On William Blake's Poem "The Fly"

by

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William Blake's poem, "The Fly," from his *Songs of Experience,* exemplifies both the power and the limitations of language. This short poem is both engaging and puzzling. One critic stated, "This simple little poem has received a great amount of critical attention that ranges through the entire spectrum of interpretation" (Connolly 33). The poem is engaging in its simplicity and seeming insightfulness, yet the evidence of critical comment suggests its meaning for the reader is dependent on the personal context brought to the reading of the poem.

I have found the poem often captures the attention of university-level students who have occasion to read it. There are many possible reasons for this. A major reason seems to be the poem's apparent expression of sympathy with a life form beyond the human. In this instance the lower life form is that of a creature usually considered an unwanted pest, a fly. Perhaps the students identify with the creature, and thus are pleased to find an expression of sympathy for it. In addition, one notes many university-level students today exhibit a personal sense of alienation. Moreover, one notes among many students a far-reaching concern for the natural environment. Then, too, possibly feeling largely powerless to alter the course of things, the students might well also share the seeming fatalism of the speaker in the poem. This particular reaction might not be the kind Blake intended, but may be appropriate to today's cultural climate.

In a postmodern era of becoming, in which interpretations are indeed multiple, any attempt convincingly to "fix" Blake's intent with this poem for all is likely doomed to futility. It is doubtful many persons today are inclined to view Blake as having the status of high priest to the human race. Writers of creative literature do not now tend to have such status in society. No impending moment hangs on the interpretation of

this poem, yet it serves as an engaging stimulant to thought about the nature of both life and death.

The critic, Thomas E. Connolly, argues that the poem has two speakers. Of the two he says this:

> The [initial] "I" speaker expresses a Newtonian identity of life and pointless death between the fly and the man (or men). They both materially live and materially die. The universe is unaware and unconcerned. The narrator who intrudes in the fourth stanza sees ultimate existence as thought, not matter, and expresses the externality of mind. Because man has his ultimate existence in the mind of the creator, he is happy (though as insignificant as, and as indistinguishable from, the fly in the total view of things) whether he lives or dies, for he will eternally be present in the mind of the creator. Among the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, this is Blake's most Platonic poem. (36-37)

This conclusion fits well with one's general knowledge of Blake. Yet one can reasonably argue that, although it lives in some circles of human society today, Platonism is not what one can term a central feature of our cultural atmosphere. Many university-level students know nothing about Plato and his thinking. It thus seems not to have any influence on their response to the poem.

A readily supportable overview of what Blake is about in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is that the *Songs of Innocence*, "introduced and sung by the piper," offer us the vision "that in the state of innocence there is, or ought to be, no discipline, no regimentation, no marching, no uniforms, and no guardians–merely free, uninhibited, irresponsible, thoughtless play on the echoing green" (Gleckner 10, 11-12). Such innocence is indeed innocent and not viable in everyday life. On the other hand, a main quality of the human behavior depicted in the *Songs of Experience* is of another extreme. It is represented by the priests of "The Garden of Love," who "bind with briars

love and desire . . . because they are selfish, fatherly [in a domineering sense], cold and usurious, worldly, cruel, humble, hypocritical," (14). Because "The Fly" is included in the *Songs of Experience* we are compelled to view the "I" speaker in the poem as having a place in this company. In placing the persona here Blake seems to direct us to see something wrong in the speaker's view of things.

Peter Ackroyd, recent biographer of Blake, says this of the *Songs of Innocence*:

> These are often poems with an argumentative or satirical intent, and they are emphatically not expressions of lyrical feeling or the spontaneous overflowing of emotion in the conventional "romantic" mode. That is why the *Songs* aspire to be as formal and impersonal as the folk ballads and nursery rhymes from which Blake borrowed; he could thereby dramatise the spiritual significance, as well as the possible deficiencies, of "Innocence" itself. "Unorganized Innocence, An Impossibility," he wrote in one of the margins of his later poems. "Innocence dwells with Wisdom but never with Ignorance." (121)

Ackroyd subsequently says of the *Songs of Experience* that Blake "originally conceived *Songs of Experience* as direct satires of *Songs of Innocence*, poem for poem, but in the process he found more general possibilities of expression" (141). He adds "it is important to remember that Blake never sustained one attitude or tone for very long" (151). Ackroyd states of the *Songs*, "Blake's insistence upon tight rhymes and forms is a way of suggesting the limits of the medium he is employing. . . . This gives his lyrics the power of direct statement, while allowing a dramatic withdrawal from the perceived sentiments of the poetic 'voice'" (141). Thus Ackroyd seems to leave us with considerable latitude in interpreting the *Songs,* including "The Fly."

The life and death involved in the poem are those of a "Little Fly" and those of "A man" (Blake 23; lines 1, 8). That

life and death for each are similar if not identical is suggested by the second stanza of the poem, in which the "man" is speaking:

> Am not I
> A fly like thee?
> Or art not thou
> A man like me? (5-8)

The questions here suggest uncertainty but, on the other hand, the clear inclination of the speaker's thought. The speaker finds himself contemplating life and death not just for himself as a human being but for the fly as well. Indeed there is in the words the suggestion that the speaker's focus is on the general nature of life and death for all organic existence.

This suggestion is enhanced by the third stanza:

> For I dance
> And drink & sing:
> Till some blind hand
> Shall brush my wing. (9-12)

That is, I "dance / And drink & sing" very much as you, Little Fly, did before "some blind hand" (the speaker's own) "brush'd" your wing. The implication is that all life can be seen as an activity characterized by dancing, drinking, and singing, until some force, some "blind hand," puts an end to it. The rich connotations here do invite exploring.

Fundamental to such exploration is a well-grounded comprehension of the setting for the reflection that the speaker offers us. This setting is established by the first stanza:

> Little Fly
> Thy summer's play,
> My thoughtless hand
> Has brush'd away. (1-4)

The image evoked is that of a male who has been bothered by a fly buzzing around him, perhaps even landing on him. To rid himself of an annoyance, the speaker has without thought swiped at the fly with his hand, by chance hitting the fly and thereby killing it. Immediately afterward, this person, not unlike many one has known and can imagine, is struck by the fact of the loss of life and how it came about. He at once sees in the fate of the fly an adumbration of his own, and, by extension, one possible for all living things. Then, apparently prepared intellectually to do so, he moves at once–in stanzas four and five–to a level of generalization that encompasses all of life and death. (I, and I think most general readers, see the words of the poem as consistent for one speaker.)

> If thought is life
> And strength & breath:
> And the want
> Of thought is death;
>
> Then am I
> A happy fly,
> If I live,
> Or if I die. (17-20)

Thus ends the poem.

The lines of the last two stanzas particularly confound and puzzle the reader. On the surface, they equate one's having the capability and opportunity to think with one's not having the capability and opportunity to think. Moreover, they indicate the two states are equal–both states of happiness.

Assuming the poem has but the one speaker, and the one is consistent (a simple, straightforward approach), the reader is confronted with the need to evaluate the speaker as a first step in evaluating what the speaker says. As indicated above, the speaker seems more sensitive than many persons in that the death of a fly causes him pause, and more thoughtful than many in that he readily philosophizes on that death. On the other hand, the

speaker's seeming to characterize life as a process of dancing, drinking, and singing tends to give the reader pause. This attitude seems to be that of an adolescent rather than a mature adult. (This factor is perhaps important to the poem's appeal to university-level students.) Moreover, the reference to the "blind hand" is possibly an exaggeration. Numerous human beings fall victim to chance circumstances–a sudden fatal accident, for example, or the immediate ravages of an earthquake or a tornado. But many die after a protracted decline–of old age itself, or of heart disease, or cancer, for example. There is no really sudden sweep of the hand here. Only in a tenuous way does the "blind hand" reference cover all, including many of the common circumstances of human demise. Thus the emphasis the speaker puts on the "blind hand" also seems somehow adolescent (live hard, die young). Might we therefore say we have a speaker who is sensitive and thoughtful but possibly adolescent (in his late teens, perhaps, a "man" in his own eyes) and as such given somewhat to dramatic overstatement? The speaker's having such a "flaw" is indeed consistent with what we find to be true of other speakers in the other poems included in the *Songs of Experience*: "Experience is hardly Blake's highest and most desired state of existence" (Bloom 14).

In a similar vein, we can say the "blind hand" reference has atheistic connotations, which one has some difficulties associating with Blake himself. The "blindness" does suggest both lack of purpose and lack of concern. Yet in swiping at the fly, the speaker himself seemingly had the purpose of eliminating an annoyance. Also, his pausing to reflect on the resulting death of the fly indicates a realization that the method he used, one fatal to the fly, was not the only one available to him. He might have achieved his purpose with no fatal results. The analogy between himself as implementer of the fly's fate and whatever awaits him as implementer of his own fate evokes an image of a power that is in fact anthropomorphic, capable of caring, of control, of purpose, of vision, but not absolute and infinite in the best of its behavior.

This view of power might be assumed by the atheist who feels responsible for preserving, as best the human being can, himself and the natural environment in which he finds himself. It is not, however, the vision of the ultimate power that is evoked by these later lines of Blake's, from near the end of his *Jerusalem*:

> And I heard Jehovah speak
> Terrific from his Holy Place & saw the Words of the Mutual Covenant Divine
> On Chariots of gold & jewels with Living Creatures starry & flaming
> With every Colour, Lion, Tyger, Horse, Elephant, Eagle, Dove, Fly, Worm,
> And the all wondrous Serpent clothed in gems & rich array Humanize
> In the Forgiveness of Sins according to the Covenant Of Jehovah.
>
> (258; lines 40-45)

We do have in this passage the vision of all life–including the fly's–as a unity seen by the eye of the human mind. To this extent the thinking of the speaker in "The Fly" seems to be properly Blakean. The notion of "blindness" is not appropriate, however. In saying as he does in *A Vision of The Last Judgment*, "The Last Judgment is an Overwhelming of Bad Art & Science" (565), Blake implies that he himself saw there to be overall purpose and direction in ultimate events. Thus the speaker in "The Fly" in his eschatology falls short of being a true Blakean visionary.

Jean Hagstrum has asked rhetorically about Blake's religious views, "What . . . can God be said to be?" And he has answered in this summary:

> Above all else an intellectual achievement, a product of mental fight, of a suffering psyche. He emerges, not in argument or logic but in existential struggle, as a

> person, sometimes in historical record, more often in vision. (425)

In a way, the speaker in "The Fly" seems a person engaged in a mental fight about matters significant–life and death. But the answer he comes up with appears to fall somewhat short of what was ultimately more satisfying for Blake himself.

In his biography of Blake, Ackroyd quotes from a letter Blake wrote late in his own life as he was approaching death. In it Blake refers to "The Real Man The Imagination which Liveth for Ever" (367). After speaking of the recent death of another man, Blake goes on: "[W]e must All soon follow, every one to his Own Eternal House, Leaving the delusive Goddess Nature & her Laws to get into Freedom from all Law of the Members into The Mind, in which everyone is King & Priest in his own House" (367). Such discourse clearly calls into question from Blake's point of view the position of the speaker in "The Fly."

On the other hand, we might ask if we cannot today grant the speaker his on-the-surface notion about life and death and, in fact, congratulate him for his successful exercise of the power of positive thinking. It is positive in that it overcomes any fear of death–for himself and, by implication, all other living creatures, including the little fly he has just done in, though not intentionally. The lines of the poem do not have the speaker absolving himself of guilt for the death of the fly. Instead, the tone of the lines tends to imply, "That's how it goes sometimes!"–for flies, for men, for life in general. The speaker is guilty of the fly's death. The question that subsequently arises in his mind involves the nature of death and whether it–for the fly, for himself, for all life–is something to fear, however caused. He seems to think not, in equating life and death as positively happy states.

Such thinking is not traditional. And, as indicated, it is not ultimately Blakean, other than as an utterance of a dramatic character of Blake's creation. But it is a position regarding life and death that one can intellectually entertain.

A problem with such entertaining is that it forces one to move beyond traditional dualism–in effect, to see body and mind as one. Such thinking does not come readily. One notes the evident traditional dualism in this recent comment on "The Fly":

> At last he [the speaker] seizes on his feeling of thoughtlessness to develop a saving myth: if thought is life and thoughtlessness is death, then if he has thought he is "A happy fly, / If I live, / Or if I die." He responds to his recognition of death by dividing himself into a part that dies, the body, and a part that survives, the mind or soul, and identifying so thoroughly with the soul that it doesn't even seem to matter whether the body is alive or dead.
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> This myth affords the speaker an escape . . . from his fear of death. . . . (Frosch 77-78)

The use of the word "myth" here seems to be pejorative. But Blake himself clearly sanctioned seeing the soul/body dichotomy in terms of soul alone: "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul. . ." (34); "Mental Things are alone Real what is Called Corporeal Nobody Knows of its Dwelling Place. . ." (565). The problem is that the speaker in "The Fly" apparently accepts the notion that a state of thoughtlessness (consciouslessness, soullessness?) is a happy state. Blake seems to have considered the existence of such a state an impossibility, and thus without quality at all, happy or sad. Therefore Blake likely wanted us to see the thinking of the speaker of the poem as wrong, but not exactly in the way the passage of comment quoted above suggests.

In recent years the problem of duality has been approached from the other side. The model here is not the assumption of body into mind but of mind into body. Thus one finds passages such as this:

> [P]ost-modernity must be that which moves beyond. . . divisions in order to establish (or reestablish) a unity

> and integration among all of the many and various separations that have so dominated the world of the recent past. In this regard new developments in science, such as Einstein's relativity theory, Niels Bohr's interpretation of physical properties, quantum mechanics, high energy physics, and unified field theory, have helped the cause of integration a great deal. (Centore 22)

Contributing to the mind-in-body approach and to the effort at integration that this passage suggests are statements such as these:

> [B]y understanding the quantum mechanical nature of human consciousness–seeing consciousness as a quantum wave phenomenon–we are able to trace the origin of [sic] our mental life right back to its roots in particle physics, just as has always been possible when seeking the origin of our physical being. The mind/body (mind/brain) duality in man is a reflection of the wave/particle duality, which underlies all that is. In this way, the human being is a microcosm of cosmic being. (Zohar 100-01)

"I am," says this writer, "made of the stuff of which the universe is made, and the universe shall be made of me" (Zohar 151). Such thinking seems to coalesce with what the speaker in "The Fly" says in stanzas four and five of the poem (if we assume he is the speaker). The tone of the lines quoted immediately above is one of contentment, and the speaker in "The Fly" seems content in suggesting a state of no-thought can be a state of happiness. We might say, that is, that Newtonian materiality is not necessarily an error of thought nor a negative.

What exact intention Blake had in mind in creating the speaker in "The Fly" we cannot know. What words and illustrations he left us are open to interpretation. One's reaction to the poem depends on the personal context one brings to the

reading. Anyone sympathetic to the views stated by the last two writers quoted has difficulty ignoring them when reading "The Fly." The university-level student today is not likely to be very familiar with the direction of some modern scientific thought. He or she is, however, the product of a society that is materialistic in a number of different senses. This is yet another reason, perhaps, for the interest in the poem shown by readers at their age.

Continuing interest in the poem indicates it has relevance yet today. This fact is something of a counter to the complaint that, "[m]agnificent as the best of the *Songs of Experience* are, it is unfortunate that they continue to usurp something of the study that should be given to Blake's more ambitious and greater works" (Bloom 14). The illustration Blake gave the poem I see as appropriate. "The trees are without foliage" (Connolly 37), but there is new life in the young boy and continuing life in the girl, the woman, and whatever is flying in the distance. Life goes on, in its circular fashion. Like the little fly, the leaves of the trees have gone on to another state–which, from the speaker's perspective, is another state of happiness.

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