



Literary Collections

Insect Poetics

Eric C. Brown, editor

University of Minnesota Press

978-0-8166-4695-1

(September 29, 2006)

While writers since Hesiod have employed insect imagery to make their metaphors crawl, no writer in the entomological tradition has as much “street cred” as Franz Kafka, whose hero Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* awakens to find himself transformed into a giant insect. This collection of seventeen essays counts on readers’ familiarity with that classic transformation, and surveys other uses to which insect imagery has been put by writers and visual artists. Readers may recoil from bees, ants, flies, “circus fleas,” butterflies, moths, worms, locusts, beetles, spiders, and cockroaches, but will read on nevertheless because of their interest in Homer, Aesop, Plato, Aristotle, Vergil, Erasmus, Emerson, Thoreau, Freud, Jung, Dali, Woolf, Plath, Gass, and others.

The editor is assistant professor of English at the University of Maine at Farmington; his collection but casts a web over the extensive figures of language and representations in visual art in which insects appear, from *The Aeneid* to beekeeping manuals to low-budget “big bug films” of the twentieth century. Among other notable chapters, *Insect Poetics* includes an examination of hive imagery in relation to political identity in Augustan Rome. Insects may have disturbed medieval belief in the resurrection of the body, but the Greek Gospels harbor entomological metaphors. Eighteenth-century French authors proposed entomology as a corrective to urban vice. Thoreau’s insect tropes expressed concerns over immigration and the mass of those—“the gross feeder is the man in the larva state”—living in quiet desperation.

Conversely, Virginia Woolf compares the butterfly to the ungraspable essence of life: “It is thus that we live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say the novelists never catch it; that it goes hurtling through their nets.” Another interesting contribution is a study in the common use of insect metaphors to dehumanize and degrade ethnic minorities, whereas other chapters consider the self-identification with the cockroach by Latino and African-American communities.

An essay or two in *Insect Poetics* may make the reader itch, but there is something here for every taste, including a survey of popular bug-eating television fare like *Fear Factor*, Food Channel exotica, novelty insect cookbooks, and other forays into “entomophagy.” So diverse a collection of essays can have no single premise, but there is a tendency in the pieces to mark out the strange affinity that human beings have for insects, an attraction/repulsion complex that gathers up anxieties, disgusts, and fears of “imperfect swarms and perfectly horrible queens” along with admiration, cultural identification, even envy.

Isaac Watts famously hymned, “How doth the little busy bee / Improve each shining hour,” and *Insect Poetics* improves an understanding of insect language and image in places high and low. As subject, point of reference, and metaphor, insects have wormed their way into language, which is no surprise, since they are here to stay.

Vince Brewton