



☞ The Ephemeron, or Mayfly, is a common fresh-water insect. The nymph grows for two years before it surfaces, sheds its skin, and emerges as a delicate, transparent fly. It is unable to eat, and can only fly and mate during its day of life. Hatches sometimes produce silent swarms which, like snow, fill the air and cover the ground along streams. ☞ Trout fishermen & philosophers have both written about the Mayfly. Artificial flies of fur, feathers, and silk on barbed hooks, cast on a thin transparent line, deceive fish, especially if the lure matches the size and color of the hatch. Aristotle established the Mayfly as a symbol of the shortest-lived animal. Philosophers use it still as a reminder of our vanity and mortality. ☞



Thomas Boreman

MORAL REFLECTIONS  
ON THE SHORT LIFE  
OF THE EPHEMERON

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This essay  
first appeared in  
*A Description of Some  
Curious and Uncommon  
Creatures*  
London  
1739

David R. Godine  
Publisher  
Boston  
1970



he uncommon cast of invention and the freedom of imagination which shine through this amusing little piece will recommend it to persons of a lively thought.

To engage their attention yet more earnestly I may justly say that the author's bold allusion conveys an instruction of the greatest moment; a lesson the most effectual of any in the compass of philosophy to humble the vanity and ambition of men.

Cicero, in the first book of his *Tusculan Questions*, finely exposes the vain judgment we are apt to form of the duration of human life compared to eternity. In illustrating this argument he quotes a passage of natural history from Aristotle, concerning a species of insects on the banks of the river Hypanis that never outlive the day wherein they are born.


To pursue the thought of this elegant writer, let us suppose one of the most robust of the Hypanians (so famed in history) was in a manner coeval with time itself; that he began to exist at the break of day, and that from the uncommon strength of his constitution he has been able to show himself active in life through the numberless minutes of ten and twelve hours. Through so long a series of seconds he must have acquired vast wisdom in his way, from observation and experience. He looks upon his fellow creatures who died about noon to be happily delivered from the many inconveniences of old age, and can perhaps recount to his great-grandson a surprising tradition of actions before any records of their nation were extant. The young swarm,

who may be advanced one hour in life, approach his person with respect and listen to his improving discourse. Everything he says will seem wonderful to that short-lived generation. The compass of a day will be esteemed the whole duration of time, and the first dawn of light will, in their chronology, be styled the great era of their creation.

Let us now suppose this venerable insect, this Nestor of Hypanis, should a little before his death, and about sunset, send for all his descendants, his friends and acquaintances, out of the desire he may have to impart his last thoughts to them, and to admonish them with his departing breath. They meet, perhaps, under the spacious shelter of a mushroom; and the dying sage addresses himself to them after the following manner.

“Friends and fellow citizens: I perceive the longest life must have an end. The period of mine is now at hand. Neither do I repine at my fate, since my great age is become a burden, and there is nothing new to me under the sun. The calamities and revolutions I have seen in my country, the manifold private misfortunes to which we are all liable, and the fatal diseases incident to our race have abundantly taught me this lesson: that no happiness can be secure nor lasting, which is placed in things that are out of our power. Great is the uncertainty of life! A whole brood of infants has perished in a moment by a keen blast. Shoals of our straggling youth have been swept into the waves by an unexpected breeze. What wasteful deluges have we suffered from a sudden shower? Our





strongest holds are not proof against a storm of hail. And even a dark cloud makes the stoutest hearts to quail. I have lived in the first ages and conversed with insects of a larger size and stronger make, and (I must add) of greater virtue, than any can boast of in the present generation. I must conjure you to give farther credit to my latest words, when I assure you that yonder sun which now appears westward beyond the water and seems not to be far distant from the earth, in my remembrance stood in the middle of the sky and shot his beams directly down upon us. The world was much more enlightened in those ages, and the air much warmer. Think it not dotage in me if I affirm that glorious being moves. I saw his first setting out in the east, and I began my race of life near the time when he began his immense career. He has for several ages advanced along the sky with vast heat and unparalleled brightness. But now, by his declension and a sensible decay (more especially of late) in his vigour, I foresee that all nature must fail in a little time, and that the creation will be buried in darkness in less than a century of minutes.

Alas, my friends! How did I flatter myself with the hopes of abiding here forever! How magnificent are the cells which I hollowed out for myself! What confidence did I repose in the firmness and spring of my joints and in the strength of my pinions! But I have lived enough to nature, and even to glory. Neither will any of you whom I leave behind have equal satisfaction in life in the dark, declining age which I see is already begun."

Thus far this ingenious writer pursues his fiction upon the thought of Cicero. Neither will it seem extravagant to those who are acquainted with the manner of instruction practised by the early teachers of mankind. Solomon sends the sluggard to the ant. And after his example we may send the ambitious or the covetous man who seems to overlook the shortness and uncertainty of life, to the little animals upon the banks of the Hypanis. Let him consider their transitory state and be wise. We, like the ephemeris, have but a day to live. The morning, the noon, and the evening of life is the whole portion of our time. Many perish in the very dawn. And the man (out of a million) who lingers on to the evening twilight is not accounted happy.

Those animals whose circle of living is limited to four or five hours are yet as long lived and possess as wide a scene of action as a man if we consider him with an eye to all space and all eternity. What a bustle then do we make about passing our time, when all our space is but a point? What aims and ambitions are crowded into this instance of our life, which (as Shakespeare finely words it) is rounded with a sleep! Who knows what plots, what achievements a mite may perform in his kingdom of a grain of dust, within his life of some minutes. And of how much less consequence than even this, is the life of man in the sight of that God, who is for ever, and for ever.

The right use of this reflection is not to make men regardless of posterity, nor to slacken their diligence in the pursuit of any kind of knowledge that becomes



a reasonable mind; nor yet, to abate their industry in endeavoring by honest means to acquire a comfortable subsistence for themselves and their children. On the contrary, our very nature prompts us to action and contemplation. And the indolent, listless person who delivers himself up to idleness, and whose whole time is a blank, grows tired of himself, and is every hour oppressed with his own laziness. What then are we to learn from our precarious, transitory condition? The most important precept of wisdom, the great document of human prudence which we should perpetually inculcate to ourselves from youth to age and imprint on our hearts as the particular and lasting signature of sound sense is namely: that there is no consideration in life sufficient to tempt a wise man to sacrifice one truth or one virtue to the folly of avarice or the madness of ambition.



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*One hundred copies  
have been printed in  
Monotype Caslon,  
on Amalfi Paper.  
The etchings are by  
Lance Hidy.*



## *Moral Reflections on the Short Life of the Ephemeron*

### The story of a little book

LANCE HIDY

AS AN UNDERGRADUATE AT YALE, interested in fine printing, I discovered that the open stacks in Sterling Memorial Library contained many eighteenth-century books. They stood out from the later books by their bindings, and I seem to remember that the dates were embedded in the call numbers on the spine. I was searching in particular for books containing hand-colored etchings, and found many. Once in a while I came upon volumes that held my interest, such as Thomas Boreman's book for young people, *A Description of Some Curious and Uncommon Creatures*, 1739. In this case it was the subject, rather than the illustrations, that drew me. One of the essays was a moralizing fable in which mayflies remind us how fleeting is life.

Being the son of a well-known fly fisherman, Vernon S. Hidy, mayfly lore was part of my upbringing. We saw them on the trout streams, and my dad was expert at tying flies of feather and fur that imitated them, both in their larval and winged forms. He was the world's leading expert on tying flies that mimicked the emerging mayfly that has left its

nymph case, but whose wings have not yet opened. Dad even coined a word for these—flymph—which appears often now in angling literature, but has yet to be recognized by the OED.

I was very pleased to know that philosophers, going back at least as far as Aristotle, had also found an instructional use for mayflies. These harmless little creatures had been ignored by etymologists because they were neither beneficial to agriculture nor pests. This animal was unique in that its literature had been created solely by philosophers and anglers. Science had other things to tend to.

Boreman's essay was short enough that I could hand-set it in type and make a little book. I was a senior at Yale, with access to the Jonathan Edwards College Press. Its small, motorized Chandler & Price platen press had been given to the college by alumnus August Heckscher years before. The C&P, as we called it, was lightweight, with almost none of the mechanisms that finer machines offer for controlling ink and impression. However, it was halloved by association. Leonard Baskin, while an art student at Yale in 1942, printed the first Gehenna Press edition on it: *On a Pyre of Withered Roses*. It contained his own poems, of which he was so ashamed that he never allowed me to see the book.

I met Baskin my freshman year, and during my undergraduate years was able to visit him and his pressman Harold McGrath in Northampton. Librarians Ken Nesheim and Dale Roylance made periodic trips there to accept cartons of Gehenna Press archives for deposit in the Beinecke Rare

Book Library, and they allowed me to join them. Later, through the initiative of Nesheim, I received a grant from Frank Altschul, of the Overbrook Press, to study privately with Baskin after graduation. One of his books, *Horned Beetles and Other Insects*, was a special inspiration. Close study of an easily accessible copy at the Yale Art Gallery led me to try some insect etchings of my own. Three of them became the illustrations for *Moral Reflections*. I printed and bound twenty-five copies for my 1968 Scholar of the House project, and sold them all during the month I received my bachelor's degree. That was a busy spring.

There were other associations in the Jonathan Edwards College Press, which only in later years have I been fully able to appreciate. One was that the type cabinets were filled with foundry Caslon, roman and italic, from ten to seventy-two point. This was the influence of Carl Purington Rollins, Printer to Yale University, and friend to W. A. Dwiggins, Daniel Berkeley Updike, Joseph Blumenthal, Ray Nash, and Bruce Rogers, all giants of the classical tradition in American graphic design. The other association is the ornamental initial T used on the first page of the text in *Moral Reflections*. Dale Roylance, then Arts of the Book curator at Yale, and my mentor, said it may have been a remnant from a book that Bruce Rogers had designed—and that somehow it had ended up in the J. E. Press. Whether it was in fact left over from the master, I don't know—but I believed that it was. I was attracted to the classical tradition of those

men right from the start. All of them, and Baskin too, had been members of Boston's Society of Printers, which I would join in 1974, and am currently writing about for its centennial celebration in 2005.

Across the street from the J. E. Press, in the Yale School of Art and Architecture, Paul Rand, the brilliant modernist designer, and critic of the classicists, was teaching, but I had no interest then in anything he had to say. Rand's dean, Alvin Eisenman, who ran the graphic design program in the graduate school, had studied with Ray Nash at Dartmouth. Like the other Nash alumni Rocky Stinehour, Sinclair Hitchings, David Godine, Stephen Harvard, and Ric Grefé, Eisenman had a profound appreciation of the classical tradition in graphic design. Rather than try to persuade me in the direction of modernism, he did what Ray Nash would have done. Eisenman gave me a letter of introduction to classical master Joseph Blumenthal of the Spiral Press.

As instructed, I took the first proofs of the mayfly book to Joe, who kindly received me at home in New York. He looked approvingly at my pages. After the long train ride from New Haven to New York I was hoping for something more, so I persisted, and asked if he had any suggestions. He gave it some thought, then told me a guideline he used when designing books: "Add something unexpected to delight the reader." Satisfied, I returned and made a little wood engraving of a mayfly which I printed by itself on a leaf before the title-page spread.

Baskin introduced me to David Godine, whom

I joined in 1969 to form the Godine Press. With his enthusiastic support the second edition of *Moral Reflections* was issued in one hundred copies in 1970. It was delicately bound by Arno Werner in thin boards with a tray case; Arno was also doing edition binding for the Gehenna Press. I engraved a larger mayfly for the front, and added a short preface. For both printings I used fresh Caslon foundry type purchased directly from the ancient foundry in England. My first Yale edition was printed on dampened paper, but I didn't bother with that for the Godine version, preferring to follow the much easier Gehenna example of printing dry. And this time I had the benefit of a Vandercook flatbed proofing press. Although it did not have a motor (except for the ink cylinder), its controls for registration, inking, and impression have made it the favorite of craft printers. Our talented crew, including Andrew Melnechuk and Nancy McJennett, helped me with the presswork for both the text and the plates.

At Baskin's suggestion, in printing the etchings I used oil paint instead of ink. The middle illustration, a swarm of mayflies in a circle, was printed in sepia, but hand colored with watercolor. This required small brushes to apply the paint to the dozens of tiny wings and bodies—not unlike the antique illustrations I had admired while combing the stacks of Sterling Memorial Library. The Godine Press team helped with the hand coloring on the second edition.

We ran into a problem that had also marred the

first edition. Printing from my thick copper plates caused the thin Amalfi paper to stretch too much, sometimes to the breaking point. To prevent this I cut a thin chipboard mat around each plate on the press bed. The chipboard supported the paper, minimizing the plate-mark stretching, and achieving a smoother page than in the first printing.

Dale Roylance pointed out to me that the shapes of the three etching plates—an oval, a circle, and a tombstone—were symbolic of the passage of life. This was unconscious on my part, but I was willing to accept the credit.

There was no course in etching for undergraduates at Yale, so I had to teach myself after my freshman year. During the summer of 1965 in Portland, Oregon, I read about Rembrandt's technique in A. Lumsden's book on print making, reprinted by Dover. Lumsden provided instructions for preparing the copper plate, and several recipes for etching acid. Of course I chose the one Rembrandt was thought to have preferred, Dutch Mordant. I found the highly toxic ingredients, hydrochloric acid and potassium chloride, available at a local pharmacy. The copper I purchased from a roofing company, but it was so rough that I had to give it a long treatment of graded sandpapering and polishing before it was usable.

Not having an etching press, I asked around and heard that Lloyd Reynolds, professor of English and legendary teacher of calligraphy, had one at Reed College. Introduced by a mutual friend, I called Professor Reynolds on the telephone, and explained

why I needed the press. He was sympathetic, and told me where his studio was on the campus. The press was a small table-top model that I could carry by myself. I went to his studio, collected the press, and kept it for the summer. I did not meet Lloyd until eleven years later, in 1976, when he stayed with me in Cambridge, and I had my first opportunity to thank him in person. Fortunately my home-made etchings were admired by Gabor Peterdi, the great print maker who taught in Yale's graduate school of art. He kindly allowed me to use Yale's giant etching press, which was reserved for the exclusive use of the graduate students. This turned out to be a gold mine, enabling me to produce enough prints (\$6 to \$12 each, matted), including those from *Moral Reflections*, to bring in \$2,000 one Christmas from a Yale student exhibition.

The first etchings I produced on Lloyd's press were of the lush vegetation in the Portland hills where I lived. When Baskin saw the prints he said they would make good illustrations for a poem he had considered for a Gehenna Press project, Andrew Marvell's *The Garden*. He suggested that I do it instead. I followed his prompting, and the same year I produced the second edition of the mayfly book at the Godine Press, I also printed the Marvell poem with my four etchings, using Jan Van Krimpen's beautiful italic typeface, Cancelleresca Bastarda, for the text. Thirty years later this book was honored by the Grolier Club in its millennium exhibition and catalogue, *A Century for the Century*. I think I understand why they chose *The Garden*, which has a

more contemporary feeling than *Moral Reflections*. Because the mayfly book was more important in my development as a designer, and because it reminds me of my father, it remains my favorite.

When I exhibited the etchings from these two books at Jonathan Edwards College, they attracted more attention from Yale librarians than from the art school, which is fitting, considering how those library rambles inspired me. Two of Yale's librarians, Louis Silverstein and Monty Montee, became close friends, and great encouragers of my work—during the 1980s, when Silverstein was of Arts of the Book curator, he acquired more of my work for that collection. Another of the librarians, Robert Jones, even promoted my work off campus. He thought my etchings would be appreciated by a friend with whom he had formerly worked in the library of the New York Botanical Garden, Harvey Simmonds, who was currently at the Berg Collection of The New York Public Library. Mr. Simmonds made the journey to New Haven, liked what he saw, and immediately wrote me a kind letter with an invitation to visit him on my next trip to New York. I accepted his invitation, beginning a friendship with Harvey, now Brother Benedict at Holy Cross Abbey, that continues to shine and warm my life thirty-six years later.

Since the time of *Moral Reflections*, friendship and support from librarians has sustained me throughout my career. Library poster commissions, exhibitions, acquisitions, publications, and other forms of support too numerous to mention, made

it possible for me to survive, and practice my art. Of particular importance to me was the book *Lance Hidy's Posters* (1983), with text by Alan Fern, Curator of Prints and Photographs at the Library of Congress; and sponsorship from the Boston Public Library, and the Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

*Lance Hidy, Merrimac, Massachusetts,  
December 19, 2004*

