

The Antient Commonwealth of Flies

[Steven Connor](#)

zoopoetics time's flies principalities and powers the syrup choak'd the rest the game of
telescopes never identical in shape his dizzy nibs references



Zoopoetics

Zoopoetics, a word used by Derrida to describe the preoccupation with animals to be found through the work of Kafka (Derrida 2004, 115), is part of a much larger project of reading the residence, the inherence, the preoccupation of the animal in the human. It draws on the work of Deleuze, Serres and some others who have grown weary of the autistic humanism of those who think and write as though they were alone in the world. This includes the work of nearly a century of Continental philosophy since Nietzsche which, while it has huffed and puffed mightily against the house of the human, has never once considered that its own proper domain might be anything else or as well as man, homo faber, homo significans, the posthuman, or that nature could have any reach or meaning outside the human phantasmagoria. Acknowledging the animal means more than attending to the meanings borne by or assigned to animals. It means more even than reading the ways in which human beings have routed their self-understandings through the relay of the animal. It is a profound mistake to imagine that, even now, those relations are exclusively those of a subject to an object. It means making out those forms of association and interaction that arise between humans and animals, those forms of compounding and composition out of which the human arises from the animal and the animal from the human. These associations and interactions, actions that not only act on other actors, but presume and produce other actors, belong to the huge Middle Kingdom of circulating quasi-objects and quasi-subjects which Bruno Latour has shown beginning to proliferate just at the point at which human beings persuaded themselves that culture was separate from nature and that animals and humans were severed by what Heidegger calls 'an abyss of essence'. As Lars Risan has put it: 'In networks of humans, machines, animals, and matter in general, humans are not the only beings with agency, not the only ones to act; matter matters' (Risan 1997). Zoopoetics means more than according animals a meaning. It means letting animals in on meaning, even allowing the animality of meaning. In this perspective, horses, dogs, cats rats and flies would be more

than just the occasions of representation. They would exert distinctive forms of pull and pressure on the work of meaning.

Why does it seem so odd, for example, to give the name of 'animal' to an insect? Insects have often been excepted from campaigns to afford protection from cruelty to animals. We might even say that insects mark the sphere of exception itself. An article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, signed only with the pseudonym 'Kuon' (Greek 'dog') satirically praised Richard Martin, the Galway MP who in 1822 steered through Parliament the first bill to extend protection from cruelty to animals (Kean 1998, 34-5), earning the nickname 'Humanity Dick', for making no effort to extend such protection to flies. '[I]t is certain', he wrote, 'that Mr Martin acted properly and wisely in excluding flies from the operation of his act - well knowing, as he must have done, that the feeling of the majority was decidedly averse from affording parliamentary countenance and immunity to those descendants of the victims of Domitian's just indignation' ('Kuon' 1828, 832). (The Emperor Domitian is said to have diverted himself by slaughtering flies on the end of a stylus.) 'Kuon' doggedly continues his diatribe, emphasising the utter unassimilability of flies to the domain of the human: 'Unamiable and unconciliating monsters! The wildest and most ferocious inhabitant of the desert may be reclaimed from their savage nature, and taught to become the peaceful citizens of a menagerie - but ye are altogether untameable and intractable' ('Kuon' 1828, 833)

No creatures seem so much like foreign bodies as insects. Insects have knowledge of us, without ever acknowledging us. Humans and flies are in a sense each other's other half. Flies seem to inhabit an inverse universe, in which bad is good, shit is precious, decay is useful, as though they moved through our world in negative, through the negative of our world. Despite their closeness and habitual intercourse, flies and humans never seem to come together in a plane where they might apprehend and appraise each other face to face (flies have no faces). The fly seems absolutely alien to human form. For centuries it was believed that flies, like other insects, did not breathe. Many observers have been amazed at the fly's capacity to carry on living after being decapitated, as though the fly were not a single organism, so much as an amalgamation of semi-autonomous parts. And yet flies and humans are not really each other's opposites, and the fly is not really any kind of Other, so the demonisation of flies may be a simplifying ruse of thought. For flies are not on simply or unilaterally on the side of noise, evil, the formless, decomposition. They are indifferent to the distinctions that hold together our understandings of value and their role is to mediate between form and the formless, between good and evil, between distinction and indistinction.

More than any other animals, flies foil that act of disambiguating abjection whereby, as individuals and as cultures, we repeatedly, but never definitively, strive to put a distance between ourselves and our excreta. Flies enact, not the return of the repressed, but the immanence of the excrescent. Flies are airborne putrescence, bits of winged shit. But this means that they may also inherit some of the ambivalence that attaches to excrement, the anal-erotic fascination with what should disgust and revolt us. This is intensified by flies' easy, impudent commerce with our own bodies. Flies are attracted, not just by faeces and the more conspicuous forms of rot, but also by human sweat and other emissions, which save them the trouble of liquefying their food, and from which they can derive proteins. So flies are not 'the other', or not in any simple sense: the otherness they represent is, so to speak, the proximate otherness of our own disavowed elements.

So the fly is our alien familiar, our intimate antagonist. Human beings are locked into a strange and difficult cooperation with insects. No animals come or cleave closer to us, have more casual commerce with us, get so literally under our skins or take such impudent liberties with our persons. This has often encouraged anthropomorphism with regard to flies. In an essay in praise of the fly the second-century rhetorician and satirist Lucian of Samostata (120-180) asserts that 'Though she has six feet, she walks with only four and uses the two in front for all the purposes of hands. You can see her standing on four legs, holding up something to eat in her hands just as we human beings do' (Lucian 1913, I, 85). A later ironic celebrant, the Florentine Renaissance humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-70), followed Homer in praising the martial mien and pedigree of the fly. According to Alberti, its military discipline confirms its descent from warlike stock, as does the fact that it is equipped with a cuirass resembling those with which gods and heroes are caparisoned in ancient statues (Alberti 1984, 176). Alberti suggests that its warlike song may even have been the origin of the practice among Spartan women of exercising to the sound of the flute. But even greater praise is due to the fly on account of its innocence: 'in the course of its whole life, the fly commits no wrong, nor any theft or rape; it does not steal from flowers the amethysts, emeralds, amber, pearls, or similar gems hidden from the sky in night; nor does it amass a store of riches for itself' (Alberti 1984, 180).



Time's Flies

But the human capacity for identification with the fly is expressed in nothing so intensely as in the sense of the fragility of the fly's life and its proximity to death. What counts as a natural death for the houseflies who survive being eaten as prey or squashed as an annoyance is succumbing to a fungus known as *Empusa muscae*. In 1857, a detailed account of the disease was published by F. Cohn in the *Microscopic Journal*, which includes an evocative account of the appearance of the afflicted flies towards the end of autumn:

At this time innumerable dead bodies of flies may be seen adhering to the windows, walls, shutters, &c., in all parts of the room: the dead insect, although dry, and so friable as to crumble into dust upon the slightest touch, retains so far the attitude of life, that it is difficult, without touching, to believe that it is not a living fly on the point of taking flight... The dead flies in this condition are always surrounded with a halo, about an inch in diameter, composed of a whitish dust, which upon examination is found to consist of the spores of a *fungus*... Further examination will show *that the whole of the contents of the body of the Fly* have been consumed by the parasitic growth, and that nothing remains but an empty shell, lined with a thin felt-like layer, composed of the slender mycelia of the innumerable fungi. (Quoted Samuelson 1860, 73-4)

Writing in *Harper's* a couple of years later, in 1859, Charlotte Taylor doubted that these uncannily frozen flies had died as a direct result of the fungus, but substituted an even more anthropomorphic account of their demise:

Living upon fluids, of course you may suppose there is nothing very material about a fly. A little chemical effort will enable you to dissolve him, and throw him away, literally "spill him" in a few drops. Old age ? the Nemesis of biped as well as insect ? overtakes them, the cold blast of winter chills them, and clinging to appearances to the last, as we do, they stand up to it and die like heroes. The evaporation of living fluid now commences and from it springs this fungus ? as mould does from darkness on

furniture in a room from whence [sic] light has been long excluded. (Taylor 1859, 740)

Even Edward Halford Ross, whose biography of the life of a house fly is intended to induce angry revulsion at its promiscuous filthiness, is able to evoke sympathy for the dying fly:

In the morning she found that she could hardly move, and the fungus which had begun to grow into the interstices of her chitinous skin was preventing the opening of her wings, and was relentlessly claiming her life as she had claimed others. Her freedom was passing and the liberty she loved so well was fading from her as her foe tied her down with silken thongs. (Ross 1913, 92)

Daniel Weissbort has hinted at the parallels between the decrepitude of human and fly in his poem 'Winter':

The flies' strength has diminished to nothing.
Sapless, without sheen, they die,
by negative weight adhering to the ceiling.

Looking along my nose's length,
I notice a fly on my sweater,
dead.

A slow pat dislodges flies from the air,
or plummets them from walls.

They are old, so old. (Weissbort 193, 106)

Raymond Queneau extended this autumnal apprehension to flies in general, who seem aware of their impending extinction in the modern world:

The flies of today
are not the same as the flies of other times
they are less gay
heavier, graver, more stately
more conscious of their uncommonness
they know their genocide is being prepared...
they contemplate their demise

the flies of today
 are not the same as the flies of other times (Queneau 1989, I, 357;
 my translation)

Few writers have been as attentive to the fate of the fly as Samuel Beckett, the chronicler of disregarded lives. The earliest appearance of a fly in his work is in a poem written in 1934 when he was living in London. The poem begins in the Regent's Park Zoo, with views of lugubrious weaver-birds, condors, elephants and adders, and proceeds in a mock-Dantean pilgrimage across various London locations. Its menagerie-itinerary comes to rest (as it may be in the garden of Kenwood), with an ominous, valedictory view of a less exotic creature:

my brother the fly
 the common housefly
 sidling out of darkness into light
 fastens on his place in the sun
 whets his six legs
 revels in his planes his poisers
 it is the autumn of his life (Beckett 1977, 22)

A fly makes a shadowy or putative appearance 45 years later in Beckett's prose-text *Company*, in which a man, lying on his back in the dark, tries to make sense of the voices he hears, recounting incidents from a life that may or may not be his own. All the way through, the value of what he is told or surmises is measured in terms of how much of an 'addition to company' it might be. At one point he imagines his story enlivened by the creation of a fly:

The temptation is great. Let there be a fly. For him to brush away.
 A live fly mistaking him for dead. Made aware of its error and
 renewing it incontinent. What an addition to company that would
 be! A live fly mistaking him for dead. But no. He would not brush
 away a fly. (Beckett 1980, 37-8)

A sentimental reading might be that the fly indeed provides company in the darkness and silence, another living creature. But that 'let there be a fly' flutters between the permissive and the directive, since in Beckett's cosmos there may be as much cruelty in the *fiat musca* as charity. The word 'company' hints at a more sombre reading too, for it literally means eating or taking bread together. If the life of the fly seems in many ways incommensurable with that of man, not measurable on the same scale (and we will see later that questions of measure and scale will always be provoked by the thought of the fly), then it is

certainly intimately commensal, taking its meals at the same table (we are a table spread for it).

The passage in *Company* also faintly recalls the climax of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. The penultimate chapter of the novel is all addressed to the solitary figure of Judge Pyncheon, as he sits dead in his chair, clutching his ticking watch. Just as the figure in *Company* entertains a series of ghostly companions, so Hawthorne imagines a host of Pyncheon's ancestors processing through the death-chamber. In the end, the appearance of a fly, and the Judge's failure to brush it away, marks the abandonment of the narrative's pretence that its addressee will ever respond to its jeerings and remonstrations:

What! Thou art not stirred by this last appeal? No, not a jot! And there we see a fly - one of your common house-flies, such as are always buzzing on the window-pane - which has smelt out Governor Pyncheon, and alights, now on his forehead, now on his chin, and now, Heaven help us, is creeping over the bridge of his nose, towards the would-be chief-magistrate's wide-open eyes! Canst thou not brush the fly away? Art thou too sluggish? Thou man, that hadst so many busy projects yesterday! Art thou too weak, that wast so powerful? Not brush away a fly? Nay, then, we give thee up! (Hawthorne 1991, 283)



Principalities and Powers

Flies have long been thought to have magical associations or powers, usually deriving from their association with devils. The *Vendîdâd*, a compilation of Zoroastrian religious laws and mythical tales, figures the physical corruption of death in the terrifying figure of the Drug Nasu, a fly-demon who rushes to take possession of the dead. It prescribes the following elaborate ablutions for driving out the devil of corruption from the body of one who has been made unclean by contact with a corpse:

'He shall press his toes upon the ground, and shall raise up his heels; thou shalt sprinkle his right sole with water; then the Drug Nasu rushes upon the left sole. Thou shalt sprinkle the left sole with water; then the Drug Nasu is driven to the toes, where what is seen of her is like the wing of a fly.'...

'He shall press his heels upon the ground and shall raise up his toes; thou shalt sprinkle his right toe with water; then the Drug Nasu rushes upon the left toe. Thou shalt sprinkle the left toe with water; then the Drug Nasu flies away to the regions of the north, with knees and tail sticking out, all stained with stains, and like unto the foulest Khrafstras.' (Anon 1995, 109-10)

In European Christianity, it is sometimes not only the filthiness, but also the sneakiness of flies, their capacity to insinuate themselves into our most private circumstances, that suggests the power of the devil. Devils were often thought to come and go surreptitiously in the form of flies. This may have helped generate the term used for the informers whom the Inquisition put into prison with suspected witches and heretics to trick them into betraying themselves: they were known, as one historian of the Inquisition tells his Protestant readers, as 'flies', on account of their ubiquity and their importunity: 'These sort of Persons they call flies, and ... they may be known and found out by this one thing, that for the most part they thrust themselves into such sort of conversations, without any one's asking them, and begin very impertinently such discourses concerning doctrine' (Limborch 1816, 381-2). A 'mouche' is still a term used for a spy in French. The sceptical Reginald Scot, by contrast, was at a loss to understand how devils 'can neither conveie themselves from the hands of such as laie wait for them; nor can get out of prison, that otherwise can go in and out at a mouse hole; nor finallie can save themselves from the gallowes, that can transubstantiate their own and others bodies into flies or fleas' (Scot 1584, 481).

The demonic power of flies is often demonstrated by the trouble taken in Christian writing to show them being subordinated to the will of God. Gregory of Tours tells of a priest from Poitou named Pannichius, who was troubled by a fly that kept circling around a cup from which he was about to drink. Sensing an attempt at ambush by the devil, the priest made the sign of the cross, at which point the drink divided into four parts and spilled over the ground (Loomis 1948, 66). Another story tells of a fly who filched from Saint Annon's hand a piece of the consecrated sacrament while he took too long a pause for contemplation, but was constrained by the power of the Lord to bring it back (Bridoul 1687, 32). Flies, especially those whose maggots damaged crops, were often subject to elaborate rituals of religious condemnation. In her study of animals trials conducted over several centuries in the diocese of Lausanne, Catherine Chène includes the following formula, by means of which a certain kind of white worm called a 'linger' (which was regarded as an imperfect

creature which had not been on the ark) was anathematised by the curé of Berne in August 1478:

By the order of his Grace [the Bishop of Lausanne] and by the virtue of the the high and holy Trinity, and by the power and goodness of the redeemer of humanity, our protector Jesus Christ, and by virtue of the obedience due to the Holy Church, I command and exhort you, within the six days following this proclamation all to depart, each and every one, in particular from all of the ground and every place where you have secretly and openly done damage or where you could do it, and to depart equally from all pastures, cultivated fields, gardens, woods, meadows, trees and all the places where the food of men and animals is grown. (Quoted Chène 1995, 141)

The absurd solemnity of the anathema is intensified by the gesture towards legal formality contained in the invitation that follows, an invitation that excludes the worms in the very act of seeming to admit them to the empire of law and self-representation:

But, if you do not obey this proclamation, and believe you have grounds for not doing so, I summon you accordingly, by the power and obedience due to holy Church, on the sixth day following this proclamation, at one o'clock in the afternoon to Avenches, to give reply from yourselves or your advocate, before my gracious Lord of Lausanne or his representative. (Quoted Chène 1995, 143)

The demonic associations of flies are focussed in the figure of Beelzebub, Satan's second-in-command, whose name, as any fule kno, at least since the appearance of Golding's much-studied novel, means 'Lord of the Flies'. *Baalzebub* occurs in 2 Kings 1 as the name of a god of the Philistine city of Akron, who is consulted by Ahaziah ben Ahab, the king of Israel. The name does not appear elsewhere in the Old Testament, but apparently reappears in the New Testament, modified, in most manuscripts, to *Beelzeboul* (Matthew 12.24, Luke 11.15), when Christ is accused of using the power of a powerful devil to cure those possessed of evil spirits. It is not clear quite what the name of this powerful entity signifies. It could mean *Ba'al-zebub*, 'lord of the house'. Another suggestion is that the term is founded on the Ugaritic word *zbl*, meaning prince - in which case *Beelzebub* would mean the 'lord of princes' (Maclaurin 1978, 156-60). If *Beelzebub* is indeed a modification of *Beelzebub*, this

seems to represent a considerable promotion for a minor local deity. Of course, it is quite possible that this Beelzebul is a different god altogether. Others detect in the name the influence of the Aramaic word *zēbel*, meaning dung or excrement, which is an obvious development from *Beelzebub* — or a deliberate diminishment of it (Fontinoy 1984, 164-6). Other allotropes of the name are found in magical and popular literature — *Beelzebub*, on the model of other demons and deities with names ending in *-ut* or *-uth*, and *Beelzebud* (Anon 1900, 110). *Beelzebub* is named as the prince of demons in the *Testament of Solomon*, a magical text from between the first and third centuries (Duling 1983). This derivation is scarcely enough on its own to account for all the stories of devils or the devil appearing in the guise of flies, but it must have exerted a considerable influence.

The interweavings of the ideas of houses, flies and excrement in the New Testament appearance of the name may also have significance. When Christ is accused of drawing on the power of Beelzebub to cast out devils, he uses a complicated, but impeccably Rabbinical argument against the Pharisees:

25 And knowing their thoughts he said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand:
 26 And if Satan casteth out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then shall his kingdom stand? (Matthew 12. 25-6)

Christ's argument is that it just doesn't make sense for Beelzebub to act against his own interests. If Beelzebub casts out devils, then he is giving himself notice to quit, which removes the force from the Pharisees' argument. On the other hand, it also removes the force from Christ's own reversal of the argument to turn it on the Pharisees and the casters-out of whom they approve: 'And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils by whom do your sons cast them out?' (Matthew 12.28) Christ's point is that he casts out the devils not by the power of Beelzebub but by the power of the Spirit of God. But this undermines the argument *ad absurdum* that he begins with, since it seems that it is no longer so absurd for Beelzebub both to be himself and to act against his own interests. For, given his subordination by the Spirit of God, foiling himself is just what Beelzebub is miserably constrained to do. So, if it is in Beelzebub's nature to to act against his interests, why should Christ seek to deflect the accusation that he is acting by the power of Beelzebub through the argument that it is ridiculous for him to act against his own interests? It's actually not ridiculous at all, but part of Beelzebub's grudging subjection obedience to the will of God. These are the kind of arguments that Captain Kirk always used to use against

alien computers in *Star Trek*, but such arguments have to be carefully staged and controlled. Christ needs to ensure consistency on this issue, since 'He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth' (Matthew 12.30). But consistency is precisely what doesn't seem to be available here. Instead of making his story stick, Christ succeeds only in exuding a singularly, or duplicitously, sticky kind of story.

How do flies come into this? Well, remember that *Beelzebub*, which could mean *Ba'al-zebub* or 'lord of the flies', is, in almost all the Greek manuscripts of Matthew and Luke, rendered *Beelzeboul*, which may mean 'prince of the house'. And remember that also in the vicinity (and far too close for comfort, given that the question of vicinity is so much the issue here) is *Ba'al-ze-boul*, 'lord of dung'. The house: houseflies: dung. So in one sense Christ might be seen as unfolding the allegory of the house divided against itself which is contained in the very name of the demon with whom he is accused of being compact. It is a demon who brings together in his own name the two things that signify a divided house, or the division between a house and what it must set apart from itself in order to be or remain a house, namely, dung. Indeed, a house that cannot separate itself off from its own dung might seem like the very definition of a unhygienically divided house (which is to say, of course, an insufficiently divided house). And what mediates between a house and its dung? The creature we know as the 'house-fly'. Does Christ knit these ideas of order and ordure, gathering and scattering, incoherence, discomposure and decomposition into a cohesive web, or does his discourse zigzag flywise between them?

As though this weren't enough, and Lord knows it should it be, there is a further possible meaning for *Beelzebub*. For it has been hard for Biblical scholars not to hear in this name the influence of the Aramaic *b'el-d'-baba*, which is a loanword from Akkadian *bél-dababi*, and means 'lord of speech' (Carson and Cerrito 2003, 2.200). This gives an extra piquancy to the plays on words involving homeliness, filth, and inconsistency, since the words for all of these things are interlaced with a word that signifies the very verbal mastery with which the house-dung-fly-lord is credited. In outdoing Beelzebub by rhetorically decomposing his name, Christ employs the very strategy at which that very name proclaims his adversary (the meaning both of Hebrew *satan* and of Greek *diabolos*) Beelzebub to be a master. So, far from denying that he is Beelzebub, Christ is here demonstrating his privy identity with him. This is precisely what he has done already, in warning his disciples of the abuse that is in store for them if they follow him 'If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?' (Matthew 10.25)

If flies are associated with evil spirits, then, as I have tried to show in another essay (Connor 2004), there is a peculiar commerce between angels and insects. Occasionally, the fly can be celebrated as a kind of angelic visitant. Ciaran Carson's poem 'Aquila Non Capit Muscas' is an account of a rapturous picnic after a visit to a French cathedral. The poem is prompted by the well-known Latin tag, often taken as an heraldic motto, in its title ('Eagles do not capture flies'), which counsels lofty inattention to paltry things. A picnic party have wandered out of the cathedral with the sound of the Angelus dimly dinning behind them. The angels of the cathedral transmogrify into insects: the angel 'does not condescend to share their cheese and wine, 'but trapezes/In a daddy-long-legs ceiling-angle: not aloof, not partizan,/But mindful of the sacrosanct occasion'. The flies who attend the picknickers' eucharistic indulgence amid a field of buttercups are represented as an angelic benediction rather than a nuisance: 'Principalities/and Powers/Of flies buzzed round us as we opened up the basket'. The speaker's boozy, fly-lulled doze ferments a final gently absurd image, which brings together the celestial and the mundane:

I dreamt I stalked on yonder far-off blue plateau
with bullets, gun and beagle,
Abroad for days, enquiring for the Lesser-Spotted
Fly-catching Eagle. (Carson 1996, 41)



The Syrup choak'd the rest

The death of flies is often moralised, as the fate reserved for a creature who devotes its life to unthinking pleasures. The moral lesson is spelled out with comic solemnity at the end of an eighteenth-century poem called 'The Fwo Flies: A Fable', by George Keate, in which a fly, trapped in dish of fruit juice into which it has fallen, splutters out this valedictory warning to his fly-companion:

"Withdraw, my brother, e'er too late,
"And happier thou, remark my fate;
"Doom'd here, my Error to deplore,
"And from this lake to rise no more.
"Sorrow shall travel at his side,
"Who makes not *Temperance* his guide!
"Struck with my crime, I here abjure
"The system false of Epicure;

"Go, preach it down, and render wise
 "The antient *Commonwealth of Flies*."

He said;- the Syrup choak'd the rest;
 Then swelling with a sigh his breast,
 He mutter'd somewhat of a pray'r,
 But all was *buzz*, and lost in air. (Keate 1781, I.152)

Pleasure is not just transitory, it is also deathly, depriving its pursuer of any hope of survival or resurrection. He will be as utterly forgotten as the negligible fly. To be a seeker of pleasure is to render oneself of no more account or significance than a fly. And yet, it is the very insignificance of the fly that fuels the poem's nicely-judged mock-heroic and resulting comedy of disproportion. Perhaps the light and passing pleasure the reader is allowed to take in the grandiose remorse and undoing of the fly outweighs the assault on trivial or ephemeral pleasure that is apparently on offer in the poem.

The trope of the fly immolated by its own appetite has been recalled and rebalanced by Jamie McKendrick, whose poem 'He Drinks Precious Wine With Flies' evokes the fruit flies - 'dome-headed midges, base-born atoms,/motes pissed as newts, seraphic soaks' - who gorge themselves on the new vintage. But the final lines of the poem implicate the drinker-poet in this sweet, commensal immolation: 'I drink you in a double-draught/of what you drank from first, then what you drowned in' (McKendrick 1993, 49).

F.W. Fitzsimmons connects the heedless concupiscence of the fly to its spread of disease:

It is an everyday occurrence for a couple of love-making flies to drop into a cup of tea or coffee, and to see them removed with a teaspoon and the fluid imbibed. It is anything but a pleasant thought to think that when taking your soup, a cup of milk, tea, coffee, or other fluid, you are taking a dose of a million or more of the germs of enteric fever. (Fitzsimmons 1915, 30)

Flies often insinuate themselves into the sexual reveries or reflections of humans. When Shakespeare's Romeo receives word that he is to be banished from Verona, the agony of his exile from Juliet prompts in him a fevered, jealous image of the delicious liberties that even flies are allowed, but are forbidden to him:

more validity,
 More honourable state, more courtship lives
 In carrion-flies than Romeo: they may seize
 On the white wonder of dear Juliet's hand
 And steal immortal blessing from her lips,
 Who even in pure and vestal modesty,
 Still blush, as thinking their own kisses sin;
 But Romeo may not; he is banished:
 Flies may do this, but I from this must fly (*Romeo and Juliet*, III.iii,
 38-43)

The fly is a metaphorical vehicle for Romeo's desire; he says that flies are better off than him; but, in stealing these imaginary kisses, they are also his surrogate, a means to close in imagination the gap between Juliet and him. More than allowing Romeo momentarily to hallucinate the closeness he is denied, the fly suggests the possibility of even closer intimacy than he has yet achieved, for, it is suggested, the flies parasite or participate in Juliet's own self-pleasuring, insinuating themselves between her lips as they press blushing together, and thereby pilfering some of the pleasure she would otherwise take from herself.

The other striking element in this passage is the fact that Romeo identifies his surrogates as 'carrion flies', by which he means the varieties of flesh-fly, *Sarcophaga*, which lay their eggs in corpses, meat or sometimes in living flesh. This establishes an identification between sexual desire and death, which, though queasy, is appropriate in the context, since Romeo has just been told that the normal punishment for his offence of duelling is death, but has been commuted to the banishment which is worse than death for him. The necrophiliac tip also looks forward to the end of the play, when the consummation of Romeo and Juliet's love will indeed take place in a tomb, and Juliet will attempt to glean from Romeo's lips enough poison to follow him to death.

The strong associations between flies and various kinds of corruption and disgust give a perverse tang to their sexual associations. These associations are particularly rich in the appearance made by two flies in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. At the point in the novel in which they appear, Leopold Bloom is sitting in Davey Byrne's bar, consuming a glass of Burgundy and a gorgonzola sandwich. Bloom's thoughts are full of food, both delicate and crude, and its sexual effects: 'Yes but what about oysters. Unsightly like a clot of phlegm. Filthy shells. Devil to open them too. Who found them out? Garbage, sewage they feed on. Fizz and Red bank oysters. Effect on the sexual. Aphrodis' (Joyce

1986, 143). Shortly after these reflections he sees (we presume he sees) two flies. 'Stuck on the pane two flies buzzed, stuck' (Joyce 1986, 143). We do not know whether the flies are stuck on the pane because there is some sweet substance smeared there, or because they are clamped together in copulation. The general stickiness seems to suggest that the eating and coupling may here be as joined together as the flies. The sight of the flies seems to precipitate in Bloom a Proustian memory of an afternoon with Molly, his future wife, on Howth Hill. They too are stuck, through an exchange of moistened seedcake, which has been rendered into the kind of liquid consistency which is congenial to flies. Male flies of some species encourage prospective mates by offering them a drop of liquid extruded from their mouthparts: here it is the female who initiates the regurgitatory exchange: 'Ravished over her I lay, full lips full open, kissed her mouth. Yum. Softly she gave me in my mouth the seedcake warm and chewed. Mawkish pulp her mouth had mumbled sweetsour of her spittle. Joy: I ate it: joy. Young life, her lips that gave me pouting. Soft warm sticky gumjelly lips (Joyce 1986, 144)'. After its climax in the exchange of kisses, the memory suddenly lurches into bathos:

She kissed me. I was kissed. All yielding she tossed my hair.
Kissed, she kissed me.
Me. And me now.
Stuck, the flies buzzed. (Joyce 1986, 144)

The stuck flies are an image both of the inaccessibility of the past, and of Bloom momentarily marooned in his memory of it. Bloom's and Molly's mouths are stuck as sweetly together as the flies are. But, as is suggested by the near-rhyme of the words 'kissed' and 'buzzed', Bloom is also grotesquely stuck to his previous self, despite the disjuncture of the two selves and the moments of time they inhabit: 'Me. And me now. Stuck, the flies buzzed' (Joyce 1986, 144).

The aphrodisiac known as 'Spanish fly' has nothing to do with flies, being made up of the (highly toxic) ground-up bodies *Lytta vesicatoria* (also known as *Cantharis vesicatoria*), an emerald-green beetle which goes by the alternative name of the 'blister-beetle'. But the term 'Spanish fly' has helped to seal the association between flies and sexual desire. Spanish fly was also used as a treatment for infertility in animals. Thomas Blundeville advised the following procedure for a barren mare in his 1566 manual of horse-care:

the cure of barrennesse that cometh through the faulte of the
Matrix or wombe, according to the old wryters is thus. Take a

good handeful of Leekes, stampe them in a mortar, with halfe a Glasse full of wine. Then put therevnto .xij. flyes called of the Appoticaries, *Cantharides*, of diuers coulours if they may be gotten, then strayne al togyther, with a sufficient quantitie of water to serue the Mare therewith two dayes together, by pouring the same into hir nature with a horne or glister pype made of purpose, and at the ende of three dayes next following, offer the horse vnto hir that shoulde couer hir, and immediately after that she is couered, wash hir nature twice together with colde water. (Blundeville 1566, 79)

One of Robert Boyle's correspondents, who was a doctor, wrote to him about the magical reproductive powers of bags of pulverised Spanish fly which he used to draw blisters. About a year after he had left a bag of the insects stuck to the window of a Mrs Cole, she sent him an account of a surprising discovery, which prompted his curiosity:

[C]leaning my chamber window two days since, I took down a paper of Spanish flies you left there ever since my last sickness; and when I opened your paper, there were multitudes of little flies like your old ones; and being afraid of their motion, I hastily and rudely lapped it up again, and put the paper where I had it. Then I grew warm and impatient to see the phoenix from its ashes; she freely offered her man to fetch me the paper, which I accepted of, and then saw with my own eyes, and many others besides myself, thousands of them creeping and crawling about most exactly shaped to the old flies, long and small their wings, as long as their bodies, but of a very faint glittering and shinning [sic] colour. I kept some of them in boxes with fruit and leaves, and they waxed bigger, and the bigger they grew, various colours came on. My children observing my often visiting and feeding my little fry, in my absence destroyed my stock. (Boyle, 2001, 5.401-2)

The sexual associations of flies mean that they were often associated with rejuvenation and resurrection as well as death. A Native American story from the Kwakiutl people of British Columbia tells of the outwitting of a monster called Cannibal-at-North-End-of-World by a wise man, who contrives to burn the monster, his wife and his child into ashes. He takes a small mat and fans the ashes, which fly up in the form of horse-flies and mosquitoes (Boas 1910, 397).



The Game of Telescopes

'We have now followed the Fly from its first appearance upon a dunghill, until it enters the habitations of man and feeds at the tables of monarchs and peasants', wrote James Samuelson at the conclusion of his popular description of the fly (Samuelson 1860, 72). In commuting between different stations and conditions, high and low, the fly represents a kind of convulsion in the idea of value, which makes our ideas of what is foul and what is fair stagger. Abrupt alternations of scale and perspective, of hyperbole and bathos, are often provoked by the figure of the fly. An example is furnished by the end of Lucian's essay on the fly, in which after a paragraph in praise of the 'dog-fly', which is reputed to be long-lived, hermaphroditic, and able to endure an entire winter without food, Lucian breaks off: 'Though I still have a great deal more to say, I will stop talking for fear you may think that, as the saying goes, I am making an elephant out of a fly' (Lucian 1913, 95). It may be that the real, hidden subject of Lucian's praise is the poet himself, who is regarded as insignificant but has unsuspected powers, not least in being able to magnify the minuscule and change the aspects and proportions of things.

More usually, the fly's diminutive size allows it to embody moral reflections on the ultimately pinched nature of human perspectives. In a popular poem entitled 'The Fly's Revenge', published in *The New England Magazine* in 1831, a fly is determined to get even with humanity after having been brushed heedlessly aside, and sets himself to interfering bathetically with the business of the poet, scholar and lover. Finally, he comes to rest on the lens of an astronomer's telescope:

"Now is the time," said he, "my man,
To measure the fly from head to heel!
Number the miles, and if you can,
Name the planets that I conceal!...

"I'll tell the world of this comic scene;
And how they will laugh to hear that I,
Small as you think me, can stand between
You and your view of the spacious sky!" (H.F.G. 1831, 520)

Ted Hughes's portrait of a crane fly struggling against imminent extinction similarly focusses on the extremes of scale which the moribund insect prompts. Though rendered in magnified, magnificent close-up ('Her jointed bamboo

fuselage,/Her lobster shoulders, and her face/Like a pinhead dragon, with its tender moustache,/And the simple colourless church windows of her wings'), the dwindling crane fly focusses a failure of commensuration:

The calculus of glucose and chitin inadequate
To pilot her through the infinities of the stems.

The frayed apple leaves, the grunting raven, the defunct tractor
Sunk in nettles, wait with their multiplications
Like other galaxies. (Hughes 2003, 332)

The Czech poet Miroslav Holub makes the fly the vehicle for a meditation on the intertwining of incompatible perspectives. Flies accompany everything that occurs in the human world, their small, repetitive cycles of life and death carrying on insistently and indifferently amid the grand and blaring events of history:

She sat on a willow trunk
watching
part of the battle of Crécy,
the shouts,
the gasps,
the groans,
the tramping and the tumbling.

During the fourteenth charge
of the French cavalry
she mated
with a brown-eyed male fly
from Vadincourt.

She rubbed her legs together
as she sat on a disembowelled horse
meditating
on the immortality of flies.

With relief she alighted
on the blue tongue
of the Duke of Clervaux. (Holub 1987, 52)

George Szirtes is also prompted, in a poem entitled 'The Flies', to what he calls 'the game of telescopes' (Szirtes 1991, 7). The poem sets the the warm, proximate perspective of the winter fly, roused by the heat of the radiator and fuddling and fizzing on the writer's window pane, against the chilly abstraction of what lies beyond the windowpane:

He can't stop
and think. His legs are small machines

that run until run down. I let him out.
The dot grows quickly smaller, disappears
in detail, in the dappled air. (Szirtes 1991, 7)

As so often, the putative perspective of the fly effects a reverse telescoping of human activity and value, as against the weather of the world, which seems equally indifferent to flies and to humans:

It's not the business of weather to be kind
nor of the market visitor to count the cost
of gypsies and of peasants.

Eternal polished faces a few streets off,
clutching embroidery or dogs for sale,
their arguments and raucous cries
exhorting us to buy the useless stuff
of lives which from here quickly lose their scale,
grow small and disappear like flies. (Szirtes 1991, 8)

Flies effect and are associated with the shifting or instability of perspective, particularly with regard to vision. The powers and limits of vision are a leading theme in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, in which the struggle for possession of the magnifying power of Piggy's spectacles is central to the text. Piggy's glasses represent not just reason, but reach, the possibility of operating at long range, in space and time, and the power of thinking through effects and consequences. Since the principal use of the glasses is to start the signal fires, the boys rely on them to keep open the possibility of contact with the civilised world they have left behind (though, for decades, sticklers have delighted in pointing out that the glasses provided to correct short sight like Piggy's cannot easily be used to focus the sun's rays). The condition of the glasses parallels the move from assisted long-sight to the immediate gratifications of instinct and appetite. Even at the beginning of the novel, Piggy's glasses are bleared (we see

him naked and dripping at the beginning of the novel cleaning them with a sock - Golding 1996, 19). Later, one lens is smashed, reducing the depth of field available via stereoscopic vision. Finally, they are destroyed altogether. The visionary Simon is given the recognition that whatever 'the Beast' is of which the children are afraid, it does not have its lair on top of the mountain, or at the far end of the island, where they go searching for it, but is much closer to home.

The flies that feature in the title themselves come into the novel's field of view only intermittently. The book pits signals against noise, with signals depending upon the establishment and articulation of various kinds of distance: the visual signal represented by the fire on the mountain, and the auditory signal represented by the conch. Against this, there is the principle of inchoate noise, which is at once dispersed and indistinct. The loss of perspective and parallax is associated with the growing dominion of the flies in the novel. The descent of the boys into savagery is marked by the replacement of the island's voluptuously exhibitionist butterflies with the sinisterly sonorous flies. Early in the novel, the boys look down from the top of the mountain, where '[t]he air was thick with butterflies, lifting, fluttering, settling' (Golding 1996, 37). The butterflies are seen again, dancing, preoccupied, in the clearing where the boys kill a sow (168-9). Once the pig's head has been set up on a stick, the vivid spectacle of the butterflies gives way to 'the buzzing of flies over the spilled guts' (Golding 1996, 169) and, by the time Simon is left alone with the talking head, '[e]ven the butterflies deserted the open space where the obscene thing grinned and dripped' (Golding 1996, 170). The flies in the novel are heard indirectly too, in the inchoate murmurings, humming and buzzings of the boys (Golding 1996, 29, 43, 90), against which Ralph and Piggy must struggle to be heard: ' "If you don't blow we'll soon be animals anyway. I can't see what they're doing but I can hear." The dispersed figures had come together on the sand and were a dense black mass that revolved. (Golding 1996, 115). And when the head of the pig, buzzing with flies, seems to speak to Simon, in the prelude to his seizure, it insists on this closeness: ' "You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?" ' (Golding 1996, 177).

The fly's diminutive size has often encouraged assumptions that its capacity to suffer must be proportionately reduced. Thus, we might say of someone that 'he would not hurt a fly', implying that he would not even inflict the tiny amount of suffering that a fly is capable of. Not everyone has subscribed to this view of the fly's capacity for suffering. Samuel Beckett's French poem 'La

Mouche' sets the fly in a large landscape the better to highlight and intensify its suffering:

between the vista and me
the pane
empty but for it

belly down
strapped in its black guts
crazed antennae, bound wings
legs crooked mouthparts sucking on emptiness
slashing the blue crushed against the invisible
under my helpless thumb it convulses
sea and quiet sky (Beckett 1977, 43)

Interrupting the view, the fly becomes the spectacle. We do not know why the thumb is pressing down on it - whether to effect slow and gratuitous torture, or to put it, as the pat phrase has it, out of its misery (or out of ours). Crushed against the pane, the fly seems magnified, precisely through being the only item in view. By the end of the poem, it has suddenly expanded to cosmic proportion, capsizing the relations between near and far, small and large, local and universal.



Never Identical In Shape

The evil or diabolic reputation of flies that I discussed earlier has a deeper determination. For flies have long been regarded as questionable or dubious forms: as the form of the unformed, the figure of the faceless. Flies are neither one nor many: though, as Deleuze and Guattari observe, they are intrinsically multiple, like maggots and wolves, their swarms are simply the aggregations of individuals, rather than molar formations like ants-nests or bee-hives (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 239). Flies, like ticks, maggots and fleas, were believed for many centuries to be spontaneously generated from purulent matter. The belief in spontaneous generation was often linked to the belief that it produced imperfect creatures, creatures that do not belong to the domain of created nature. Aristotle assumed that, although such creatures could copulate and reproduce, they could never reproduce themselves identically:

But whensoever creatures are spontaneously generated, either in other animals, in the soil, or on plants, or in the parts of these, and when such are generated male and female, then from the copulation of such spontaneously generated males and females there is generated a something - a something never identical in shape with the parents, but a something imperfect. For instance, the issue of copulation in lice is nits; in flies, grubs; in fleas, grubs egg-like in shape; and from these issues the parent-species is never reproduced, nor is any animal produced at all, but the like nondescripts only. (Aristotle 1910, V.1, 539^a-539^b)

The fly itself has often been thought to be as careless a construction as it seems to be in its manner of life. In his *Elementary Sketches of Moral Philosophy*, Sydney Smith drew a contrast between the extraordinary purposiveness of the bee-hive and the distracted frivolity of the house-fly:

Nature has chosen that some animals should be more accurate and fine in their habits; others more careless, lax, and inattentive. Upon some, she seems to have bestowed vast attention: and to have sketched out others in a moment, and turned them adrift. The house-fly skims about, perches upon a window or a nose, breakfasts and sups with you, lays his eggs upon your white cotton stockings, runs into the first hole in the wall when it is cold, and perishes with as much unconcern as he lives. (Smith 1856, 231-2)

There is a traditional contrast between the apparent casualness of the fly's form and the perfection of man, a contrast that it is equally traditional to invert:

I stand and wonder, pausing mid the trees,
And question what they purpose - worm and fly;
Unbeautiful; and made, it seems, to tease,
And weary ear and eye.

Does Nature blunder into forms? Does she
Count these as true expressions, - fly and worm?
And Man? - perhaps her one mistake is he -
Slow-toiling out his term. (Madison 1912, 117-8)

As an imperfect creature, the fly was apt to be seen as an anomaly in creation. Flies presented a particular problem for early Christians like Origen, who could

not believe that God could be responsible for their creation. Origen wrote a book which argued vigorously against the arguments maintained by Celsus, a Platonist and opponent of Christianity who wrote at the end of the second century (and who some believe may have been a friend of the satirist Lucian, whose encomium in favour of the fly we have already encountered). Where Celsus proposed a syncretic philosophy of a divine principle or Logos spread ubiquitously through the universe, dwelling in everything, and encompassing even demons, Origen evidently regards it as enough simply to mention the fly and other lowly creatures to show the absurdity of this view:

It follows from Celsus's remark that if the world is God, everything in it is divine as being parts of the world. According to this conception even animals will be divine, flies, fleas, worms, and every kind of snake. Not even those who maintain that the world is God hold that view. (Origen 1965, V.7, 269)

Augustine, by contrast, saw in the exquisite contrivance of the fly's body a proof of the unsurpassable power of the Lord God. His scornful reminder that Egyptian wise men and natural philosophers were unable to defend themselves against the plague of flies, despite their tininess, would become traditional in later Christian writing:

Pharoah's magicians also made serpents, and other similar things. Yet it is more of a wonder that, when it came to making the tiniest flies, the power of those who could make serpents failed them utterly. For the midges [*scyniphes*] which in the third plague fell upon the Egyptian people in their pride, were the most short-lived little flies. And yet there the impotent magicians said 'This is the finger of God.' (Augustine 1845, III.7, col. 875. My translation.)

The writer of the 1676 *Doctrine of Devils* follows Augustine in arguing for the fly as the limit of the simulating power of the Egyptians. Though they had the power to make pieces of wood look like snakes, or frogs or toads

when it came to smaller or lesser Things and Corpuscles, as Flies and Lice (the Painting, Colouring, or effigiating the like, they were not formerly acquainted with); and to things of another Nature (and a greater number of them also expected): Their Weakness, and Knavery, or (as the Apostle styles their Juggl's) their Foolery was manifest to all Men. (Anon 1676, 114)

The Origenian view held sway against the Augustinian for nearly 1500 years, though with the balance swinging slowly towards the latter. Roger Bacon followed Augustine in taking the fly as the emblem of the unknowable complexity of God's creation:

on account of the great difficulty besetting our intellect it is certain that never, before God is seen face to face, shall a man know anything with final certainty. Therefore if he lived through infinite ages in this mortal state, he would never arrive with certainty at the perfection of wisdom in the multitude of things knowable. For no one is so learned in nature that he knows how to be certain in regard to all the truths involved in the nature and properties of a single fly, nor does he know how to give the particular reasons for its color, and explain why it has so many feet, neither more nor less, nor can he give a reason for its members and properties. (Bacon 1928, I.10, I.24)

It was not until access to microscopes made the complexity of insects directly apparent to the eye that insects began regularly to be represented as proof of the glory of God's providential creation, as in this passage from the eighteenth-century observer Henry Baker:

Nothing seems now more contrary to Reason, than that *Chance* and *Nastiness* should give a Being to Uniformity, Regularity and Beauty...that dead corrupting Matter, and blind uncertain Chance, should create living Animals, fabricate a Brain, constitute Nerves issuing from it, compose a Contrast of Muscles, furnish out Eyes, Lungs, a Heart, a Stomach, Bowels, and all other Parts useful to such Creatures: and that too not after an awkward, slovenly, variable, undesigning, and unfinished Manner, but with a Contrivance, Dexterity, Elegance, Perfection, and Constancy, beyond the utmost Power of Art to imitate. (Baker 1742)

By the end of the nineteenth century, few would have regarded the fly as an anomaly in the scheme of nature. One exception was Mark Twain, who in an essay entitled 'Flies and Russians', written between 1904 and 1905, while Twain was following the events of Russo-Japanese war in hopes of seeing the Czarist regime come to an end, insisted on the uselessness of the fly.

It is possible that at the time the idea of creating the Russian nation was first conceived, the grotesque nature of the result was

not clearly foreseen. I think that this is the honorable view to take of it. It was so with the fly. It would not be right for us to allow ourselves to believe that the fly would have been created if the way he was going to act had been fully known beforehand. I think we may not doubt that the fly was a disappointment. I think we have reason to believe that he did not come up to expectations. This argument justifies us in surmising that it is the same with the Russians...Nature has made many and many a mistake before she added flies and Russians, and always she corrected them as soon as she could. She will correct this one too - in time. (Twain 1972, 422, 423)

Twain is responding here to the new understanding that grew up during the 1890s of the involvement of various forms of diptera (mosquito, tsetse fly) in the transmission of disease. This brought about a brief but intense intermission in the growing acceptance of the fly into God's creation. While the fly might now be acknowledged to belong fully and honorably to nature, it nevertheless became the object of a fear and hatred that had never been seen before. Some temperate and even sceptical voices were also to be heard. G.S. Graham-Smith concluded a long and careful survey of the available evidence by saying that 'The filth-carrying capacity and foul associations of the house-fly have been clearly demonstrated, but prolonged and careful observations are yet required before we are in a position to understand its exact relationship to disease under varying circumstances' (Graham-Smith 1914, 263).. Charles V. Chapin protested in 1910 that 'there is no evidence that in the average city the house fly is a factor of great moment in the dissemination of disease' (quoted Howard 1912, 140). But most people were quickly won over. The apocalyptic language of F.W. Fitzsimmons's *The House Fly: A Slayer of Men* of 1915 is typical of attitudes towards the fly during this period: "The House Fly has the world in its grip. Arise! Ye leaders of the human folk and declare WAR - aye! War to the death against this terrible enemy which is mowing down the flower of your people' (Fitzsimmons 1915, 86). Though it may be acknowledged that 'the House Fly is one of Nature's sanitary service', only annihilation would do: 'The wolf and the hyaena had to go, and so, too, must the House Fly' (Fitzsimmons 1915, 44, 47).

Ironically, the fly, or at least its maggots, also began to reveal therapeutic uses. Napoleon's medical officer during his Egyptian campaign reported on the surprisingly beneficial uses of blow-fly larvae in treating wounds:

When they were suffering from the suppuration of their wounds, these injured men were troubled by the worms or larvae of the blue fly [presumably the blow-fly], which is common in this climate. These insects, which appeared in a few hours, developed with such speed that, from one day to the next, they had grown to the size of a small pen nib; this was terrifying for our soldiers, despite all the reassurance we tried to offer them. They could only be convinced by experience that, far from being bad for their wounds, these insects in fact accelerated the process of scar-formation, by shortening the work of nature. (Larrey 1829, I.51-2)

This recalls older stories of Mayan Indians who exposed beef blood to the sun in order to produce maggots which were then applied to wounds to help them heal. G.K. Dunbar reported that when he was a boy, probably during the 1920s, he saw that among the Ngemba aboriginal people of New South Wales 'the blow-fly larva was employed to cleanse a wound which suppurred and became more or less gangrenous', adding 'Apparently this was an ancient practice' (Dunbar 1944, 177).

The centrality of the fruit-fly, *Drosophila melanogaster*, to the development of genetics during the twentieth century has also helped to rehabilitate the fly. The first wave of genetic investigation, up until the Second World War, was concerned principally with understanding the mechanics of genetic inheritance. After the War, the fruit fly found a new use, as biologists turned their attention to the process that controlled the growth and development of individual organisms. One of the most important breakthroughs in this area was made by Edward Lewis, who, working at Caltech in the late 1940s, became interested in the processes that caused a mutation known as *bithorax*. In this mutated form, a fly developed a second pair of wings where the next section of its body, normally containing the halteres, or residual wings, ought to be. In effect, an entire segment of the fly's thorax had been omitted and replaced by an exact copy of the segment next to it. Lewis made a number of important discoveries from his work on this mutation. First of all, he established that the development of the fly was governed by a small number of control genes, which switched on and regulated the operations of a large number of other genes. In 1957, he demonstrated that these genes were arranged in the chromosome in the same order that they were activated along the body axis during development, a feature known as the colinearity principle.

His work was carried forward by Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard and Eric Wieschaus, who came together in 1978 at the European Molecular Biology

Laboratory at the University of Heidelberg. They set out to map the entire process whereby the formation of the fly's body was regulated. Their technique was again centred on mutations. They reasoned that mutations in genes which were crucial to the embryo's development would be lethal, and so undertook a massive exercise in the screening of *Drosophila* embryos to find dead embryos with segmentation defects. In identifying these mutations, they would also be identifying the key areas of structural determination, or the control genes which regulated the whole of the fly's development. 'I loved working with flies. They fascinated me, and followed me around in my dreams', wrote Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard in the autobiography she supplied on the occasion of the Nobel Prize she would later be awarded jointly with Lewis and Wieschaus (Nüsslein-Volhard). This is scarcely surprising, given the circumstances whereby she and her colleague undertook their 'saturation screening', sitting opposite each other, sifting, one gene at a time, through slideful after slideful of *Drosophila* embryos, looking for these mutations. Their patience and boldness seem the more admirable, given that they had no notion at the beginning of their work how many of these key genes there would turn out to be. In the end, it was a surprise to discover that only 15 genes were involved.

An even greater surprise was to find how conservative evolution has been in its use of DNA. The compound eye of insects and the lens eye of mammals are so different in structure and function that it has been widely assumed that they must have evolved separately. But in 1994, a gene was found in *Drosophila* the absence of which inhibits the formation of eye-cells: a very similar gene was shown to operate in a similar way in mice and humans. Since then, it has become clear how much complex organisms like human beings have in common with *Drosophila*. One of the molecules which patterns fly development is known as 'hedgehog', so-called because fly embryos lacking this molecule are covered in tiny bristles. Basal cell carcinoma, a form of human skin cancer, is caused by a fault in the human version of the hedgehog molecule (Ainsworth 2002, 3). Sometimes these relations are more indirect. A team of Japanese researchers discovered in 1999 that 75% of men suffering from mood or panic disorders had a mutation in a human gene (hW) which is homologous to the gene mutation which turns the normally red eyes of a fruit fly white - the mutation that first caught the attention of the biologist Thomas Henry Morgan at Columbia in 1910 and began modern genetic research. They suggest that the link may have to do with the action of the amino acid tryptophan, which is altered in flies with the white mutation. If this same genetic fault hinders the uptake of tryptophan in humans, this may explain why sufferers from this problem experience distressing emotional instability, for tryptophan is used in humans to make serotonin, the neurotransmitter which controls mood.

(Nakamura et. al. 1999, 155-62). Indeed, researchers looking for equivalents in *Drosophila* for 289 of the genes implicated in causing disease in humans have found matches in 177 cases, including genes that play a role in cancers, and disorders of the kidney, blood and immune system.

The physical structure of the DNA molecule had only been identified only a few years when George Langelaan's published his science fiction story 'The Fly', which is focussed upon the dream of teleported matter. When, instructed and in-formed by three decades of experiment and speculation regarding the possibilities of transforming matter at the genetic level, David Cronenberg came to remake the 1958 film that had been made of Langelaan's story, he chose to highlight the function of the transmission of the code. The prominence in *The Fly* of the computer, which analyses and recomposes the matter placed in Brundle's teleporter, represents form as a matter of information, transmitted through various media. Viewed in this way, the story of *de trop* is not so much about a metamorphosis or invasion of one form by another, as about the interruption or scrambling of a transmission: the fly complicates the ideal short-circuit whereby Brundle attempts to send himself to himself. Bruce Clarke suggests that stories and films of metamorphosis like 'The Fly' are inherently self-referential: they are always also allegories of the media through which they are communicated' (Clarke 2002, 173). A comment made by Cronenberg suggests that film, as the medium in which this mediated transformation is to be shown, may be implicated in biological process:

I had a dream that I was watching a film and the film was causing me to grow old fast. The movie itself was infecting me, giving me a disease, the essence of which was that I was ageing. Then the screen became a mirror in which I was seeing myself age. That's what I'm talking about, more than any puny virus... We've all got the disease - the disease of being finite. (Rodley 2002, 148).

This dream seems to be alluded to in a couple of scenes in Cronenberg's film, in which Seth Brundle looks at himself in a mirror, to see parts of his body, fingernails, teeth, horrifyingly fall away.



His Dizzy Nibs

What, after all, does the fly mean? The fly means - meaninglessness. How, if the fly discomposes composition, is the fly either to be written, or kept away

from writing? If a Freudian unconscious spectacularly disarrays understanding by surging up through the fabric of everyday meaning, then the fly effects a minor disturbance of coherence, The fly is a sort of lateral or diagonal unconscious, which does not so much alienate us as distract us - literally draw us aside - from ourselves. Perhaps even this is too dramatic. For it is precisely seriousness from which the fly distracts us. The fly means the lure, the ridiculous, imperious demand not of meaninglessness (which has grandeur and shape and destiny), but of insignificance.

The principle of discomposure represented by flies is dramatised in Paul Goodman's poem 'Flies'. The poet begins by congratulating himself on his self-possession:

I flicked these flies impatiently away
and suddenly I knew
how I could lie there like a cow
indifferent to flies: "They don't sting.
The whispering tickling is a sensation
like any other — like the soft trade wind.
I need not choose to be annoyed
by tiny toes —" (Goodman 1973, 431)

So confident is the speaker of his capacity to deal with the intolerable tickling, that he allows himself a reverie of 'your/wandering fingertips along my shoulders/and on my forehead'. At this point, he is restored to himself, but a self who is no longer so serenely immune to the attentions of the flies. Troubled by the titillations of fingertips that are not there, he is unable to bear with equanimity the ticklings of the flies who are: 'I went from the mistaken to the stupid./Couldn't really stand the flies and I went in.' (Goodman 1973, 431) . The poem that began with the calm assurance of being able to resist the minor distraction of the flies must defend itself from the amplifying power of that minority by breaking off.

The killing of flies, which ought to release the poet to concentrate on his or her poem, is sometimes represented as its undoing. Vernon Scannell's poem 'Killing Flies' describes the attempt to silence the 'black hum/And accidental mischief' of flies which are stopping him concentrating on his 'pompous play/With words that twist and tease'. The truncheon of rolled-up paper he forms does its work, translating the flies 'from busy bodies into dark/Smudges on my wall'. But the freedom from the flies' teasing also kills off the poem. The

poet goes back to his desk: 'To where my words like insects bled/And dried upon their paper shroud,/All dead, unquestionably dead' (Scannell 1993, 43).

Flies are useful for poems and poets who are seeking to embody distraction itself, the state of not being able to find quite the right words, or get things securely in focus. When Christopher Reid sees a fly trying to get through a glass pane, it becomes an image of the opacity of the obvious in reading:

A fat fly fuddles for an exit
at the window-pane.
Bluntly, stubbornly, it inspects it,
like a brain
nonplussed by a seemingly simple sentence
in a book. (Reid 1996, 28)

Similarly, Galway Kinnell's poem 'Flies' finds its own form in the whizzing, not-quite-in-focus intermittency of the flies which keep disturbing its concentration, while suggesting that flies are bred from the process of concentration itself:

When a person sits concentrating hard,
flies often collect in one spot, in a little bunch,
not far from the brain, and fly through each other. (Kinnell 1994,
68)

The fly is difficult to get at, the poem suggests, not because it is out of reach, but because it is too close:

When I swat and miss,
the fly sometimes flies to the fly swatter,
getting out of striking range by going deeper
inside it, like a child hugging the person who has just
struck her. (Kinnell 1994, 68)

As we see them 'in a shaft/of sunlight in the barn, going over an intricacy', they form a shape for uncertain shapelessness itself. The poem multiplies memories, quotations and historical bits of fly-lore, as a way of trying to lay a tongue or finger on its own infuriatingly elusive preoccupations:

I think I have a fly inside me.
It drones through me,
at three A.M., looking for what stinks,

the more stinking the better, a filth heap
 old or new, some regret, or guilt, or humiliation,
 and finds it, and feeds, waking me,
 and I live it again. ..
 I do not think this fly will ever go.
 It feels like part of me, and it might not leave
 until I rattle out a regret
 sufficient to the cause and close the account. (Kinnell 1994 70-1)

In fly poems, the fly's buzz often features as the rival to composition, that which strives to prevent the formation of the words that have nevertheless unaccountably precipitated themselves beneath the reader's eyes. In his poem 'A Task Ad Libitum', in which he protests against being asked to write a poem without being provided with a theme, Hartley Coleridge contrasts the music of the spheres and the 'low sweet melody' that runs through nature to the grinding discord of poetry ground out to order: 'the weary drone/Of half-forgotten lays, like buzzing night-flies,/Thwarting the drowsiness themselves produce' (Coleridge 1851, I.42). Austin Dobson complains in similar terms of the distractions of trying to work in town:

There is that woman again:
 "Strawberries! fourpence a pottle!"
 Thought gets dry in the brain;

Ink gets dry in the bottle.

"Strawberries! fourpence a pottle!"
 Oh for the green of a lane!—
 Ink gets dry in the bottle;
 "Buzz" goes a fly in the pane!

Oh for the green of a lane,
 Where one might lie and be lazy!
 "Buzz" goes a fly in the pane;
 Bluebottles drive me crazy! (Dobson 1913, 412)

Flies suspend, interpose and interrupt. They occupy empty intervals, or evacuate the spaces they occupy of sense and purpose. They feature in the moated grange where Tennyson's Mariana paces up and down, awaiting the arrival of her lover, and wishing she were dead: 'All day within the dreamy house,/The doors upon their hinges creak'd;/The blue fly sung in the pane!'

The fly's sound suggests something out of place, *de trop*, but is also a provocation to melody, sense and orderly consequence. 'We discern not in their buzz/Language, but the poet does', as Charles Stuart Calverley notes in a comic poem about the tormenting to death of a poet by the 'brisk unmeaning buzz' of a 'Vaticide' fly who will not let him sleep (Calverley 1901, 132).

Just as the sound of the fly is a noisome spoiling of a poem's euphony, the body of the fly can mar the materiality of the page. Flies are distractingly comparable to the marks on the page that become animated as words, and just as often can indicate the relapse of those words into mere inky accident. 'Sometimes they alight on my writing-fingers', writes Kinnell, 'as I form letters that look like drawings of them/or sit on the typewriter watching the keys hit' (Kinnell 1994, 68). Getting these marks on to the page is often compared to swatting flies:

I swat,
flailing at the window almost without aiming,
until the windowsill, and the big, open
Webster's First, and the desk and part of the floor
are speckled with their paltry remains,
strewn thick as the human dead in the Great War. (Kinnell 1994,
71)

In his poem 'Luther to a Blue-Bottle Fly (1540)', Eugene Lee-Hamilton dramatises Luther's famous dislike for flies:

Ay, buzz about my Bible. But I wot,
Unless thou wish to shrivel, thou'lt not dare
To settle on the page, thou live blue blot! (Lee-Hamilton 1888, 48)

In his poem 'Religio Laici', Dryden reverses the usual metaphor: instead of the fly making the page illegible, the promiscuous readings to which the Bible has been subjected produces a wriggling corruption of the text, which then multiplies its own pestilential readers:

While crowds unlearn'd, with rude devotion warm,
About the sacred viands buzz and swarm,
The fly-blown text creates a crawling brood;
And turns to maggots what was meant for food. (Dryden 1956-
96, 2.121)

The idea that reading, or the attention of critics and commentators, might constitute infestation recurs in a letter of Keats of 1819 to his brother and sister, as he considers giving up writing poems in order to train as a doctor: 'it's not worse than writing poems, and hanging them up to be fly-blown on the Review shambles' (Keats 1947, 312-3).

Not all writers have found flies this kind of enemy to the concentration needed for writing. Goethe's poem 'The Musagetes' (1798) complains that neither the Muses of the winter nor the nightingales of the spring have been able to rouse him from his bed to begin work. In the summer, by contrast, 'I am tickled from my slumber/By a fly that's up and busy'. In a trochaic metre that mimics the fly's relentlessness (Christopher Middleton's translation skilfully preserving the original), Goethe concludes 'I owe to these vexatious/Insects many a golden moment', and celebrates the insects as 'Bonafide Musagetes', in reference to the title 'leader of the Muses' more usually applied to Apollo (Goethe 1983, 153). And sometimes the entry of the fly on the scene of writing can be the making rather than the breaking of the poem. A fly features among the four insect visitors to Thomas Hardy's writing desk in 'An August Midnight': 'mid my page there idly stands/A sleepy fly, that rubs its hands'. Although the insects seem to mar the writing - 'My guests besmear my new-penned line' - they also draw the poem together into epiphanic unity: 'Thus meet we five, in this still place/At this point of time, at this point in space' (Hardy 2001, 146-7).

Ciaran Carson's distinguished contribution to the zoopoetic tradition I have been considering is a meditation upon the Latin tag 'Graecum Est: Non Legitur', which, as his own note explains, means 'This is Greek: not to be read', and was placed against certain words in medieval manuscripts as permission to the reader to skip them. The hard word in the poem is identified with a fly, who intrudes upon the writing of the poem, its intrusion providing the poem's beginning:

The fly made an audible syzygy as it dive-bombed
through the dormer
And made a rendezvous with this, the page I'm writing
on. It was its karma.

This tsetse was a Greek to me, making wishy-washy
gestures with its hands. (Carson 1996, 45)

'Syzygy' and 'tsetse' are a thyming pair of onomatopoeias (though the word 'tsetse', probably from the Southern African language Tswana, or possibly from

tsiisi, the word for flies in the Luyia language spoken around Lake Victoria, combines with the setting of the poem in an attic or 'dormer' to hint at sleeping-sickness). The first of these words, which is indeed Greek, from *syzygia*, a yoke, or pair, has as its primary meaning a conjunction or alignment of celestial bodies. But, fittingly, perhaps, this meaning is itself conjoined with others. In classical prosody, it means the combining of two metrical feet into another single metrical unit. In Gnostic theology, a syzygy refers to a pairing of opposites, such as male and female, a usage taken up by Carl Jung, who used it to refer to the union of the psychological principles of animus and anima (Jung 1969, 11-22). In this poem, the word also seems to be autoreferential, in that it imitates both the buzzing sound and the zigzag blitz of the fly's movement.

But perhaps the most relevant meaning for the word syzygy is from biology. A syzygy is a name for two fused organisms, as most remarkably in the case of *Diplozoon paradoxum*, a parasite of minnows and other freshwater fish. The larva of this species is called a diporpa. It does not become adult, nor is it capable of sustained independent life, unless it comes together with another diporpa, at which point the two will coalesce in an X-shaped organism, which will share an intestine and develop two sets of interconnected genitalia. Carson's poem seems to enact just such a conjunction of two organisms, as the hand of the poet finds in the buzzing and dithering of the fly about the room not distraction but clarification, insofar as it gives a form to his distraction. The end of the poem pays tribute to the fly, which is both itself nourished by the blot of ink at which it drinks and seems to lubricate the stuttering, scratching inscription of the words of the poem.

The candle guttered.

My enormous hand was writing on the wall. The words
began to stutter

As the quill ran out. *Syzygy*: His dizzy Nibs was
back. I took on board more ink.

He staggered horse-like towards the blue blot I'd
just dropped. Then he began to drink. (Carson 1996, 45)

As 'His dizzy Nibs', the fly both lords it over the writing, and is its co-compositor. The minor genre of the fly-poem allows writers to implicate the fly in its own writing, in the very principle of distraction or discomposure that it embodies. Whether the ointment be theological, mechanical, or poetic, the fly is always sizzling somewhere in it.



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