



William Blake (1757–1827) The Ghost of a Flea (1819–20) Tempera mixture panel with gold on mahogany (21.4 cm × 16.2 cm) Tate, London, England

...a flea

Has smaller fleas that on him prey;
And these have smaller still to bite 'em,
And so proceed *ad infinitum*

—Jonathan Swift, *On Poetry: a Rhapsody* (1733)

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“There was no doubt that this poor man was mad, but there is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott,” remarked William Wordsworth about his fellow poet William Blake. Blake’s own claims to outlandish visions added fuel to rumors of his insanity. As a mere child, he saw God “put his head through the window” and on another occasion, “a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars.” Later in life, when faced with the death of a younger sibling, he saw this brother’s spirit “clapping its hands for joy.”

Blake was a Londoner, born in a spacious old home at 28 Broad Street, Golden Square, the son of a hosier. He never went to school and throughout his life was glad to have escaped formal education, “Improvement makes strait roads; but the crooked roads without Improvement are roads of genius.” His family indulged his talents. “As soon as the child’s hand could hold a pencil it began to scrawl rough likenesses of man or beast and make timid copies of all the prints he came near.” At age 10 he was sent to a fashionable preparatory school for young artists, and at 14, he was apprenticed to Basire, engraver to the Society of Antiquaries, who sent him to draw old monuments, especially at Westminster Abbey. His love of Gothic art dates from this time.

He delighted in the linear nature of monuments for he believed “firm and determinate lineaments unbroken by

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shadows” to be the essence of art. He abhorred chiaroscuro, the art of Venice and Flanders, because its interplay of light and shadow blurred outlines. Linear style was also characteristic of religious art. The spirits he drew, Blake insisted, should be “organized” within determinate and bounding form. Admiration of Greek antiquities and mythology also nurtured his style and subject matter.

For a man who never strayed far from his home town, he became very cultured in the visual arts. In his prime a distinguished printer, painter, poet, and musician, as well as prophet and iconoclast, Blake took education in his own hands. He learned Greek, Latin, and Hebrew to appreciate the classics in the original and invented his own engraving and color preservation techniques. He combined his facility with the word and brush in “illuminated printing,” a technique rooted in the Middle Ages, to bring poetry to the reader through the eye of the poet’s own imagination. Eccentric and nonconformist, he associated with radical thinkers, among them Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Blake’s work was on a small scale and often contained in the pages of books. But his imaginings were boundless. “He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments and in stronger and better light than his perishing and mortal eye can see does not imagine at all.” To him the great art of the world depicted not that seen by the “mortal eye” but a more perfect imagined form. His idiosyncratic approach to life and the individuality of his craft defy labels. While his work places him solidly among the Romantics, some have labeled him a forerunner of modern anarchism.

Many spirits or ghosts Blake drew seemed to derive from his Gothic studies; others were of kings or queens.

The ghost of a flea, on this month's cover, seems that of a demon. This miniature was part of a series of "visionary heads," commissioned by his friend John Varley, landscape painter and astrologer, who believed in spirits but was unable to see them. He was drawn to Blake, who professed to live with them. The two would meet and try to summon spirits of historical or mythologic figures and if they appeared, Blake would draw them. They were angels, Voltaire, Moses, and the flea, which told them that "Fleas were inhabited by the souls of such men as were by nature blood thirsty to excess."

"I called on him one evening and found Blake more than usually excited," Varley reported, "He had seen a wonderful thing—the ghost of a flea!" "And did you make a drawing of him?" Varley asked. "I wish I had," Blake responded, "but I shall, if he appears again! ...There he comes! His eager tongue whisking out of this mouth..." Varley gave him paper and a pencil to draw the portrait. "I felt convinced by his mode of proceedings that he had a real image before him, for he left off, and began on another part of the paper, to make a separate drawing of the mouth of the flea, which the spirit having opened, he was prevented from proceeding with the first sketch, till he had closed it."

Varley described the conception as a "naked figure with a strong body and a short neck—with burning eyes which long for moisture, and a face worthy of a murderer holding a bloody cup in its clawed hands, out of which it seems eager to drink.... I never saw any shape so strange, nor did I ever see any colouring so curiously splendid—a kind of glistening green and dusky gold, beautifully varnished."

Both in his poetry and his art, Blake often personified death, war, famine, and other abstractions, ascribing them faces and human characteristics. The ghost of his flea is muscular, part human part reptile, loaded with symbolic clues of its nature and character. The creature strides theatrically across a stage framed by opulent drapes and sprinkled with stars—Blake's friend and supporter John Linnell made a copy of this drawing for Zodiacal Physiognomy, as a sign of Gemini.

The left hand holds an acorn, the right a thorn. The massive frame scarred by a protruding spine supports a small head, vaguely alluding to the shape of a flea. On the floor near the feet, an insect, the physical embodiment, completes the portrait. Despite claims to a visionary source, this flea recalls the imps of Henry Fuseli (1741–1825), another painter of monsters, and some of Blake's previous work. It could also have been informed by the drawings of early microscopist Robert Hooke (1635–1703), whose illustration of a flea in his book *Micrographia* described it as "adorn'd with a curiously polish'd suite of sable Armour, neatly jointed"

"It's God. / I'd know him from Blake's picture anywhere," Robert Frost's Eve said in "Masque of Reason." Whether he was drawing the Almighty or a tiny insect, Blake captured and uncloaked the unadulterated character of the subject. And whatever the source of his inspiration, it lit and portrayed this character in all its purity.

Not fooled by the tiny creature he tossed on the scene as a reference, Blake knew and spelled out its horrific nature. And he was not alone. The flea was notorious for its pestiferous qualities. They did not escape the attention of Jonathan Swift: "The vermin only tease and pinch / Their foes superior by an inch." John Donne (1572–1631) had exploited the flea's blood-drinking habits in his immortal plea to a mistress, acknowledging the importance of fluid exchange, before the possibility of contagion even entered the equation, "Me it suck'd first, and now sucks thee, / And in this flea our two bloods mingled bee."

The perpetual struggle against these pests inspires poetry to this day: "Fleas / Adam / had'em." The incongruous imbalance between their size and their impact on humanity, shown in no less than their deadly connection with the history of Black Death, is now fully understood. Fleas are known for the vectors of disease they are, spreading in addition to bubonic plague, murine or fleaborne typhus and other rickettsioses in new areas, and still tormenting and killing humans, despite improved diagnostic techniques and treatments. Swift would see no humor in the *ad infinitum* emergence of novel spotted fever strains causing disease in yet more areas. He could not have known that microorganisms, such as rickettsia, infect fleas and through them spread to other animals, in fact becoming what he had lightly referred to as the fleas of fleas.

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