizing epithets:

It fortun'd (as heavens had behight)  
That in this gardin, where yong *Clarion*  
Was wont to solace him, a wicked wight  
The foe of faire things, th'author of confusion,  
The shame of Nature, the bondslave of spight,

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<sup>193</sup> Like the lame god Vulcan, the cuckolded artisan, Aragnoll weaves a subtle web to defeat the one who has humiliated him. By analogy, Clarion— with his martial armor and amorous glamor: “whose terrour more adornes” (88)— conjoins the figures of Venus and Ares. In suspending the fornicating pair from the ceiling of Olympus, Vulcan intends to publish their crime and hence defeat them through the violence of spectacle. His strategem backfires, however, when the spectacle excites the fantasies of the onlookers and Vulcan himself becomes the butt of mockery.

Similarly, in the *Muiopotmos*, the final phrase “spectacle of care” (440) moves us more with pity for the entangled victim than with praise for the villainous victor. The final lines, an almost exact translation of Aeneas’ violent rampage at the end of the *Aeneid*, further ironizes the fable’s moral. The personal motives of jealousy and vengeance, not piety or submission to duty, drives Aragnoll, Vulcan, and Aeneas to destroy those “unhappie happie” (234) souls ornamented with earthly and heavenly beauty.

<sup>194</sup> Cf. Patricia Fumerton on Isaac Oliver, the miniaturist who succeeded Nicholas Hilliard after Queen Elizabeth’s death: “Oliver... grew to reject the decorativeness of Hilliard’s bright colors and patterned lines for the naturalism of muted hues and dark modeling. Whereas Hilliard’s faces were white and flat, Oliver’s were shadowed and rounded. They were more fully represented in depth... From one point of view, we can see this new style of limning as more personal because it more fully figures forth the individual.... Yet from another point of view the psychological realism of Oliver’s miniatures made them *less* private. The more fully a sitter is realized in a limning, the more fully his or her privacy was *publicized*.... There was a kind of split in Oliver’s miniatures, in other words: they were highly private and at the same time highly public. Such a divided personality can be associated in literature with drama— for example, *Hamlet*, where the inner thoughts of the hero are acted out for all to see” (105-107).

Had lately built his hatefull mansion,  
And lurking closely, in awayte now lay,  
How he might anie in his trap betray. (241-48)

The poet is not content, however, to end with this spiritual anatomy by negation. Vice is tied to emotion and physiology to further animate the creature. Specifically, the spider's downward-tending nature is represented in scatological terms:

But when he spide the joyous Butterflie  
In this faire plot dispadding too and fro,  
Fearles of foes and hidden jeopardie,  
Lord how he gan for to bestirre him tho,  
And to his wicked worke each part applie:  
His heart did earne against his hated foe,  
And bowels so with ranckling poyson swelde,  
That scarce the skin the strong contagion helde. (249-56)

Aragnoll, with his bowels of “ranckling poyson” recalls the monster Error in her Cave—the motive drive of the first book of *The Faerie Queene* and hence, arguably, of the entire epic. An engine of jealousy, Aragnoll looks at the world as through blinds (jealousies).

Identified with his own fallenness, he is the perfect agent to bring about Clarion's fall.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Aragnoll also recalls the fairy knight Sir Guyon who, at the end of the second book of *The Faerie Queene*, at the culmination of a canto riddled with parodic reduction of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, destroys a beautiful garden and its enchanting ruler, Acrasia. Guyon, so-called hero of Temperance is driven crazy by the effect or “aspect” of so many lively sensual phenomena. The point would seem to be that ‘moralistic fervor’ is oxymoronic in some deeper sense than the hero is able to recognize. As inflamed with hatred as Aragnoll, the morally zealous Guyon experiences the actors in the garden as a voyeur—peering through the blinds of his jealousy/jealousy. He finds it at once alluring and dangerous. As in his miniature, so in his epic when describing the destruction of the Bower of Bliss: Spenser uses a highly erotic, yet peculiarly distanced language, as if to reflect the perspective of a detached, yet deeply involved, observer. The artifice would seem to describe less the *judgment* of a Puritan poet upon the life of the senses than the *perspective* of a spidery agent who feels intensely threatened by the action of the senses.

### *The Epic as Simile*

To sum up, however purely each agent seems to embody opposed drives, each remains a somewhat mixed and complex character. On the one hand, each seems essentialized; on the other hand, each one's appearance is shown to depend upon one's perspective. For instance, superficially, eroticism may be characterized as a passive function with a primarily external aspect (e.g., Helen or Penelope as the recipient of aggressive male attention). Certainly, the potential of beautiful physical form to attract viewers is an aesthetic property, involving the stimuli given off by surfaces. Yet Spenser imagines erotic attraction as an active power able to attack the inner entity or soul of the viewer by means of an assault upon and penetration of the senses. Similarly, heroism may be thought of chiefly as an active, public and civilizing function, using violence as a last resort to preserve the moral fabric of society from the inroads of illicit desire. Yet Spenser imagines heroic violence as driven by very personal, emotional, even irrational motives. Seen close up in the miniature, heroic action is shown to be reaction and projection: Jealousy weaves with the intent of reducing the freedom of the object of desire, ensnaring or fixing it as in a picture. Each agent contains and mirrors the other; the fever of love ignites the fever for war (e.g., Menelaus, Achilles, Odysseus, Aeneas). Each figure is made more complex, making a simple moral judgment more difficult.

On the surface, the insects are of course more like caricatures than round characters. They are comical such as any creature grotesquely identified with a single physical characteristic. But both of these agents are also animated in a deeper sense, in that they are driven by, have a relation to, divinely natural agencies. Ironically, it is their very cartoonish or infantile quality that enables the artist to regress his narrative to a level

where things are mythic and primal, where divine and mortal natures refuse to remain separate but are attracted to each other.

So intense is the magnetism of the visual in Spenser's miniature that, beyond merely stemming the progress of the narrative, the wings and the web actually have the power to turn back time. The narrative becomes, twice over, an etiological or 'thus-so' tale, when the narrator is driven backwards into myth to divine the causes of each agent's present condition. The drive towards origins in Spenser's miniature, however, is daemonic in its intensity. Indeed, its recursion into the realm of myth is, more properly speaking, a primal regression. The narrative proceeds as if it absolutely needed an archaic center around which it must revolve in order to be fully present. Or, it is as if the narrator were in danger of becoming utterly lost in a static or timeless state of present marveling and had to journey backwards (and inwards) in order to seek perspective. Each myth intimates the existence of greater psychological depths in the very course of displaying one more brilliant and intricately woven surface. So much narrative space is occupied by these recursions, these primal regressions into myth—the butterfly's origin in a nymph named Astery (113-44); the spider's origin in a mortal spinner named Arachne (257-352)—that it is curious even to think of the narrative as a linear movement. Relative to full-scale epic, the proportion of these digressions in the miniature is very high. The miniature is as if more pregnant in the degree to which it permits these inward expansions. It expresses a luxury, for a single story contains a wealth of other full-length stories. Etiological or regressive in relation to the narrative, these myths may also be read as proscriptive or prophetic in relation to the miniature agents. That is, the myths are tracing the process by which humanoid creatures can get back to, or progress towards,

the garden. Spenser's butterfly and spider figure this return in terms of an ideal rapport with, and a hateful resentment of, a joyous, beautiful and happy nature.

Once we see how epic has been reduced, divided, and pieced together again in the miniature, we can understand that there is a quite natural reason why Spenser's epic fable virtually had to be about insects. Both his poem and its protagonists were already similes, so to speak.

### *The Fate of the Butterfly at the Hands of the Critics*

So curious is the form of Spenser's poem that scholars have tied themselves in knots trying to explicate its meaning. Taking their cue from the proem, where the poet petitions his Muse to "reveale" to him "and all the meanes *detect*" (14) of his hero's misfortune, readers have exercised great ingenuity in puzzling out the mystery at the heart of the *Muiopotmos*. Rather than attend to the peculiarities of miniature form, they have ruminated over the allegorical meanings that the poem is alleged to contain. A sonnet Spenser affixed to the beginning of his *Virgil's Gnat* had hinted at a personal reference and goaded interpreters to spin more than one farfetched exegesis.<sup>196</sup> Similar attempts were made to fix the meaning of the *Muiopotmos*, despite its obvious preoccupation with the question of artistic representation and its parody of epic and

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<sup>196</sup> The proem, cited in the chapter on fable above, warns away 'Oedipal' readers even as it teases them to solve its hidden riddle. Edwin A. Greenlaw ("Spenser and the Earl") identifies the serpent as Alencon, but F. Vigilione ("La Poesia Lirica di Edmondo Spenser" qtd. in *Variorum* 544) argues that it represents Burghley. Meanwhile, Charles E. Mounts ("Spenser and the Countess") says the snake stands "for Leicester's amorous dalliance with the Countess of Essex" (198). After minutely studying dropped stitches in Spenser's translation of the Latin original, Doris Adler ("Imaginary Toads") reverts to Greenlaw's theory. David L. Miller ("Spenser's Vocation") backs off from these ingenious attempts at overly precise identification, claiming the sonnet points to "the dynamics of textual and authorial self-presentation ... [transforming] the conventional apparatus of dedication into a complex performance that forces uncertainty as to the poet's 'social place' into the thematics of the text" (212).

Ovidian myth-making. Such interpretations presume that the poem cannot be about anything as trivial as insects. Spenser must be talking about himself or about other personages in the Sidney circle or at court. A summary of these convoluted efforts is given by D.C. Allen:

[The] poem has been anatomized by the historical school, which has attempted to find in the verse some important piece of political history or some fragment of the courtly rivalry or gossip of the Elizabethan age. The critics in this group know a great deal and they think very hard to tell us that the *Muiopotmos* is a secret poem, informing the reader of the relations between Spenser and Lady Carey, Raleigh and Essex, Spenser and Burghley, Sidney and Oxford, or Burghley and Essex. One critic, at least, has chalked the poem down as a hieroglyphic account of the victory over the Armada (“On Spenser’s *Muiopotmos*” 141).

Or, if the true subject matter is not historical, then there must be some other more ‘real’ issue, a serious religious or philosophical doctrine, underlying all this silliness. The best model for such allegorical readings remains that of Don Cameron Allen. Trying to make sense of certain minute apparent contradictions or local errors in the text, Allen gradually discerns a global coherence in which the butterfly is “the rational soul,” the spider is “Satan,” and the whole poem illustrates the Christian doctrine of the Fall of the soul into sensuality and error. Allen thus renders Spenser’s poem as a fairly orthodox piece of *Ovide moralise*. A more recent reading, reflecting the temper of our troubled times, is that of Eric C. Brown in his essay, “The Allegory of Small Things: Insect Eschatology in Spenser’s *Muiopotmos*.” Where Allen sees a paradise lost, Brown discovers apocalypse:

“[the poem] joins a tradition of works in which the slightest of creatures, namely insects, represent allegorically and often anagogically the most extreme of human conditions.”

The poem’s concerns are “more broadly eschatological and devoted ultimately to ‘final things,’ including death and the Last Judgment” (249). In all such readings, the presumption is that the poem must be more committed to (human) ‘reality’ than it appears to be on the surface.

Finally, however, even these readings come across as reductive and formulaic. They ignore the fact that Spenser is never content simply to be a mechanical illustrator of ideas. As we have seen, a large part of Spenser’s psychoanalysis is devoted to the *animation* of his ideas, to making them somewhat *like* (but not the same as) living beings. He labors to make his poem a sensory as well as a cognitive structure. Unlike in many allegorical fables, the reader is made to *feel* the ideas as well as think them. Treating a poem as the illustration of an idea, a message or moral prescription in some sense ‘objective,’ muffles the poem’s reverberations. Whatever depths the butterfly arises from, teleological explanations smooth it down to a single plain of meaning. It is as if one strove to classify, but ended up killing, the image; or, as if one sought to give the butterfly significance by sticking him on a pin. Thus intellectualized, the poetic phenomenon is lost, even as the exegete untangles the convoluted skein of interpretations. Such readers come across as victims themselves of their too-intensely-causal method. They react to the poem much as the spider does when he sees the butterfly flit among the flowers. They, too, would gleefully reduce that vision of carefree loveliness to the spider’s ‘meanness,’ to a more serious meaning or intent. In its prefiguration of future readings, Spenser’s poem may be viewed as a playful prophecy, a *serio ludens* that

makes gentle sport while *performing* in miniature the rabid machinations of his moral censors.<sup>197</sup>

Still other readers— taking their cue from the grand, gusty, voice which the narrator employs as he asks for aid from “the mournfulest Muse of nyne,/ That wonst the tragick stage for to direct” (10-11)— classify the poem as a mock epic.<sup>198</sup> Doubtless, parodic elements exist. However, most mock epics— e.g., the pseudo-Homeric *Batrachomyomachia*, Heywood’s *The Spider*, or Swift’s *Battle of the Books*— express their satire overtly by means of witty repartee. In *Virgil’s Gnat*, the insect protagonist drones on and on in a self-conscious parody of rhetorical abuses.<sup>199</sup> By contrast, the “deadly dolorous debate” of the *Muiopotmos* is subsumed in the body of narrative. The poet not only avoids dialogue between characters and denies the insects speech, but he makes them do nothing which real insects are incapable of. The ‘dumbshow’ Spenser writes, with its interest in causes and effects, in root maladies and external symptoms, is more akin to the etiological myths that Ovid writes in his *Metamorphoses*, or Kipling in

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<sup>197</sup> This view has been expressed by Hallett Smith: “Because of some puzzles in the poem and because *Virgil’s Gnat* is a topical poem, many modern commentators have been tempted to read *Muiopotmos* as an allegory. The interpretations vary. We have been told that the poem is about Spenser and Lady Carey, Raleigh and Essex, Spenser and Burghley, Sidney and Oxford, Burghley and Essex, the defeat of the Armada, and, most recently, The Soul Caught in the Eternal War between Reason and Sensuality. If I were to add to this formidable list, I would be tempted to suggest that *Muiopotmos* is a *prophetic* allegory: that the butterfly represents the scholarly critic who gets caught in the spider-web of extraneous antiquarian, historical, and philosophical learning” (qtd. in Nelson 130). The very tone of the poem, which most of the learned allegorical interpreters ignore, says Smith, “would almost certainly rule out any heavy philosophical, military, or political allegory.”

<sup>198</sup> In “Spenser’s *Muiopotmos*,” Thomas William Nadal suggests that it is not an allegory, but a “purely mock-heroic poem, and that he wrote it under the influence of two mock-heroic poems of Chaucer, *Sir Thopas* and the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (644). Judith Anderson argues in “‘Nat worth a boterflye’: *Muiopotmos* and *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*” that Spenser writes in imitation of Chaucer’s mock-heroic poem (see also Karl P. Wentersdorf’s, “Chaucer’s Worthless Butterfly”).

<sup>199</sup> Even *Virgil’s Gnat*, however, skirts the genre. Strict satire, in its castigation of human folly, tends to have an excoriating effect. Whereas *Virgil’s Gnat* is elegiac in tone, and concludes with a tender lament of the kind we saw in *The Greek Anthology* where dead bugs were mourned as dear pets.

his 'just-so' stories. Not mock epic, but only a simulacrum of epic or tragedy, as he himself says in his proem: a "wayfull tyne" (13) and a "tragicall *effect*" (9) are what he seeks.

Readers also need to keep in mind the ironies put in play by the creation of a narrator. The allegorists tend to take at face value the ostensible moral given by Spenser's narrator. In contrast to a fable, where the moral comes at the end, in the *Muiopotmos* the narrator's commentary is situated at the exact mathematical center of the poem, dissecting the insect dialectic with two stanzas. The first stanza eulogizes— some would say 'romanticizes',<sup>200</sup>—the butterfly's ideal existence:

What more felicitie can fall to creature,  
Than to enjoy delight with libertie,  
And to be Lord of all the workes of Nature,  
To raine in th'aire from earth to highest skie,  
To feed on flowres, and weeds of glorious feature,  
To take what ever thing doth please the eie?  
Who rests not pleased with such happines,  
Well worthie he to taste of wretchednes. (209-16)

The second stanza ironizes the butterfly's sensibility, introducing the demonic antagonist as an agent of cosmic vengeance:

But what on earth can long abide in state?  
  
Or who can him assure of happie day;

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<sup>200</sup> Spenser's stanza describing the butterfly's supreme felicity appears on the title pages of both John Clare's and John Keats' first books of poems. In William Wordsworth's "The Beggars" (1802), the poet describes a beautiful and haughty Amazon who asks him for alms as "a creature/...beautiful to see—a weed of glorious feature" (17-18).

Sith morning faire may bring fowle evening late,  
And least mishap the most blisse alter may?  
For thousand perills lie in close awaite  
About us daylie to worke our decay;  
That none, except a God, or God him guide,  
May them avoyde, or remedie provide. (217-24)

Here we seem to be squarely in the realm of Aesop's fable of the ant and the grasshopper, or of Anacreon's lyric on the grasshopper: The experience of impermanence teaches us the lesson of providence. From this pagan/Judeo-Christian moral, Allen and others make their case for the allegory of the Fall of the Christian soul into sensuality.

One might well ask, however, whether the moral, like all the other conventions of epic, romance, lyric, elegy, that float through this miniature taxonomy, is not yet another means by which the poet attempts to animate his subject matter? Is it wise to try to separate the aesthetic and moralizing functions? What sets this question in motion is not only the manner of the moral's delivery, but the character of the narrator who delivers it.

In fable, one recalls, the fabulist is detached and superior to the action and the agents he describes. The narrator is very much outside the action he describes, looking down, with the reader, over the machinations of fools. The moralist does not tolerate difference, but only demands assent from his reader. In Spenser's miniature, however, the narrator is involved in what he is speaking about, caught up in the accelerated rhythms he describes. When he praises the butterfly's wings as surpassing those of Cupid's, for instance, he immediately expresses his anxiety about his transgression. He is

fully aware that his audience may be different from himself. Clearly, he fears the very transformation of which the butterfly himself is the victim.

Ne (may it be withouten perill spoken)  
The Archer God, the sonne of *Cytheree*  
That joyes on wretched lovers to be wroken,  
And heaped spoyles of bleeding harts to see,  
Beares in his wings so manie a changefull token.  
Ah my liege Lord, forgive it unto mee,  
If ought against thine honour I have tolde;  
Yet sure those wings were fairer manifolde. (97-104)

In fable, too, the storyteller is supposed to remain calm, cool, collected. This is part of the urbanity and rationality of which Aristotle and other classical rhetoricians approved. Whereas, in lamenting the fate of the fly, the narrator of the *Muiopotmos* sounds almost hysterical.

Who now shall give unto my heavie eyes  
A well of teares, that all may overflow?  
Or where shall I finde lamentable cryes,  
And mournfull tunes enough my grieffe to show?  
Helpe O thou Tragick Muse, me to devise  
Notes sad enough, t'expresse this bitter throw:  
For loe, the drierie stownd is now arrived,  
That of all happines hath us deprived. (409-16)

In this poem, it is difficult to see exactly the subject of Spenser's sermonizing, if, indeed, he is sermonizing at all. Clearly, though, his poem is involved in its own external projected storytelling; its speaker not absolutely independent, but involved in the error of which he speaks.<sup>201</sup> As the poet exposes to the reader's view his agents' susceptibility to error, he is painstakingly conveying the susceptibility of the viewer as well. The narrator is incapable of taking an objective stance. True, the poet's interest seems to be literary at least as much as moral. He explores, for instance, the nature of artistic parody. When, in the course of the Arachne digression, an exquisitely woven butterfly is inserted into Minerva's winning tapestry, the poet seems to be competing with Ovid's original presentation of the myth. In this way, the classic artwork serves, not unlike either a moral or a picture, as a center of stasis, a mirror of history and yet also timeless. The continual representation, with variation, of the masterwork by later artists demonstrates that the desire for change or novelty, as well as return to an origin, is eternal. The object of wonder is an object of desire, and we find such acts of imitation pleasant.<sup>202</sup>

But Spenser's poem also anticipates the reduction of the hero in modern literature to the status of an insect. If at times the miniature waxes nostalgic, then other times it seems to prophesy the tragic historical forces that restrict agents in sophisticated, bureaucratic societies. Like the little man in Nikolai Gogol's short story, "The

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<sup>201</sup> Andrew Weiner, in "Spenser's *Muiopotmos* and the Fates of Butterflies and Men," reaches similar conclusions, finding the narrator, as it were, equally enmeshed in a spider's web, "vacillating between feeling that the butterfly has done nothing to deserve its fate and assuming that everything it did must have been wrong" (220).

<sup>202</sup> Cf. Aristotle: "To do the same thing often is pleasant, since, as we saw, anything habitual is pleasant. And to change is also pleasant: change means an approach to nature, whereas invariable repetition of anything causes the excessive prolongation of a settled condition: therefore says the poet [Euripedes, *Orestes*, 234], 'Change is in all things sweet.' That is why what comes to us only at long intervals is pleasant, whether it be a person or a thing; for it is a change from what we had before, and, besides, what comes only at long intervals has the value of rarity" (*Rhetoric* 1371a-b).

Overcoat,” the armored Clarion is diminished in proportion to his fabulous powers of specialization, refinement and subtlety. As subservience to the technology we create compels us to read natural and manmade worlds as texts, fictional characters surrender the heroic capacity to act in significant and effective ways. Clarion reminds us of the fascinating, enigmatic creature in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Man of the Crowd,” as deep as he is superficial, alienated from and yet an inseparable part of the urban environment that surrounds him. For these modern authors, as for Spenser, daemonic freedom cannot exist without daemonic possession. Their agents are burdened with the very devices which seem to promise them such power. Clarion struggles in a curious kind of jeweled marmalade, like the fly in W. B. Yeat’s “Ego Dominus Tuus”:

....No, not sing

For those that love the world serve it in action

Grow rich, popular and full of influence,

And should they paint or write, still it is action:

The struggle of the fly in marmalade.

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,

The sentimentalist himself; while art

Is but a vision of reality.

What portion in the world can the artist have

Who has awakened from the common dream

But dissipation and despair?” (45-55)

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