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10. From Vampire to Apollo: William Blake's Ghosts of the Flea (c. 1819-20)

Sibylle Erle

I. Introduction

Blake's flea was first produced as a Visionary Head and exists as a head, a full-length pencil portrait (Figure 10.1), <INSERT FIGURE 10.1 NEAR HERE> and the tempera known as *The Ghost of a Flea*. One year after Blake's death the watercolourist and astrologer John Varley picked two versions of the head to include in *A Treatise on Zodiacal Physiognomy* (1828).¹ In *Zodiacal Physiognomy* Varley (1828, 56-57) puts forth the idea that human faces cannot only be classified according to moral beauty or intellectual capacity as Johann Caspar Lavater and Johann Georg Spurzheim had done, but also according to zodiacal type which inscribed itself at birth. Blake's flea, he claims, is an example for Gemini.

Varley's *Zodiacal Physiognomy* and Blake's Visionary Heads are the two mainstays of a project which involved séance-like meetings at Varley's house. While the lights were still on, Varley's guests would have listened to the stories about the flea. With *The Ghost of a Flea* in front of them, the recitals of the flea's pompous speeches, combined with the fact that it was just a ghost who leered after human blood, Varley's guests may have laughed very heartily, if not in front of him then behind his back. It is more than likely, and many have argued this, that Blake humoured Varley or even made fun of him.² Each evening followed the same protocol. When the lights were off, Varley would call out a name and Blake would look around, suddenly exclaiming 'There he is!' and start drawing. While those present were staring into empty space, Varley would record the time in order to calculate Blake's invisible sitters' ascendants (Curry 1992, 24-26). Even though none

of Blake's Visionary Heads, ranging from Edward I and William Wallace to Wat Tyler's daughter,³ bears a resemblance to existing portraits, Varley believed with all his heart that Blake was drawing the portraits of spirits (Gilchrist [1907] 1998, 270-275). The flea is the most striking of the Visionary Heads, though it is not the only head which exists in different versions. If appearance is elemental to any kind of judgement of one human being of another, then Blake deliberately confused Varley. By working up the sketch, he played on Varley's expectations; he presented him with an extraordinary and very puzzling painting, *The Ghost of a Flea*. But why, if Blake could have chosen any monster, did he settle on the ghost of a flea?

The flea has a heterogeneous-looking body. Taking all of the surviving sketches together, it is impossible to categorize the flea; its appearance is changing and it remains unclear what in the flea can count as animal. Blake, to put this differently, makes it hard to gauge whether human or animal qualities dominate. The figure unsettled Varley, who was always keen to understand what kind of person Blake had sketched. The flea appeared with Gemini rising (Varley 1828, 54), and Varley (1828, 59), on account of its accendant, attributed it with a 'double nature':

Gemini ... represents persons generally best suited for diplomatic pursuits, and who decide readily, but are often double-minded, and consider, with some famous statesmen, that language is useful principally to conceal their thoughts rather than explain them; and are usually considered as being discreet and wise in worldly matters.

This essay argues that the versions of the flea revolve around perceived similarities between humans and animals. Such similarities, rooted in basic human-animal relationships, will be contextualised through the intersecting discourses of astrology, physiognomy and vampirism to explain Blake's artistic choices. Discourses intersect

and proliferate. Interpretation, which revolves around animals as metaphorical or literal referents of human habits, moreover, can be seen to supersede the discourses of the pseudo-sciences of human character, such as physiognomy and phrenology, because all aspects of the flea's character resonate with the emerging literature of vampirism. In the early nineteenth century, this literature is strongly invested in the renegotiation of human-animal interaction as well as the hierarchy between human, superhuman and animal. Blake's flea is a complex statement against attempts at categorisation of character. This essay examines Blake's lasting interest in physiognomy to then determine how the vampire context intervened with both the creation and the reception of *The Ghost of a Flea*.

II. From Physiognomical to Astrological Practices: Representation, Influence and Perception

Anne Mellor (1978, 54) argues that in the late 1810s Blake collaborated with Varley because his interest in physiognomy rekindled after reading either Johann Georg Spurzheim's *Observations on the Deranged Manifestations of the Mind* (1817) or Thomas Holcroft's second edition of his translation of Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1804). A good reason why Blake's flea was inspired by this edition of Holcroft's translation, originally published in three volumes in 1789, is that it included Lavater's *Lines of Animality* (Schögl 1999). In the 1790s, when two different translations of Lavater's physiognomy were published in London, Blake joined the engraver team working under Thomas Holloway on the Hunter translation of *Essays on Physiognomy* (1789-98). He contributed four plates, originating from the French translation, to the multi-volume work.⁴ The Hunter translation is the most expensive and most extensively illustrated edition of any version of Lavater's physiognomy. The

illustrations exceed those of the French and Dutch translations published in the 1780s. In England, the rivalry between the Hunter and the Holcroft translations came to the fore in Henry Fuseli's review, when Fuseli, a supporter of Lavater, close friend and author of the advertisement to the Hunter translation, accused Holcroft of fooling his readers about the importance of man-animal analogies. The abridged version, so Fuseli wrote, did not do justice to Lavater's physiognomical theory. Holcroft's source, the abridged German edition, had almost no man-animal analogies. Lavater had felt uneasy about human-animal resemblances, which is why he agreed to an abridged edition in the first place. He collected a huge number of portraits and examined the faces of the people he met, thinking of the human face as aspiring to the divine image, which precludes any reference to animals (see Erle 2010, 134-163).

Lavater's *Lines of Animality* develops independently and as some kind of thought experiment. While alive, Lavater published it privately and only shared it with his closest friends. It is therefore likely, as suggested by Mellor, that Blake's flea is a result of reading Holcroft, but it is also probable that Blake read Thomas Cooke's *A Practical and Familiar View of the Science of Physiognomy* (1819). Cooke (1819, 179-180) uses the new material from Holcroft and reiterates what Lavater had said about the nose. Varley (1828, 58), too, makes much of the nose in his *Zodiacal Physiognomy*:

With respect to noses, those which turn up at the tip belong generally to persons who have confidence or assurance enough to battle their way well in the world, sometimes threatening more than they intend to do. But the noses which slant downward, belong to very fixed and determined people who exhibit no assurance, but often have very quiet manners, and sometimes very pretty smiles and mock dimples, yet they are not easily put aside from their

purposes, but do much more than they say. Such persons have very often a large high nose, a retreating mouth, and projecting chin. Nos. 5 and 6 partake of this character, and belong also to one of the classes of Gemini.

Listing the shapes of the nose, Varley attributes meaning to different sizes. In this section he reaches the conclusion that Gemini with big noses stand out due to their determination.

Lines of Animality was issued long after Blake was directly involved with the physiognomy project, but the idea of morphological development already exists in the Hunter translation. In the late 1780s Blake, moreover, was working for Fuseli when he agreed to engrave the frontispiece for Fuseli's translation of Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man* (1788). Because of his friendship with Fuseli, Blake would have been closer than most to Lavater and more familiar with his theory. In the advertisement for the Hunter translation, arguing that Lavater's theory accounted for the effects of the minutest of changes on the representation of character, Fuseli states the value of physiognomical theory for artists. Should the profile of Apollo be modified in the slightest, his face would lose its divine look and degenerate into a human face.⁵ The allusion to Apollo may be an acknowledgement of *Lines of Animality*, but within the context of *Essays on Physiognomy* it links to the section on the Greek God in volume two, where Lavater (1789-98, 2:377) enthuses about his favourite statue's perfect face:

The forehead and nose are more energetic, more sublime, more worthy of a god, than in the preceding silhouette. Observe likewise how far removed the contours are from the perpendicular form of the famous Greek heads. ... The breadth of the nose, near its root, becomes here the expression of a dignity

more than human. The eye, considered separately, is not deficient in point of energy; but it almost loses it when placed by the side of that majestic nose.

When seeing his physiognomy through its translations in the 1780s and 1790s, Lavater had shied away from exploring the full extent of morphological change, and yet he continued to study animals, such as insects, horses and elephants. In the Hunter translation when Lavater is analysing animal faces, he teases out the human qualities of their physiognomies, implying that there exists a spectrum of faces. The idea of a spectrum or continuum of faces evolving from animal to human into divine is only hinted at in *Essays on Physiognomy* but spelt out in *Lines of Animality*. The plates of this work outline, according to Lavater, God's creational plan by morphing the face of a frog into that of the Apollo Belvedere. *Lines of Animality* puts human and animal faces on even par, blurring the boundaries between human, animal and divine, because Lavater's continuum maps how the nose becomes the most prominent feature in a face (Lavater 1804, 3:391). Similarly, while the fleas in the pencil drawings have rounded profiles, the nose of the flea in *The Ghost of a Flea* is big and protruding.⁶ That is, the flea in the tempera has its match further up the ascending scale of moral perfection (Bindman 2002, 211).

Blake's sketch of the head (Figure 10.2) <INSERT FIGURE 10.2 NEAR HERE> was engraved after John Varley by John Linnell, who had introduced the two men, and published in *Zodiacal Physiognomy*. The flea-head appears on the right. On the left is another, female and serene-looking Gemini with a slightly angular nose. These Gemini frame the much younger, possibly female face of a Cancer. The implied opposition of the Gemini pair, one female, beautiful and human and the other male, aggressive and animal, may mark the two poles of a psycho-physiological development contained in the Gemini type. There exists, however, another

preparatory sketch done by Varley in 1828. In this sketch Varley renders the outline of the flea, but seems to follow the tempera rather than the pencil sketches because Varley's flea has a more pronounced nose and its tongue is sticking out (Figure 10.3). <INSERT FIGURE 10.3 NEAR HERE> The flea's changing nose, I think, is the main indicator of its increasingly human look. Whether or not this change improved the flea's character remains to be determined. The physiognomists would have assumed it, but Varley eventually returns to Blake's original, the rounded profile in the sketch of the head and, as if to stress its authenticity, adds the caption 'Ghost of a Flea from Blake's vision' (Butlin 2015, 128).

The flea's hybrid body is part of a wider tradition in the visual arts, which Blake would have been familiar with (Bryson 1981, 29-57; Berland 1993, 252-254). Giovanni della Porta and Charles Le Brun especially underline the similarities between humans and animals, when explaining about styles of characterisation.⁷ The Le Brun plates, at least, were in the library of the Royal Academy, and would have been available to be consulted by Blake after he joined the Academy in 1778 (Gilchrist [1907] 1998, 30). In Volume Two of *Essays on Physiognomy* Lavater (1789-98, 2:108) uses images from della Porta but only to discard them. He refutes della Porta's interpretations and distances himself from his practice. But even though he insists that he wants to avoid conceptual contamination, man-animal analogies are deeply ingrained in his vocabulary. While arguing for human virtues embodied in physical beauty, Lavater (1774-1778, 1:434) insists that the visual combination of human and animal features subverts the notion of moral beauty.

Blake's response to Lavater's persistent search for the perfect human form, purged of all animal resemblance, is probably best appreciated in the wider context of satirical prints, because the principles laid out in *Essays on Physiognomy* were

also taken up by the caricaturists. Thomas Rowlandson, for example, was eager to employ man-animal analogies as well as the comic potential of the comparisons in della Porta or LeBrun (Bills 2006, 108-109). By combining human with animal features Blake likewise was able to shift human-animal relationships from a metaphorical to a literal level. With regard to the Visionary Heads this practice may have informed the visionary portrait of the assassin in 'Saladin, and the Assassin, two drawings' (c. 1819-20). 'The Assassin laying dead at the feet of Ed.^{wd} 1st in the holy land' is the inscription (Keynes 1970, no. 69). The assassin had disguised himself as a Christian and attacked King Edward with a poisoned dagger (Butlin 1981, cat. no. 728). The drawing shows him dead and with a head resembling that of a lion. Blake may have associated this assassin's behaviour with lion-like courage, but another explanation of the feline features is he was born when Leo was rising.

By the late eighteenth century, judicial astrology, the kind Varley was practising, had undergone a renaissance due to the masterful calculations and widely circulated works of John Worsdale and Ebenezer Sibly (Curry 1989, 132-137). The astrologers' methods had become ever more professional and self-assured. Worsdale (1819, 55) claims that he could draw up the nativity of anyone who would supply him with the correct time and place of birth. Many of the early nineteenth-century astrology books include tables or nativity diagrams of the heroes of world history, positioned ahead of lengthy calculations and full explanations about their lives. Only very few are illustrated. Sibly's *Illustration of the Celestial Science of Astrology* (1813, 2:798) has portraits at the centre of its egg-shaped nativities but these illustrations have no bearing on the explanations. By 1818 Varley too had acquired quite a reputation for drawing up birth horoscopes and it was the visual representation of the zodiacal types which gave him the edge over his competitors

(Story 1894, 257-258). The matter of the illustrations, of course, creates a direct line to *Essays on Physiognomy*, because Varley is taking Lavater's approach to the next level. While Lavater searched for a shared or divine likeness in the faces he examined, Varley explained the consistent differences between individuals as zodiacal types. Varley worked from faces, only cross-referencing what he saw with what he read in astrological almanacs. Blake, as far as Varley was concerned, made visible what is normally obscured by the body. Evidence for Varley's physiognomical approach to birth horoscopes is that only six of the known Visionary Heads, sketched between 14 and 30 October 1819, have inscriptions which could have been used for astrological calculation (Bentley 2001, 371).⁸ The lack of inscription suggests that Varley stopped noting down the time early on. With the help of Blake's spiritual portraits, he thought he could penetrate to man's so-called inner essence.

In the prospectus for *Zodiacal Physiognomy*, Varley announces that the work was going to be published in four parts and at five shillings each. Part one, the only one to appear, ends with the documentation of the Gemini type and includes a lengthy description of the flea. There is no mention of the flea in the prospectus, however, and it seems that the flea was a last-minute addition. Varley planned a memoir of Blake, together with Blake's heads of King Edward I, Nebuchadnezzar, and Cancer, and intended to write a chapter on Cancer, but the published book doesn't advance beyond Gemini and only the heads of Nebuchadnezzar and Cancer were engraved.⁹ Varley also promised tables for every day and every hour of the year, but, though these tables were included, they advance in four-day intervals. The production of *Zodiacal Physiognomy* was a hasty business.¹⁰ Not only was the prospectus issued as late as October 1828;¹¹ there are references to October 1828 in the book itself (Varley 1828, 41, 59).

The most significant difference between prospectus and book is the addition of hybrid figures, best described as human-animal combinations, all of which are Gemini. The flea, consequently, is not the only Gemini with animal resemblances in *Zodiacal Physiognomy*. There are three Cochabiels, three female heads, and one pair, named Capella and Bellatrix (after the stars). Neither of the pair is fully human and it turns out that Gemini typically have animal-like features, because they are, in Varley's words (1828, 51), equipped with 'long necks, inclining to that of the goat, by bending outwards a little in front; having the ears rather pointed or angular, and the forehead retreating'. About Cochabiel he writes that the figure represents a type of small chinned person with a big, pointed nose. Curiously this head's bird-like features remain unexplained. It is impossible to say when Varley created Cochabiel, Capella or Bellatrix and there are no prototypes in the surviving drawings done by Blake. Martin Butlin (2015, 129), moreover, reminds us that Varley and Linnel were the driving forces behind *Zodiacal Physiognomy*. Varley's fascination with man-animal combinations, however, can be traced back to the time spent with Blake. Testimony to his keen interest is in his detailed description of the flea:

This spirit visited his imagination in such a figure as he never anticipated in an insect. As I was anxious to make the most correct investigation in my power, of the truth of these visions, on hearing of this spiritual apparition of a Flea, I asked him if he could draw for me the resemblance of what he saw: he instantly said, 'I see him now before me.' I therefore gave him paper and a pencil, with which he drew the portrait, of which a fac-simile is given in this number. I felt convinced by his mode of proceeding, 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.

During the time occupied in completing the drawing, the Flea told him that all fleas were inhabited by souls of such men, as were by nature blood-thirsty to excess, and were therefore providentially confined to the size and form of insects; otherwise, were he himself for instance the size of a horse, he would depopulate a great portion of the country. He added, that if in attempting to leap from one island to another, he should fall into the sea, he could swim, and should not be lost. This spirit afterwards appeared to Blake, and afforded him a view of his whole figure; an engraving of which I shall give in this work.

(Varley 1828, 54).

Varley talks about the different sketches and Blake's struggle to capture the flea's likeness, and he relates what the flea told Blake. The flea said that it inhabits the 'souls of such men, as were by nature blood-thirsty to excess', which is an explanation that evokes the figure of a vampire. The flea, in other words, is the first talking vampire.

We don't know what Blake said to Varley when he first told him about the flea. Was he afraid? The flea is unusual due to its looks but also because it is a ghost rather than a spirit. According to Gilchrist ([1907] 1998, 127), Blake only once saw a ghost. When living in Lambeth, he saw 'a horrible grim figure, 'scaly, speckled, very awful', stalking downstairs towards him. More frightened than ever before or after, he took to his heels, and ran out of the house'. This story, as related by Gilchrist, suggests that the flea was not specifically created for Varley and it, in fact, predates Blake's time with Varley. Gilchrist put emphasis on the fact that it scared Blake.¹²

Thinking of animals more generally, many of Blake's animals aspire to the human form, which means that, in any case, the flea is not a singular image, even

though Varley presents it as such. Examining Blake's tigers, Mary R. Baine and Rodney M. Baine (1975, 565-566), for example, explore Blake's use of animal symbolism and gloss and contextualise 'The Tyger' with Fuseli's commentary, quoting the advertisement in the Hunter translation: 'Were man and man as easily discriminated as a the lamb and the tiger, the Physiognomist's would be a useless science; but since both lamb and tiger may dwell in human frames, he surely deserves our thanks, who points them out to us before we wound the one or sink beneath the other'. Appealing to the usefulness of Lavater's physiognomical theory, Fuseli associates animal qualities with human character, while explaining that all can be identified by a physiognomist. The flea's hybridity and its body's resistance to classification, on the other hand, can be interpreted as Blake's critique of the restrictive interpretative systems proposed by Lavater and Varley. The flea's evolving body, to be clear, can be seen to represent what Peter Heymans (2012, 15) calls 'an emancipating free zone where the subject is immune to the patriarchal procedures of dualism, centralization and marginalisation'. Heymans, who also discusses 'The Tyger' and the political dimension of its symbolical meaning (2012, 114-115), says much about Romantic science but nothing about the pseudo-sciences which engage with the invisible aspects of human identity.

The shape of the flea's hybrid body is far from stable. Approaching the images of the flea through Lavater's physiognomy as well as Varley's zodiacal physiognomy, appears to explain why the flea reveals its true nature gradually. Varley and Lavater stress that much practice is needed to decode the character embodied in a face but Blake's versions of spiritual portraits make it impossible for any reading of character to cohere. In addition, the changes from sketch to painting foreshadow the transformation from the animalistic to the more human-like vampires. The blending

and eventual overriding of animal with human features is typical of the evolving figure of the vampire. Besides, the idea of exposure, which the second part of this essay will posit can be associated with vampirism and the flea's connection to early nineteenth-century literature on vampires, explains why Varley and his guests were so thrilled.

III. From Bloodletting to the Practices of Vampires: An Analysis of the Flea and Vampirism

In Blake's obituary *The Ghost of a Flea* represents a vampire. On 1 September 1827 *The Literary Chronicle* quotes one of the flea's speeches (from *Zodiacal Physiognomy*), describes its flea-like coat, and points out that the flea is a 'pernicious little *vampire*', to then conclude approvingly, 'it is indubitably the most ingenious, and able personification of the *devil*, or a malignant and powerful *fiend*, that ever emanated from the inventive pencil of a painter' (Bentley 2004, 469-470). This quotation proves, literally, that the flea is part of the emerging discourse of vampirism and that this was recognized by Blake's contemporaries. After Blake's death, the flea took on a life of its own; impressions of the tempera flea, as this section argues, were superposed on the engraved flea. *The Ghost of a Flea*, a cabinet picture, is a beautiful and fascinating artefact but it was never exhibited at the Royal Academy. Varley owned it and, if at all, it would have been shown at his house. That Varley shared the painting long after the meetings with Blake emerges from the early descriptions by J. T. Smith and Allan Cunningham. Smith and Cunningham talk about the flea's animal qualities (originating primarily from the sketches and the engraved version) but these appear oddly alongside direct allusions to the figure's vampiric qualities.

Many of Blake's contemporaries struggled with Blake's visions. J. T. Smith in *Nollekens and his Times* (1828, 2:471-472) mentions the flea to make the point that Blake's 'whimsical and novel descriptions frequently surpassed his delineations':

his picture of the Transformation of the Flea to the form of a Man, is extremely curious. This personification, which he denominated a Cupper, or Blood-sucker, is covered with coat of armour, similar to the case of the flea, and is represented slowly pacing in the night, with a thorn attached to his right hand, and a cup in the other, as if ready to puncture the first person whose blood he might fancy, like Satan prowling about to seek whom he could devour. Blake said of the flea, that were that lively little fellow the size of an elephant, he was quite sure, from the calculations he had made of his wonderful strength, that he could bound from Dover to Calais in one leap.

Vampire imagery in this passage originates from the words 'Cupper' and 'Blood-sucker', but the impact of these allusions is weakened by the expression 'coat of armour', which evokes a natural flea as well as the flea from *Zodiacal Physiognomy*. The head in *Zodiacal Physiognomy* has already been compared to the flea as seen under the microscope in Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665,10-11) (Singer 1955, 12-18)¹³ and yet, the flea's coat also resembles the amour of King Harold, who is another of the Visionary Heads (Butlin 1981, cat. no. 692 76). In fact, the differences between Blake's and Hooke's fleas are striking: where Hooke's flea has a complex feeding apparatus, feelers or horns, Blake's flea has a mouth. The body of the natural flea, according to Hooke (1665, 10), is covered with what looks like 'Porcupine's Quills, or bright conical Steel-bodkins'. The tempera flea, by comparison, has bristles on its head and ears and down its back it has something that resembles exposed vertebrae (Keynes 1971, 134).

Information about the flea mostly derives from its speeches attributed by Varley. There is only one other anonymous eyewitness who recorded a speech, in which the flea complains about its size, thus confirming the themes disseminated by Varley. Utterly frustrated, the flea laments that it cannot be as dangerous as it would like to be:

‘It was first intended,’ said he (the flea) ‘to make me as big as a bullock; but then when it was considered from my construction, so armed – and so powerful withal, that in proportion to my bulk, (mischievous as I now am) that I should have been a too mighty destroyer; it was determined to make me – no bigger than I am’. (Bentley 2001, 378)

The flea here associates its power with that of an ox, implying that it could have been as strong as a whole army. How big was Blake’s flea really? The only stable reference point for size is in *The Ghost of a Flea*, where the figure is holding an acorn cup. Going by the setting, Blake’s flea must be about one foot tall, because the image includes a tiny insect, appearing between the figure’s legs.¹⁴ That Blake was interested in pictures of insects enlarged as ‘magic pictures’ has already been discussed by David Erdman. Blake refers to microscope slideshows in *An Island in the Moon* (1784) to ridicule the activities of the natural philosophers.¹⁵ The narrative about the flea incorporates the theme of size as well as ideas pertaining to natural science and animal behaviour. Varley told Smith that ‘if it were the size of an elephant’, it could have jumped over the English Channel. The earlier comparison to a horse (in *Zodiacal Physiognomy*) is perhaps more plausible, but interestingly, with time passing, the animals the flea compares itself with increase in size. The combination of flea and elephant, moreover, is comical. Elephants can run but they cannot jump. Does this mean that Varley was in on the joke? His narrative, in

Zodiacal Physiognomy as well as in Smith, evokes the sliding scale of Lavater's *Lines of Animality* because it blends animal with human qualities, and to varying degrees.

In his chapter on Blake, Smith, moreover, brings religious connotations to *The Ghost of a Flea*, recalling the allusion to the devil in the obituary, when he compares the flea to Satan: 'like Satan prowling about to seek whom he could devour'. Smith may have been thinking of Blake's *The Ghost of Abel* which, though first conceived in 1788, was etched as late as 1822. It is tempting to associate this work and its story, which revolves around blood sacrifice, with the flea due to its peculiar climax. As Abel sinks into his grave, Satan, glad in armour of 'glittering scales', rises from it with a curse:

I will have Human Blood & not the blood of Bulls or Goats
 And no Atonement O Jehovah the Elohim live on Sacrifice
 Of Men: hence I am God of Men: Thou Human O Jehovah.
 By the Rock & Oak of the Druid creeping Mistletoe & Thorn
 Cains City built with Human Blood, not Blood of Bulls & Goats
 Thou shalt Thyself be Sacrificed to Me thy God on Calvary (E272)¹⁶

Satan claims that he prefers human to animal blood because it makes him a God. The eerie demand initiates vengeance but it is more than an announcement of a blood-feud. That Satan in this story climbs out of a grave transforms the figure into an undead creature, damned to haunt the living and the connection between *The Ghost of a Flea* and *The Ghost of Abel* throws the vampiric qualities of the flea into relief.

When Allan Cunningham researched Blake for his *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1829-33), he visited Varley to look at the

sketchbooks with the Visionary Heads. According to Cunningham, Varley saved the best, *The Ghost of a Flea*, until the end. Cunningham (1829-1833, 2:169-170), careful not to identify the figure, records, just like Smith before him, what Varley told him:

‘This is the last which I shall show you; but it is the greatest curiosity of all. Only look at the splendour of the colouring and the original character of the thing!’ ‘I see,’ said I, ‘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. But what in the world is it?’ ‘It is a ghost, sir – the ghost of a flea – a spiritualisation of the thing!’ ... ‘I called upon him one evening and found Blake more than usually excited. He told me he had seen a wonderful thing – the ghost of a flea! ‘And did you make a drawing of him?’ I inquired. ‘No indeed’ said he, ‘I wish I had, but I shall, if he appears again!’ He looked earnestly into a corner of the room, and then said, ‘here he is – reach me my things – I shall keep my eye on him. There he comes! his eager tongue whisking out of his mouth, a cup in his hands to hold blood and covered with a scaly skin of gold and green;’ – as he described him so he drew him.’

Varley, quite clearly, is relishing the opportunity to relive the story of the flea. For dramatic effect, he creates the impression that the painting, too, is based on first-hand observation. But when describing the material qualities of the tempera, he slips when he talks of ‘a scaly skin of gold and green’. Unless Varley is referring to a bad skin condition, we should note that neither the full-length flea nor the figure in *The*

Ghost of a Flea has scales. The full-length flea is wearing some sort of costume, while the flea in the tempera is definitely naked.¹⁷ Formal dis-semblances between the fleas are easy to determine. In the sketch, the flea has bat-wings as well as arms and legs.¹⁸ It touches its tongue, stands more erect, and its right hand is hidden behind its body. In the tempera, the flea holds an acorn cup for a bowl and strides across the room. Functional differences are harder to spot as the main discrepancy is one of approach: the flea drawings are sketches which pretend to be based on observation, whereas the painting is a worked-up image. Especially, the use of gilding draws attention to the highly crafted quality of the tempera.

A more immediate context for the flea emerges once the image is associated with death and disease, as Blake himself may have done, as well as vampirism as Varley did when showing it to Smith and Cunningham. These themes turn the flea into a metaphor for a threat which is difficult to detect. This, shall we say, medical quality of the flea bears comparison of a sort with James Gillray's print *The Gout* (1799), which visualises inflammation in the big toe as a little demon, with talons, an upright tail, and flames bursting from its nostrils. Greedily, the demon sinks its fangs into human flesh (Godfrey 2001, 226-227). Designs by Blake with metaphors for death and disease are *Plague* (c. 1805), which makes a general statement about human suffering by showing the living mourning the dead, and especially *Pestilence: The Death of the First-Born* (c. 1805), which takes an allegorical approach. Blake's figuration of pestilence is a giant figure. It exudes poisonous vapours and strides, arms outstretched, from the left to the right. Nobody in this picture, except for the guardian angel in the background, is aware of it being the cause of mass destruction.¹⁹

Just as with its appearance, animal qualities guide the flea's actions and these actions can be seen to resonate with other areas of Blake's working life. The iconography of Blake's bat-winged creatures has been explained with reference to Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1781) and John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a five years' expedition against the revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796) (Bogan 1976; Twitchell 1981, 18-29). The most fruitful comparison, for the purpose of this essay, is Stedman's *Narrative*, because one of the plates, not engraved by Blake, is labelled 'The vampire or Spectre of Guiana'. The plate illustrates Stedman's encounter with a vampire or spectre-bat. First he relates the panic he felt on waking up covered in blood, then, in a much calmer voice, he rationalises his first impressions:

Knowing by instinct that the person they intend to attack is in a sound slumber, they generally alight near the feet, where while the creature continues fanning with his enormous wings, which keeps one cool, he bites a piece out of the tip of the great toe, so very small indeed that the head of a pin would scarcely be received into the wound, which is consequently not painful; yet through this orifice he continues to suck the blood, until he is obliged to disgorge. He then begins again, and thus continues sucking and disgorging till he is scarcely able to fly, and the sufferer has often been known to sleep from into time in eternity. (Stedman 1796, 2:142-144)²⁰

A medical context sheds light on the flea. Blake, according to Smith (1828, 2:471-472), referred to the flea as a 'cupper' and 'blood-sucker', which suggests an objective description, echoing Stedman's approach. However, by the 1810s Robert Hooke's scientifically sober analysis of a flea had been replaced with a more emotionally charged or aggressive rendering: G. F. Shaw in his illustrated edition of Oliver Goldsmith's *History of the Earth* (1819, 680) describes the flea as seen under

the microscope, but uses hyperbolic language, such as ‘blood-thirsty’, ‘attack’, and ‘enemy of mankind’ to evaluate its behaviour. Semantically the connotations of ‘bat’ and ‘vampire’ merge. In the section on bats, the *History* juxtaposes bats and vampires because they feed on blood and remain unseen. In addition, the scenario of the innocent traveller being attacked by a local predator, as related by Stedman, is almost identical with Goldsmith’s account of the American vampire-bat and its medical attitude towards seeking nourishment:

The inhabitants of those warm latitudes being obliged, by the excessive heats, to leave open the doors and windows of the chambers where they sleep, the vampyres enter, and if they find any part of the body exposed, they never fail to fasten upon it. There they continue to suck the blood, and it often happens that the person dies under the operation. They insinuate their tooth into a vein, with all the art of the most experienced surgeon, continuing to exhaust the body, until they are satiated. (Goldsmith 1819, 368)

Next, the *History* compares different species. While English bats live on insects and are small and harmless, those living in Africa, the East and the West Indies are big and dangerous; they inflict mortal wounds on animals and humans alike. Shaw then gives examples of European travellers, the most famous being Stedman (Goldsmith 1819, 366-370). The account of vampire-bats depopulating whole areas in South America and invading the human body with the efficiency of a surgeon chimes well with some of the content of the flea’s speeches conveyed by Varley (1828, 54).

Indeed, the medical context together with the conflicting narratives about the size of a ‘mighty destroyer’, attacking under cover of night, readily connects to an incident described by Dr John Leyden, the Scottish orientalist who died in Java in 1811. Either Blake or Varley could have read *The Poetical Remains of the late Dr*

John Leyden (1819). While stopping off in India, Leyden encountered a 'blood-sucker' and his description incorporates the mannerisms and attitudes witnessed in Blake's flea:

The first night I slept ashore I was waked by my side smarting very severely, and rolling myself on my side, discovered ... that the smart was occasioned by a large animal, which I imagined to be a snake. As the chamber was dark, I disengaged myself from it with as little ... violence as possible, not wishing to irritate such an antagonist. ... On the morn ... I discovered it to be a large lizard, termed a blood-sucker here, which nods with its head when you look at it, and it saluted me with a nod from the window ... though it would not condescend to enter into conversation. (1819, xc)

This account is relevant as Leyden, for dramatic effect, builds up the identity of his attacker gradually, thereby generating an evocative combination of impressions: first, it is a large-sized animal, possibly a snake, then a lizard and definitely an 'antagonist'. On what he claims to be the next morning, Leyden draws attention to the humanoid behaviour of what is now (in broad daylight) securely identified as an exotic lizard. Leyden's story is well told. The longwinded designation process, both serious and playful, invites more speculation about the character of an 'enemy of mankind'. In other words, it is not necessarily animals but, as in Shaw's edition of Goldsmith, animalistic traits in humans which pose a danger to mankind. The juxtaposition of Blake's flea and Leyden's blood-sucker also invites the question if Blake placed his flea on a window-sill, between curtains and against the backdrop of a night sky, which means that he would have depicted the interiors of Varley's house.²¹

The way in which Leyden's story toys with the lizard's identity leads on to another talking point: John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819). Linking Blake's flea to Polidori's vampire is a matter of narrative and symbolism, because, as in the accounts of the flea, *The Vampyre* opens with Lord Ruthven as a drawing-room attraction. Nobody quite understands who or what he is. Further on, Aubrey, the protagonist travelling with the Lord on the continent, is attacked by a vampire. He escapes but discovers, after the Lord's supposed death, the very weapon with which he was attacked among his possessions (Polidori [1819] 2005, 15). Suddenly, everything makes sense but there is no escape. When they meet again in London, Aubrey, bound by an oath, has to witness the ruin of his sister. Many of the highly dramatic scenes are set in bedrooms. The book's success was due to the fact that the vampire's behaviour, rather than its appearance, was associated with Lord Byron:

Polidori seems to use the myth in part as an analogy to explain how people interact. To Ianthe and Miss Aubrey, Lord Ruthven is an actual vampire, a horrid demon, but to Aubrey, Ruthven is a parasite of a different sort, a psychological sponge. Ruthven never 'attacks' Aubrey, never sucks his blood; yet there does seem to be some energy exchange between the two men. At their first meeting Aubrey is robust, Ruthven pale and thin. Ruthven then strengthens as the relationship deepens and becomes positively 'healthy' on the continent, when he dispenses his perverse charity to those he knows will misuse it. But most interesting is what happens when Aubrey is taken ill, for it is Ruthven who nurses him back to health, letting energy now flow from strong character to weak. (Twitchell 1981, 112)

The interpretation James B. Twitchell offers here is of the unconventional nature of Lord Ruthven's vampirism. Ruthven prefers the blood of women and is able to form emotional attachments. This means that it remains unclear whether or not Polidori's vampire bites its victims when he subjects them to his control. The connection is the weapon and with regard to the flea in the tempera, we can establish for ourselves that it has a 'thorn', which, according to Smith (1828, 471-472), is 'attached to his [its] right hand'. Fleas bite their victims, but Blake's flea is more sophisticated. What adds to its stylish cruelty is a blood-letting instrument: the flea does not suck its victims' blood, it attacks and bleeds them, collecting the blood in an acorn-shaped bowl. *The Vampyre* was an instant hit and everyone knew perfectly well that Lord Ruthven was a portrait if not self-portrait of Lord Byron. The book went through several editions and was adapted for the stage. Soon after Blake and Varley met, Charles Nodier's *Le Vampire* (1820) was performed in London (Frayling 1991, 131-144).

The flea's hybrid body is typical of that of a vampire. Instructive for the exploration of the flea's vampire context is the folklore about vampires summarised in the introduction to *The Vampyre*:

In the West ... the belief existed, that vampires nightly imbibed a certain portion of the blood of their victims, who became emaciated, lost their strength, and speedily died of consumptions; whilst these human blood-suckers fattened --- and their veins became distended to such a state of repletion, as to the cause the blood to flow from all the passages of their bodies, and even from the very pores of their skins. (Byron 1819, xix-xx)

The editor of Polidori's story elaborates on a vampire episode, published in the *London Journal* in 1732, and explains about the curse of vampirism, Greek folktales

and Byron's *The Giaour* (1813), as well as Robert Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801). As examples for the next, older generation of literary texts to include vampires, this editor mentions the works of Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1656-1708) and Dom Augustine Calmet (1672-1757) (Byron 1819, xxii-xxiv). The figure of the vampire is a fairly recent phenomenon in English literature and Polidori's editor uses the same reference points as Byron in his footnotes to *The Giaour*: 'The Vampire superstition is still general in the Levant. Honest Tournefort tells a long story, which Mr Southey, in the notes on *Thalaba*, quotes', and as the story of this vampire unfolds, Byron, in another footnote, adds a verbal picture of his vampire. The lines 'Wet with thine own best blood shall drip / Thy gnashing tooth and haggard lip;' are annotated with 'The freshness of the face, and the wetness of the lip with blood, are the never-failing signs of the Vampire' (Byron 1813, 23-24). Byron's vampire is a tortured creature and vampirism for Byron is a punishment as well as a curse, designed to inflict pain worse than eternal damnation. This kind of vampire is all but lost to us today, because, as Tom Holland points out (1999, 154, 155), the modern vampires tend to be equipped with Byronic good looks.

There is yet another vampire text, John Stagg's poem 'The Vampyre' (1810), which helps to flesh out the context of vampirism Blake was responding to. This poem, which isn't referenced in either Polidori's or Byron's texts, engages with the animal nature of the vampire. In his introduction, Stagg relates how vampires create other vampires and how they can be killed. Vampires are a class of demons which are partly corporeal and visible only at will. Stressing that they manifest themselves in human form only because they eat human flesh, Stagg writes (1810, 262),

they had such a desire to render themselves in part corporeal and visible, as it pleased them, that when human excrescences were not easily obtainable,

they were forced to repair to the common slaughter-houses, carrion heaps, &c. ... From which we may infer the reason so many of our common apparitions have, per force, been compelled to appear in the forms of horses, cows, sheep, asses, dogs, cats, &c. &c. in fine, every sort of animal.

In the tale itself, Stagg (1810, 265) gives a conversation between husband and wife. These are the words of the dying man, who describes his horror as well as what he can see and feel:

'The ghost of Sigismund doth roam,
 And dreadful haunts me in my bed!

There, vested in infernal guise,
 (By means to me not understood,)

Close to my side the goblin lies,
 And drinks away my vital blood!

Sucks from my veins the streaming life,
 And drains the fountain of my heart!'

Stagg's poem echoes Leyden's account of the performance of the blood-sucker, but, more importantly, its introduction offers an explanation for the flea's transformation. Stagg says that vampires have a double nature and can make themselves 'corporeal and visible' when they consume human (or animal) blood. In the poem the wife notices the changes in her husband's body but has no explanation. She implores her husband and he eventually tells her what is really happening to him. Sigismund, a former friend, has returned to feed on him. There is no hope, Sigismund will return every night and "drag" him to "the silent tomb!". (The dying man also tells his wife

how to destroy a vampire.) Thinking of the Visionary Heads, the invisible visitors of Varley's house only allowed Blake to see them, which suggests that they were believed to have a choice on account of their double natures, which, in turn, can be associated with Stagg's vampires.

IV. Conclusion

Apart from the humans, the nightly visitors to Varley's house were only visible to Blake. The faces of most of the Visionary Heads, as noted by Gilchrist ([1907] 1998, 273), however, follow a formula: it is easy to tell the good from the bad, but Gilchrist also mentions that many chose to change shape or make parts of their bodies disappear to tease Blake who was trying to take their portrait. The flea appeared to Blake at least twice. It talked while Blake was sketching and it opened its mouth, because it wanted its teeth sketched as well. Only on the second occasion it allowed Blake to make a full-length portrait (Bentley 2004, 377-378). All this supports the idea of serious playfulness. Varley's *Zodiacal Physiognomy* and Blake's Visionary Heads in their approach to human bodies mirror an interplay of ideas, originating in folklore as well as pseudo-science. While Varley, observed by his guests, was trying to make sense of Blake's spiritual portraits, Blake gave him what he wanted. But Blake had his own agenda. The surviving drawings, snippets of conversation and pretence interviews document a range of physical features as well as human and animal qualities. If read through Lavater's physiognomy, which Varley's *Zodiacal Physiognomy* is building on, these qualities take on moral as well as aesthetic meanings. Guided by Varley's project, Blake explored combinations of human and animal traits. That he modified them suggests that he preferred expressive bodies to bodies expressing one type of person. Bodies solidifying into

human form is, of course, presented as an unintended side effect in Blake's creation myth.

The connection to early nineteenth-century vampirism exists via the flea's speeches. The reason, I think, Blake encouraged (and Varley developed) such associations is not that he was interested in the now iconic Gothic figure of the vampire, but rather that he recognised his creature's versatile embodiment in the emerging literature on vampirism. In the early nineteenth century the physical identity of the vampire is still fluid and this visual formula suited Blake since it provided him with a blueprint for experiments with human-animal combinations. What stands out is that Blake, in the surviving images, self-consciously explores the differences between human and animal, fully aware of his audience, on the one hand, and reflective about the implications of attributions of personality, on the other hand. The reason he gave the flea a voice is that he wanted to make physiognomists and astrologists think about the consequences of character readings for the identity of any being. Blake's flea, in other words, can never be captured. It resists both its creator and interpreters.

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¹ Two engraved versions of the flea exist, only one of which was published. For the materials and their relevance to Varley's *Zodiacal Physiognomy*, see Butlin (2015, 129).

² Blake was 'very willing to enter fully into the spirit of the game that he and his friend had invented, regarding it not too seriously, but nevertheless allowing it to be a legitimate outlet for artistic creation' (Keynes 1971, 131). Butlin (1981, cat. no. 495) suggests Blake 'humoured the credulous Varley's beliefs'. Bindman (1977, 202) argued that the Visionary Heads are the result of a 'parlour game'.

³ The appeal of Blake's visions depicting the ideal or eternal bodies of British celebrities was broad. Jane Porter, author of the successful historical novel *Scottish Chiefs* (1841), liked Blake's heads of Edward I and William Wallace. See Porter 1841, 2:468).

⁴ For the different translations of Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* see Johnson (2004).

⁵ See Fuseli's advertisement in Lavater (1789-98, 1:n.p.).

⁶ The differences between the sketches and the painting were noted early on. W. M. Rossetti, for example, in his list of Blake's works mentions them in his entry on the tempera Flea: 'The head is less unhuman, and less strikingly invented, than that engraved in Vol. I' (in Gilchrist 1880, 2:222). Rossetti refers to the first volume of Gilchrist's two volume edition of Blake's *Life*.

⁷ Giambattista della Porta's *De Humana Physiognomia* (1586) was never translated into English but there were several translation of Le Brun's work in the second half of the eighteenth century (Percival 1999).

⁸ See Butlin (1981, cat. nos. 692 23, 692 99, 729, 737, 752), and Christie's (1989, 83).

⁹ Prospectus, British Library shelfmark 1879 b. 1, vol. 4.

¹⁰ For the reception of Varley's publication, see Curry (1992, 24).

¹¹ British Library Shelfmark 1879 b. 1, vol. 4. Bentley (2004, 489) thinks that the prospectus was published in early October 1828.

¹² The flea seems to have been an eccentric if not egocentric sitter, but many of the drawing sessions at Varley's house were rather unorthodox. See Gilchrist ([1907] 1998, 272).

¹³ Geoffrey Keynes (1971, 134) supported Singer's discovery: 'In the pencil drawing the overlapping plates on the flea's neck are arranged very much as in Hooke's figure ... and the protruded tongue is suggested by the palps of the flea. ... Even more convincing is the two-pronged sting held in the monster's left hand. This exactly reproduces the curved claws which are a very conspicuous feature of Hooke's flea at the end of each of the six legs'.

¹⁴ This insect is an ambiguous figure. The traditional argument is that the insect between the flea's legs is a natural flea (Preston 1952, 80; Hamlyn and Phillips 2000, 190). Could it be that it has wings? Could it be a fly? Flies are generally associated with Beelzebub, the so-called lord of the flies who, when exorcised, escapes as a fly (Seligmann [1948] 1975, 49-52).

¹⁵ Erdman (1954, 97) discusses the slide projections of insects with reference to the ghost of a flea.

¹⁶ References to Blake's writing are taken from Erdman's edition (Blake 1988), abbreviated as E.

¹⁷ In the inscription written by William Bell Scott, a later owner of the drawing, it says about Blake's creature that it is 'the Emblem (or Ghost) of a Flea'. Emblem is an interesting choice here. With this term Scott suggests that Blake's flea is a concrete statement about something complex and abstract, which I believe is the case (Essick 2006, 153).

¹⁸ Fallen angels such as Satan tend to have bat-like wings. See 'Adam and Eve leaving Paradise' (c. 1807) (Keynes 1970, no. 45).

¹⁹ For how Blake transforms the traditional representations of the plague subject, see Behrendt (2002).

²⁰ Keynes (1979) delineates how this story may have given shape to Blake's idea of the spectre which is seen to haunt travelers in *The Gates of Paradise* (c.1818) and *Jerusalem* (1804-27).

²¹ This night sky links the flea image to Varley and astrology, but also to Blake's *Milton* and its plates 'William' and 'Robert'. While Milton's descending bright star enters the feet of William and Robert, in the tempera we see a falling star going past the flea's forward foot. David Erdman argued that Milton's star not only organizes the narrative of Blake's epic poem, it signifies salvation and transformation. Just as Robert is, the flea is in left-profile. Is the flea a contrary or mirror image to 'William'? For the relationships, established through the intervention of Milton's star, between different sets of brothers in *Milton*, see Erdman (1973).