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Anna Letitia Barbauld's Insect Poetics

ROSALIND POWELL

Abstract: This article reads Anna Letitia Barbauld's affective encounter in 'The Caterpillar' (1825) in the light of her broader entomological writing for both adults and children. It investigates the recommendations for attention to the small and the particular in her didactic work alongside the narratives of insect subjectivity and insect metamorphosis in her occasional and lyric verse to assess the poet's contribution to an ecological mode of writing in this period. This uncovers a key tension in Barbauld's communication of insect worlds, reflected in the conclusion of 'The Caterpillar', where the affective encounter exposes the inescapable otherness of the human observer.

Keywords: Anna Letitia Barbauld, caterpillars, children's literature, eighteenth-century poetry, entomology, positionality

Some two centuries before toddlers could meet with Eric Carle's gourmandizing, metamorphosing *Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969), Anna Letitia Barbauld's infant readers could experience their own different lepidoptery encounter. In the second volume of her *Lessons for Children of Three Years Old* (1779), Barbauld's narrator draws the infant Charles through an experiential encounter with caterpillar metamorphosis:

> Charles, do not you remember the caterpillar we put into a paper box, with some mulberry leaves for it to eat? Let us go and look at it. It is gone—here is no caterpillar—there is something in the box; what is it? I do not know. It is a little ball of yellow stuff. Let us cut it open, perhaps we may find the caterpillar. No, here is nothing but a strange little grub, and it is dead, I believe, for it does not move. Pinch it gently by the tail. Now it stirs: it is not dead quite. Charles, this grub is your caterpillar; it is indeed. That yellow stuff is silk. The caterpillar spun all that silk, and covered itself up with it; and then it was turned into this grub. Take it, and lay it in the sun; we will come and look at it again tomorrow morning—Well, this is very surprising! here is no grub at all to be found. Did not we put it on this sheet of paper last night? Yes we did. And no body has been in the room to meddle with it? No, no body at all has been in the room. Is there nothing upon the sheet of paper? Yes, here is a white butterfly. I wonder how it came here; for the windows are shut. Perhaps the grub is turned into a butterfly. It is, indeed; and look, here is the empty shell of the grub. Here is where the butterfly came out. But the butterfly is too big; this shell could not hold him. Yes, it did, because his wings were folded up, and he lay very snug. It is the same, I assure you, Charles; all the pretty butterflies that you see flying about were caterpillars once, and crawled on the ground.[1]

Whereas the twentieth-century caterpillar book uses the insect as a vehicle for broader learning by encouraging the child to identify numbers, days of the week, and the different kinds of food eaten by the insect — 'On Monday he ate through one apple … on Tuesday he ate through two pears' — before it constructs a cocoon and emerges as a butterfly at the story's end, Barbauld's description presents a caterpillar (here a mulberry-leaf-eating silkworm, *Bombyx mori*) as the object of close examination.[2] The speaker encourages

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Charles to touch the 'grub' in the cocoon by 'pinch[ing] it gently by the tail' and, later, to 'lay it in the sun'. Whilst this is a monologue, the structure is governed by questions and answers. The whole process is an example of problem solving as the phenomena are encountered before any definitions are given: the cocoon begins as 'a ball of yellow stuff' and it holds 'a strange little grub'; the disappearance of the grub overnight is a mystery until it is confirmed twice that there has been no interference and that the white butterfly is connected to the empty chrysalis. Barbauld's commitment to experiential learning is shown through the fact that the connection between 'all pretty butterflies' and crawling caterpillars is only confirmed at the end of the episode.

Neither Carle nor Barbauld provides an ecological portrait: to be suited for infant study, the insects are taken out of their natural environment for direct encounters with human eyes, hands, and foodstuffs. However, the earlier version is not just about learning to recognize objects and words: Barbauld is largely interested in describing the nature of the caterpillar itself. Crucially, the narrator explains that the grub within the chrysalis 'is not dead quite': what is being observed here is a natural process of development, rather than the miraculous (that is, spontaneous) generation of a new animal out of a corpse. This is important: in establishing the process of insect metamorphosis as being made up of four stages of growth — egg, larva (i.e., caterpillar), pupa (grub), and adult (butterfly) — Johannes Swammerdam, who published his observations in his *Historia Generalis Insectorum* (1669), had displaced centuries of misinformation on the topic.[3] One is never too young, it seems, to learn correct zoological processes through empirical observation and that observation can be recreated at home.

Joanna Wharton suggests that the objects in *Lessons for Children* relate to actual items encountered by the book's original user, Barbauld's adopted son Charles: 'The frequent demonstrative references to things – "here is a pin,", "here is a white butterfly" – and the imperatives "see" and "look at," suggest, in the first place, Barbauld's actual physical gesturing towards a particular proximal object, and subsequently a conceptual gesturing to or prompting of a familiar type of object; that is, the image of an object in the mind.'[4] Wharton argues that these features of the different sections of *Lessons for Children* are part of a Lockean education in ideas that works by building 'associative structures' between things, words, and feelings.[5] In the case of the caterpillar, we can understand the associative effect as going beyond the recognition of the metamorphosis of caterpillars into butterflies to the knowledge that insects are as worthy of contemplation as other members of the animal kingdom.[6] What Barbauld describes in the caterpillar episode is also a familiar domestic employment, ripe for replication, because silkworms were bred in the home as both educational project and material product. Signs of the popularity of indoor silkworm rearing as a children's activity can be seen throughout the long eighteenth century: in a poem from 1704, Matthew Prior depicts a 5-year-old girl 'mak[ing] her Silk-Worms Beds | With all the tender Things'; Sarah Trimmer's child learner is told in 1780 that, whilst she 'will never be a Silk Merchant', she will be allowed to 'keep silkworms'; whilst in *An Introduction to the Natural History and Classification of Insects* (1816), discussed at length below, Priscilla Wakefield presumes readers' prior knowledge when her speaker describes insect metamorphosis with the comment that 'You amused yourself, a few summers ago, with keeping silkworms'.[7] It is no mistake that the silkworm, in particular, appears in textbooks authored by women: whilst the educational books highlight silkworm rearing as a small-scale educational project, conducted indoors due to the British climate, Leonie Hannan has explored women's involvement in sericulture as a domestic, experimental process which was carried out by some women during this period in response to the financial incentive of national competitions to reduce the importing of silk

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from France and Italy.[8] As a natural historical demonstration, however, Barbauld's narrative for infants stops before the harvesting of silk (which necessitates the plunging of the silk cocoon, and the pupa within, into hot water before the transformed creature emerges and destroys the precious threads): the silkworm is therefore presented as natural creature in its own right, not as the dispensable creator of a product.[9] By avoiding direct identification of the caterpillar's species, the associative structures built up between caterpillar and child observer are those of curiosity and care and the yellow silk is of little interest.

Barbauld returned to caterpillars several times throughout her career, and her writing consistently engages with the re-evaluation of small, uncharismatic insects. In selecting from Barbauld's works, I have chosen those whose subjects meet the late-eighteenth-century definition of insects, which is, to use Wakefield's summary, the seven orders of animals 'having two antennae or feelers', an exoskeleton, and at least six feet (p. 8). Many of the insects found in Barbauld's work — caterpillars, flies, wasps — are those most often recognized as pests. Lacking the utility and order of bees and ants, they are often viewed as the animal equivalent of weeds: ugly, inhibiting production, crawling where they should not.[10] Of Barbauld's insect texts 'The Caterpillar', published in 1825, has attracted the most critical attention. The poem depicts the speaker's ethical quandaries in a close encounter with an individual European Tent caterpillar, larva of the Lackey moth (*Malacosoma neustria*)[11]:

I have scanned thy form with curious eye,
Noted the silver line that streaks thy back,
The azure and the orange that divide
Thy velvet sides.[12]

This poem, which combines accurate description that enables identification of the caterpillar species with a discussion of sympathy, engages in its own kind of classification of both the observer and the observed. Famously, the poem hinges on this caterpillar's rehabilitation from its pest status:

[B]ut when thou,—
A single wretch, escaped the general doom,
Making me feel and clearly recognize
Thine individual existence, life,
And fellowship of sense with all that breathes,—
Present'st thyself before me, I relent
And cannot hurt thy weakness.
(lines 23–29)

This moment has produced a number of readings that focus on ecological topics. For example, Inhye Ha suggests that Barbauld's re-evaluation of the caterpillar is an example of a 'poetic meeting point', where 'a nonhuman tames a human subjectivity in profoundly ethical ways', resulting in the creation of an 'affective community in which species differences are properly addressed and respected'.[13] Ha suggests that the catalyst for a revaluation of the caterpillar is the beauty of its vivid markings and its individuality. Placing it in

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the context of Barbauld's double exclusion as both Dissenter and woman writer, Alice G. Den Otter reads the poem through the speaker's 'complex identification with and resistance to systems of power' as a discussion of parasites both social and biological.[14] Heather Keenleyside, on the other hand, reads it as reinforcing the division between humans and other animals.[15]

The current article puts Barbauld's engagement with an individual caterpillar in the context of her wider writing on metamorphosing insects. It investigates her poetics of the small and the particular alongside narratives of insect subjectivity and metamorphosis in her writing for children to assess the degree to which these poems facilitate an ecological mode of thought. I read two poems from either end of Barbauld's writing career, 'To Mrs P[riestley], with some Drawings of Birds and Insects' (written *c.* 1769, published 1773) and 'The Caterpillar' (written *c.* 1816), as flanking excerpts from three works for children — the *Lessons for Children*, the *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), and the co-written *Evenings at Home* (1792–96).[16] Like others, I read Barbauld's literature for children as indicative of her epistemology. This means that the engagement with insects in these works can be read as training children in how they should interact with and understand the natural world, even on its smallest scale. What emerges from this half century of insect encounters is a strongly ambivalent attitude towards the use of personification and figuration to convey the lives of insects to her readers. As Eric C. Brown comments, 'the insect must be mediated – by art, artifice, technology – as an (almost) impossibly *different* creation'; Barbauld both employs these tools of mediation and questions the ethics of doing so.[17]

In the following section, I use Barbauld's epistolary address to Mary Priestley to place the poet's writing in the context of a shift from figurative to naturalist descriptions of insects before considering the clash between attempts to understand how insects experience the world and their common treatment as pests. In the subsequent section, I explore how caterpillars' metamorphosis contributes to their depiction in Barbauld's *Hymns for Children* and how this might be compared with the re-evaluation of the larval form in the 1825 poem. The essay closes with a discussion of how Barbauld's insect poetics draws attention to the limitations of an ecocritical ethics.

1. *Insect Affects*

That insects, and caterpillars in particular, are a recognizable motif in Barbauld's writing over the course of some five decades reflects the growing interest in entomology during the eighteenth century. Her early work 'To Mrs P[riestley], with some Drawings of Birds and Insects' is an example of sociable, occasional verse that treats animal life as the object of aesthetic and intellectual engagement. The poem's title suggests an epistolary exchange and the writer comments that 'friendship, better than a Muse inspires'.[18] Barbauld's title also refers to the inclusion of her own art.[19] Amongst the detailed descriptions of animal life as subjects of her pencil, butterflies are presented as a creative challenge. Their features are compared to other natural objects:

> What atom-forms of insect life appear!
> And who can follow nature's pencil here?
> Their wings with azure, green, and purple gloss'd,

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Studded with colour'd eyes, with gems emboss'd
Inlaid with pearl, and mark'd with various stains
Of lively crimson thro' their dusky veins. (lines 103–08)

The charismatic butterfly is treated as a wonder of nature and this catalogue of features also reads as a kind of classification of different species. Whilst the poem's title signals ekphrasis, the verbal description of species presents a puzzle for the reader encountering it without the accompanying drawings: as Millie Schurch notes of this and other verses, Barbauld 'invites the reader to step into the poetic space to complete the poem's epistemology'.[20] The reader is, therefore, being asked to recognize the features of these butterflies and of the other birds and insects that are described.

The signals of sociability that frame the poem relate to the common genre of polite science, where natural history or natural philosophy is incorporated into domestic and conversational contexts to render it fit for juvenile and female consumption.[21] A comparative example from towards the end of Barbauld's writing career is Wakefield's *An Introduction to the Natural History and Classification of Insects in a Series of Familiar Letters* (1816), a sequel to her 1796 volume of fictional letters on botany. Sam George suggests that these later letters, in which the young Felicia communicates her newly acquired knowledge about insects to her absent sister Constance, could be read aloud to replicate polite conversation. George draws connections with the conduct-book genre, noting that Felicia's entomological studies can be 'a vehicle for sisterly advice', whilst also suggesting that the first letter's instructions to replicate drawings shows Wakefield to be 'advocating scientific observation, precise reproduction and revision through mutual correction'[22]:

> Get your pencils and paints in order; for you will find great amusement, and considerable advantage, from copying the subjects I describe. As I intend to do the same, when we meet, we may compare our drawing-books together, and correct each other's mistakes.[23]

In both Wakefield's and Barbauld's works, insect knowledge can be accessed through a leisurely activity of drawing in which feminine artistic accomplishment is also developed. Whereas Wakefield sanitizes her subject through prefatory references to 'novelty and delight' and the instruction of 'natural religion',[24] in Barbauld's poem, the selection of the 'lower' orders of birds and insects — 'humbler themes my artless hand requires' (line 19) — can be read as an exhibition of modesty as she repeatedly disavows association with 'the painter's or the poet's name' (line 126).

The texts' references to drawings of insects can also be associated with an important shift in these animals' function in visual art. Studies by William B. Ashworth, Jr, and Marcel Dicke have shown that the symbolic links that accorded insects' figurative functions ranging from the death of a subject (flies) to Christ (dragonflies) to sin (caterpillars) and the soul (butterflies) had largely waned by the mid-seventeenth century to be replaced by more naturalistic precision.[25] A key example of this change is the work of the German naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian, which both McCarthy and Ha locate as a source for Barbauld's caterpillar knowledge.[26] McCarthy also suggests that 'To Mrs P[riestley]' can be linked to Merian's drawings, which were on display at the British Museum from

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1759 as well as being available in published form, and to which Barbauld appears to allude in her correspondence. As Kay Etheridge notes, Merian's technical drawings are 'innovative compositions [which] elevated insects in a new way; they were no longer merely objects to be collected and classified, but actors on the scene, and in a starring role'.[27] The illustrations in Merian's *Der Raupen wunderbare Verwandlung und Sonderbare Blumen-Nahrung* (*The Wonderful Transformation and Unusual Flower-Food of Caterpillars*, 1679–83) are titled according to the plant depicted — that is, the required food of the larval insect — and each image presents the plant specimen together with the egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, and butterfly or moth in the same scene. These are certainly to be viewed as botanical illustrations and not scenes from natural life; Etheridge suggests that Marian's approach is ecological, without any reference to moralizing symbols, and 'the first to tie the process [of caterpillar metamorphosis] to the required foods of the larval insects'.[28] The first plate of this work closely resembles Barbauld's neutral description in *Lessons for Children* of a caterpillar's metamorphosis: Marian's image depicting 'Mulberry Tree with Fruit' presents a silkworm crawling across a mulberry leaf, surrounded by depictions of the eggs, a butter-coloured silk cocoon (Barbauld's 'little ball of yellow stuff') both entire and cut open, the brown 'grub', and the newly white moth (Barbauld's 'white butterfly'), which as Merian notes 'needs half a day to get clear, dry wings, or its finished form'.[29]

The change in visual depictions of animals is also aligned with the gradual shift in children's writing from fables, where the animals stand in for humans, to more naturalistic descriptions. Fables were prevalent throughout the first half of the eighteenth century in translations from Phaedrus and Aesop as well as original compositions in varying roles from devices for teaching languages and ethics to political satires. Whether original or translated, eighteenth-century fables present the classic example of what animal studies scholars, citing Levi-Strauss, call 'thinking with animals'.[30] Insects in these contexts carry with them instructive symbolic associations. In John Gay's 1727 *Fables*, for example, one poem 'The Butterfly and the Snail' frames an interaction between the two protagonists with the conservative, anti-luxury moral that 'All upstarts, insolent in place, | Remind us of their vulgar race'.[31] The 'upstart' is a preening butterfly who spurns his old friend the snail after his beautiful transformation. Addressing the gardener, he describes the snail as 'vermine of voracious kind' (line 22) and calls for its destruction. The snail's response is to celebrate purity and dignity of his unchanging state with the rhyme retort that 'And what's a butterfly? At best | He's a caterpillar, drest' (lines 41–42). This poem demonstrates what Jayne Elizabeth Lewis has described as fables' 'capacity for transportation and exchange':[32] Gay capitalizes on his mastery of a popular, much circulated and translated poetic form to produce satirical class commentary.

Barbauld's writing in her brother John Aikin's six-volume collection *Evenings at Home* repudiates such distanced commentary and shows resistance to the figural representation of animals.[33] In his own *Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry* (1777), Aikin had noted the derivative nature of much natural description, reserving particular vitriol for 'the trite and hackneyed fables of ancient poets, [which,] when copied by modern writers, must appear as rigid and uninteresting as they are extravagant and unnatural'.[34] The animal fables in the co-authored volumes significantly modify these old models, and they can be read as experiments in ecological thinking. Barbauld's own work 'The Wasp and Bee. A Fable' (1792) adopts the familiar trope of an inter-species conversation. Crucially, though, the insects are not parsed as creative substitutes for humans. The dialogue offers instead an insect perspective on human-animal relationships as the wasp asks why the bee receives vastly preferential treatment:

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> We are both very much alike, only that the broad golden rings about my body make me much handsomer than you are: we are both winged insects, we both love honey, and we both sting people when we are angry; yet men always hate me, and try to kill me.[35]

The repeated first-person pronouns highlight the altered positionality as the human reaction is defamiliarized. The wasp's confusion at his inferior treatment 'though', he exclaims, 'I am much more familiar with them than you are, and pay them visits in their houses, and at their tea-table' is designed to be read with knowing irony, but it is also a logical argument that hinges on a differing concept of politeness. The bee's explanation that 'you never do them any good [...] but they know what I am busy all day long in making them honey' reverts to a more anthropocentric value of utility.[36] This dialogue reflects what Darren Howard sees in *Evenings at Home* as 'a radically pluralistic notion of objectivity', where the reader learns by considering different perspectives and values by being prompted 'to inhabit the animal's alienated stance and to observe from the vantage of the animal society which they are being trained to enter'.[37] Barbauld's wasp fable attempts to centre animal experience, even as the ambivalence towards figural, distanced perspectives remains coloured by habitual anthropocentricism.

The productivity of animals is a shared preoccupation of both writers in *Evenings at Home*: it recurs later in the volume in Aikin's 'The Rookery', when a father describes rooks as 'the farmers' friend' because they feed on crop-destroying grubs but denounces their avian society as non-cooperative.[38] This more conventional description prompts a new comparison with the communal work and honey production of bees. Aikin's 'What Animals are Made For' (1794) is another dialogue that begins, like 'The Rookery', by scripting animals' utility to humans. The father begins by explaining that 'Flies eat up many things that would otherwise corrupt and become loathsome',[39] before offering an alternative perspective:

> Suppose a fly capable of thinking; would he not be equally puzzled to find out what men were good for? This great two-legged monster, he might say, instead of helping us to live, devours more food at a meal that would serve a whole legion of flies. Then he kills us by hundreds when we come within his reach; and I see him destroy and torment all other animals too.[40]

In this variation on the wasp's questions about human preferences, the opening hypothesis about a fly's thought signals that this is not part of the fabular convention but an attempt to imagine an alternative point of view. The flipped scale veers towards the mock heroic in its descriptions of the gigantic human and its Brobdingnagian diet and appetite for destruction. But the framing of a man as a monster is also instructive in its suggestion that these actions are quite literally out of the order of nature in comparison to the collective society of flies and 'all other animals'.

We can see in these experimental narratives a movement towards decentralizing human perception: children cannot begin to see as flies do, but they can, as Heather Keenleyside notes, learn to identify 'with the creaturely vulnerability of the animal'.[41] As these examples show, however, one stumbling block in Barbauld's insect ethics is her subjects' status as pests that do not evoke sympathy. This is something that even popular entomology books cannot avoid: William Kirby and William Spence's *Introduction to Entomology* (1815) devotes five chapters to the 'indirect injuries'[42] caused by insects to

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human's property including livestock, crops, and vegetable patches. Similarly, Wakefield's *Familiar Letters* twins careful descriptions of the different orders of insects with the acknowledgement that 'Some insects … must be destroyed; but let it be done with the least pain and the greatest expedition possible'.[43] There is literary precedent, too, in georgic poems that are often more realistic about agricultural conditions than their Virgilian source: James Grainger employs a martial description of ants and locusts as 'bugs confederate, in destructive league' against sugarcane crops; John Philip describes how 'preying' snails and 'noisom [*sic*] Swarms' of wasps (the latter with 'worthless Souls') greedily devour and destroy apples; and Christopher Smart describes how insects threaten 'to hyemate, and monarchize o'er all | Thy vegetable riches'.[44] In all these cases, destruction is justified for these creatures, which are perceived as obstacles to the agricultural domination of the natural world; like following Virgil, who devotes a whole book of the *Georgics* to bees, eighteenth-century writers do not consider such hive-building, honey-producing insects to be pests, and this only emphasizes the perceived incongruity of other insects' futile attempts to 'monarchize' terrain designed for farming. Barbauld's 'The Caterpillar' acknowledges this perspective of prioritizing crop over critter: 'I have sworn perdition to thy race,' the speaker says 'And recent from the slaughter am I come | Of tribes and embryo nations' (lines 15–16). The reference to tribes and races is not misplaced in its suggestion of plurality: Merian notes of this species that 'I have found many thousands of such little caterpillars on quince and plum trees'.[45] For the poet-gardener, the nibbled stone fruit leaves left behind by caterpillars — as Den Otter notes, 'a community of [Lackey] caterpillars can defoliate an entire tree' — justifies such enraged destruction and disregard for insect futures.[46]

The pests in georgic poetry are frequently described in their swarms, but an individual encounter enables Barbauld to present a negotiation between natural history of a closely examined individual set apart from its destructive activity and an attempt to understand caterpillar feelings. This results, as readers know, in a reassessment of the natural hierarchy:

> No, helpless thing, I cannot harm thee now;
> Depart in peace, thy little life is safe,
> For I have scanned thy form with curious eye,
> […]
> thee, houseless wanderer,
> My garment has enfolded, and my arm
> Felt thy light pressure of thy hairy feet;
> Thou hast curled round my finger; from its tip,
> Precipitous descent! with stretched out neck,
> Bending thy head in airy vacancy,
> This way and that, inquiring, thou hast seemed
> To ask protection; now, I cannot kill thee. (lines 1–3, 6–13)

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The imperative 'depart in peace' recalls the Nunc dimittis, but the speaker shifts immediately away from this possible figural framing towards a detailed 'scanning' of the animal's features, thus preserving its otherness over a narrative of mutuality. Alice G. Den Otter reads the speaker's protective change of heart as the product of the caterpillar's flattery of the former.[47] However, given Barbauld's ongoing interest in insect affects, we should also pay attention to the way that the poem shifts from describing a 'helpless thing' to considering it as an experiencing animal through attention to the sense of touch. The movement from the speaker's sensation of 'the light pressure of thy hairy feet' to the caterpillar's own experience of scale ('precipitous descent!') reflects the same switching of perspective seen in the description of the wasp's argument in *Evenings at Home*.

As this shows, the speaker's repeated inability to destroy the caterpillar is explained in terms of feeling. Tobias Meneley has discussed the role of sensibility in the re-evaluation of domestic animals' rights running up to the debates about recognizing animals as legal subjects and the welfare legislation that emerged in the 1820s and 1830s. His suggestion that, by bypassing language, 'sensibility … puts pressure on the symbolic order, and thus on a model of community as necessarily human' can also be applied to Barbauld's exploration of caterpillar feelings.[48] This produces a change of heart that is only temporary, but it bears resemblance to Barbauld's other attempts to consider and articulate insect affects. In all of these cases, though, the ecological encounter is laced with irony: the wasp is a nuisance to humans, in spite of its claims to sociability; insects do destroy crops; and inter-species dialogue does not occur in 'The Caterpillar' as the tiny subject has only '*seemed* | To ask protection' (my emphasis). Even if insect affects can be imagined, their articulation in literature only reinforces the presence of human observers whose sympathies are temporary.

2. *Metamorphosis and the Human Observer*

Although the topic is not addressed directly in 'The Caterpillar', one of the barriers to considering insects' perceptions is the very otherness of their development. Barbauld's discussion of the 'Insect race' in 'To Mrs P[riestley]' exhibits some features of the movement away from figuration already discussed. The following description of insect hibernation can be read as a combination of the two modes:

> [T]he Insect race, ordain'd to keep
> The lazy sabbath of a half-year's sleep:
> Entomb'd, beneath the filmy web they lie,
> And wait the influence of a kinder sky;
> When vernal sun-beams pierce their dark retreat,
> The heaving tomb distends with vital heat;
> The full-form'd brood impatient of their cell
> Start from their trance, and burst their silken shell. (lines 73–80)

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To some extent, the insects are being understood within their natural environments as categorically other and not to be associated with human behaviour: the labelling of the insects as 'full-formed' at their emerging hints at physical processes that, if not indicative of a complete metamorphosis, do not happen when humans sleep. As Melissa Bailes and Daniel P. Watkins have both remarked, the labelling of the emerging insects as the language of sabbath and entombing recalls the biblical narrative of human resurrection.[49] However, this image is not moralized or personified in any way, and we might note the common usage of a 'tomb' in entomological writing, including Wakefield's *Letters* (p. 77), as neutral a term for the chrysalis. If metamorphosis (not just hibernation) is a possibility here, then Barbauld is careful to suggest that the insects do not die to produce new winged organisms.

Alongside this sense of insect temporality, we can see Barbauld's characteristic attention to affect. Emerging into the sunshine, the insects are depicted as 'impatient' and full of feeling. These displays are not concerned with human observation, but with the independent activities of the newly rejuvenated animals:

> Trembling awhile they stand, and scarcely dare
> To launch at once upon the untried air:
> At length assur'd, they catch the favouring gale,
> And leave their sordid spoils, and high in Ether sail. (lines 81–84)

Like the caterpillar's encounter with the 'precipitous descent' in the later poem, this description considers the spatial experience of the newly emerged winged insects encountering 'the untried air'. Whilst 'trembling' may simply connote the tiny movements of the insects, the daring and reassurance that finally prompts the animals to take flight again shows the speaker's attempt to consider another point of view. Wakefield's *Familiar Letters* also associate springtime, with its humming bugs and budding plants, with 'a sympathy with the general happiness that prevails throughout the face of nature, uniting, in every part, to the praise of its great Author'.[50] Barbauld omits the physico-theological framing employed by her fellow Dissenter, preferring instead discussions of artistry and pastoral nymphs: she continues the description by referencing Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581), where full-grown nymphs are found sleeping 'confin'd' in tree trunks (we might note that a *nymph* is also a common term for the larval form of a hemimetabolous, or metamorphosing, insect).[51] Wakefield's reference to 'sympathy' does, however, give a name to the effect achieved in the poet's depiction of hibernation, and we can see here the recognition that the insects might feel something like joy and fear.

Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781) presents an active interrogation of metamorphosis and how it can be understood. Published only 2 years after the final volume of Barbauld's secular *Lessons for Children*, the hymns also engage their young readers in direct investigations of the natural world as a site of plenitude and knowledge. However, as Isobel Grundy notes, there is a difference in the form of address, which is important for the text's treatment of non-human actors: 'The voice of *Hymns in Prose* is nothing like the voice of *Lessons*; here the adult does not speak to the child, but the adult and the child speak together, with one voice, to God.'[52] That is, the child is not only being encouraged to respond to prompts and gestures, but to articulate new ideas and, as Barbauld notes in her preface, to learn the texts by heart.[53] The language that the child is being trained to

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speak combines praise and curiosity. Hymn II's opening address, 'Come let us go forth into the fields, let us see how the flowers spring' (p. 5), signals an interest in understanding processes, as well as the appreciative surveying of the world as the product of creation. The poet encourages her reader to recognize the wonder of the natural world and there is constant attention to the familiar and the small. For example, the botanical world of wall-flower roots, blossoming thorns, and seasonal flowering of snowdrops and primrose — 'When the spring cometh, they say, here we are!' (p. 71) — is presented in Hymn IX as a divinely-powered system of autonomous growth.

The hymns' development of attention to the natural world in terms of seasonal shifts and the active participation of organisms adds also an ecological dimension to Barbauld's own recommendation of a slow, repetitive development of religious habit, where she says that it 'it is safer to trust to our genuine feelings implanted in us by the God of nature, than to any metaphysical subtleties'.[54] Daniel E. White notes how 'Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose*, […] following Priestley's habitual devotion, represent an attempt to associate God with familiar objects of childhood experience'.[55] This means that even death itself is framed as a natural event that happens to humans and other animals alike. Mortality is the primary topic of Hymns X and XI, and it is here that insects play a vital role. Hymn X sets the sudden deaths of 'insects sporting in the sun-shine' (p. 79) alongside the unexpected death of a man — 'he leaped; he walked; he ran; he rejoiced in that he was more excellent than those' (p. 81). The human subjects introduced here are not entirely incorporated into the natural scheme: in the latter case, the first-person speaker maintains objective distance and highlights the difference between the insects' bright colours and quick movements and the fact that the man's 'activity' is twinned with emotional subjectivity not permitted to the lower animals. Insects are clearly chosen here for their short lifespan — their copious destruction is presented as a natural event as 'they were perishing with the evening breeze' (p. 80) — whilst the speaker's weeping is reserved for the death of the human.

Hymn XI addresses the child, rather than presenting them as speaker, and it offers a more extended and persuasive comparison between humans and insects. Here, Barbauld draws on a long tradition of the link between resurrection and insect metamorphosis that is hinted at in 'To Mrs P[riestley]'. The hymn opens with the motifs of reflowering seen in the earlier hymns before outlining a familiar analogy between a caterpillar's metamorphosis and the doctrine of resurrection. This comparison can be tracked back to antiquity: In the *Historia Animalium*, for example, Aristotle describes the process and explains the chrysalis stage as a death out of which new life spontaneously arises.[56] Latin texts also play on the connection between *anima* (soul) and *animalia* (butterfly). This is indicated in Book 15 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where Pythagoras's description of the spontaneous generation of insects (broadly conceived) develops into a description of shape-shifting animals, including tadpoles and frogs, bees, bear cubs 'licked into shape', and caterpillars which 'change to a butterfly's form, symbol of the soul'.[57] It is unsurprising to see the adoption of this connection in Christian literature: Herbert's pattern poem 'Easter Wings' (published 1656) is an early example and the seventeenth-century artistic depictions of insects follow the same model. Crucially, of course, by the time caterpillars and butterflies are appearing in eighteenth-century texts, it is known that metamorphosis does not involve death at all. In his physico-theological work *The Wisdom of God* (1704), John Ray executes a long refutation of spontaneous generation (i.e., the birth of the butterfly from the corpse of the caterpillar) and links insect life to order and plenitude rather than any resurrection narrative.[58] The new understanding of the connection between caterpillar and butterfly does, however, reinvigorate the trope in at least one poetic example

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before Barbauld. Richard Jago's 'An Elegy on Man' (1752) uses the motif of caterpillar metamorphosis as a model for understanding the promise of humans' resurrection, that 'in Christ all shall be raised alive', as described in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.[59] The poem begins by describing the ambitious nature of 'imperial Man', who 'range[s] with curious eye, | O'er earth from pole to pole'.[60] This is followed by a description of ageing and death: Jago suggests instead that human's corporeal forms are only precursors to future spiritual glory and insight, reinforcing the idea that this is not a permanent death. The poet explains this by presenting the 'silken tomb' (line 38) that houses a caterpillar during its metamorphosis as a model for the human body: 'Anon you see him rise | No more a crawling worm to view, | But tenant of the skies' (lines 42–44).[61]

We should read Barbauld's version of the resurrection trope in Hymn XI as the reverse of Jago's: it begins with natural subjects, culminating in the caterpillar, and it signals a new ecological dimension:

> I have seen the insect, being come to its full size, languish, and refuse to eat: it spun itself a tomb, and was shrouded in the silken cone; it lay without feet, or shape, or power to move—I looked again, it had burst its tomb; it was full of life, and sailed on coloured wings through the soft air; it rejoiced in its new being. (p. 85)

As with Barbauld's other insect engagements, the detail provided here demonstrates close proximity. The description seems to hint at personification by outlining the precursor to the transition stage as sickness or languishing. Most affecting is the description of refusal to eat, which extends the concept of satiety or readiness to a kind of conscious decision. The personification continues with the caterpillar's construction of the cocoon through the craft of weaving only to be undercut by the negation of motion and form in the following clause. Again, the common term 'tomb' hints at personification, but this allegory is not drawn out — perhaps because the hymn should prompt educational dialogue between parent and child. Instead, the speaker skips to the promise of human salvation to suggest that the caterpillar provides a material model for understanding a spiritual event:

> Thus shall it be with thee, O man! and so shall thy life be renewed.
> [...]
> A little while shalt thou lie in the ground, as the seed lieth in the bosom of the earth: but thou shalt be raised again; and, if thou art good, thou shalt never die any more. (pp. 86–87)

Unlike the butterfly who emerges from the cocoon by 'burst[ing] the tomb, full of life', the process of resurrection is not an independent one for humans. Instead, the speaker describes how Christ's redemptive act will be 'to burst open the prison doors of the tomb; to bid the dead awake' (p. 87). The effect of this is ambiguous: the infantile and helpless human requires salvation as a chosen 'child of immortality' (p. 89). This description of the caterpillar's metamorphosis as a narrative for understanding human salvation treats insect life in a way that is distinct from the other essentially distancing and hierarchizing representations in *Hymns in Prose*. In this hymn, the newly transformed butterfly is afforded an affective capacity — 'it rejoiced in its new being' — of precisely the kind denied the winged insects of Hymn X. This does not completely collapse the hierarchy: the natural world is still treated as a book to be read and interpreted for human improvement,

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even as the animal world can be understood as a self-sustaining system that does not require intervention.

This sequence of images raises theological questions when it comes to Barbauld's Dissenting background and especially her links to the Unitarian movement and to Joseph Priestley at Warrington Academy. Priestley even employed the same analogy in his Philadelphia lectures, published as *Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion* (1799), to explain quite how unknowable and unintelligible 'a resurrection and a future state' is to humans:

> Indeed, more exact knowledge would only gratify an useless curiosity; and it is very possible that a full account of it could not be made intelligible, or credible to us. Supposing, what is not impossible, that our condition in a future state will be as different from that of the present, as that of a butterfly is from that of a caterpillar, the difference would be so great, that we should not be able, by any description, to form a just idea of it.[61]

Priestley's own view that there is no separate immaterial soul, and that resurrection is therefore a material reconfiguration, is expressed more fully in his 1777 *Free Disquisition of the Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity*. Whilst Barbauld's writing for children has no explicit Unitarian or materialist agenda — Emma Major characterizes it as 'carefully non-denominational' — there is a similarity in the distinction Priestley makes between the strange but comprehensible transformation of insects and the unimaginable future transformation of humans.[62] In Barbauld's account the caterpillar, even considered up close, does not have a soul and there is no actual mystery to its development. 'Metamorphosis', with its mythical trappings, is therefore not a helpful term for Barbauld's caterpillar poetics: as Swammerdam and the others that followed him claimed, the transition from caterpillar to butterfly is akin to the transition from egg to chicken, or from embryo to born child. The transformation from caterpillar to butterfly is as comprehensible as the biological process of human birth and we might remember here Barbauld's own similar description of an unborn child as an 'infant bud' within a 'living tomb'.[63] The simplicity of Barbauld's description that '*thou* shalt be in the ground, as the seed lieth in the bosom of the earth: but thou shalt be raised again' (my emphasis) can be seen as a consequence of her intended juvenile audience and a characteristic shying away from theological discussion.[64] But there remains a distinction between birth and caterpillar metamorphosis and human resurrection: only the renewal of human life after death is a miraculous process — growing again from 'seed', from the very beginning — which is, for Barbauld, also indicative of humans' particular otherness and dependence upon salvation.

3. *Caterpillar Politics*

The main consequence of Barbauld's dissenting faith as far as the depiction of insects is concerned seems to have been her conviction about the kind of education her readers should receive: the examples that I have explored correspond to Isobel Armstrong's description of Barbauld's work as constructing an 'Unitarian poetics' that promotes dialogue and affective ways of knowing.[65] Significantly, 'The Caterpillar' was written after Barbauld's retreat from public literary life due to the disastrously misogynistic reception of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* and after the backlash against Dissenters in the 1790s which led Sarah Trimmer and others to revise their positive reception of her writing for

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children and, as Emma Major says, to frame references to 'nature and the natural in her writings' as 'fraught with insidious intent to subvert the youthful mind and lead it away from the rules of society into an unchristian Francophile carnival of nature'.[66] Barbauld's discussion of liberty in her most famous poem 'The Mouse's Petition' (1773) was interpreted in this light as being as much politically radical as expressing animal sympathies.[67] In this final section, I consider how Barbauld's consideration of human virtue in the second half of 'The Caterpillar' highlights the reader's positionality and relation to the insect subject. This prompts the question: how central is the insect to this poem?

As an ecological encounter, the 1825 poem presents an ambivalent narrative: once the 'fellowship of sense' between individual human and individual caterpillar has been established, the speaker stops looking at the caterpillar altogether. Barbauld's description here mirrors her turn to the human in Hymn XI:

> So the storm
> Of horrid war, o'erwelming cities, fields,
> And peaceful villages, rolls dreadful on:
> The victor shouts triumphant; he enjoys
> The roar of cannon and the clang of arms,
> The urges, by no soft relentings stopped,
> The work of death, and carnage. Yet should one,
> A single sufferer from the field escaped,
> Panting and pale, and bleeding at his feet,
> Lift his imploying eyes, —the hero weeps!
> He is grown human, and capricious Pity,
> Which would not stir for thousands, melts for one
> With sympathy spontaneous:— 'Tis not Virtue,
> Yet 'tis the weakness of a virtuous mind. (lines 29–42)

At first, the 'horrid war' seems to refer to the 'slaughter' that had characterized the speaker's earlier approach to the 'tribes' of greedy insects. However, it soon becomes clear that the speaker is much more interested in exploring what the change of sympathy means for the human observer rather than the subject of observation. Caroline Dauphin suggests that, caterpillars being pests, '[i]t would be a "virtue" for the good farmer of the georgic to kill the last caterpillar', and this leads her to read the poem in the light of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* as a rebellion against nationalist crop-production.[69] According to this reading, the final section of the poem is much closer, therefore, to the strong commitment to liberty and diversity visible outside of Barbauld's animal literature, most notably the renaming of a battle as 'a bloody murder' in 'Things by Their Right Names'.[70] Barbauld suggests that — like the speaker — the victorious soldier's temporary humanity

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in saving the bleeding victim is a sign of 'capricious Pity' and spontaneity rather than a virtuous conversion to sympathy. This helps to show how Barbauld's political expressions and her ecological writing cannot be neatly demarcated.

The caterpillar seems an ideal vehicle for this kind of commentary. Anti-georgic imagery is visible in Barbauld's bracing criticism of slavery and torture in the 'Epistle to William Wilberforce', where 'shrieks and yells disturb the balmy air' of 'spicy groves'; *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* depicts conflict as a regression from the Ovidian model of ages where 'The sword, not sickle, reaps the harvest now' and ends with the statement that, like worms, 'Arts, arms and wealth destroy the fruits they bring'.[71] Alice Den Otter highlights how the composition of 'The Caterpillar' occurred 'in the shadow' of the latter poem to frame the encounter as 'mere rhetorical performance' to attract the audience, rather than to prompt them to engage in ecological thinking.[72] However, the current article has shown how Barbauld's writing signals a tension between attempts to view insects neutrally, or to decentre the human perspective, and the figurative language that is often central to explanations of insect life. In this light, the turn to the soldier's example should be read as an articulation of the difficulty of sustaining an ecological outlook. The suggestion that 'sympathy spontaneous' is demonstrated by both gardener and soldier indicates that the garden itself is a site of conflict where the human seeks dominance over the natural world. The two transformations in the poem — the moment where the speaker 'feel[s] and clearly recognise[s]' the caterpillar (line 25) and when the hero is 'grown human' when encountering the individual wounded opponent (line 39) — are not concerned with the insect subject, which itself remains unchanged. A neutral relation to small creatures would involve a restructuring of human identity rather than a change in the status of the caterpillar subject.

The centring of insects across these different texts shows the complex tension between the idea that insects have individual, affective experiences and the pedagogical imperative to link to human experience. With this realization in mind, the connection to the soldier to understand how sympathy works is no longer effective in the expected way. Barbauld's comment that ''Tis not Virtue, | Yet 'tis the weakness of a virtuous mind' (lines 41–42) signals that anthropocentric parallels between (autonomous) animal societies and human politics are ineffective. When figuration or morality is (re)introduced following observations of either the organism or its processes, the central problem of positionality arises. The equivocal final lines of 'The Caterpillar' prompt the reader to push beyond 'thinking with' insects and ideas of virtue or utility, showing that insect encounters that return to human metaphors of experience are inevitable even as they short circuit a sustained engagement with insect experience.

NOTES

1. Anna Letitia Barbauld, *Second Part of Lessons for Children, of Three Years Old* (Dublin: printed for Jackson, 1779), pp. 30–36.

2. Eric Carle, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (London: Puffin, 2002).

3. Eric Jorink, 'Snakes, Fungi and Insects: Otto Mareus van Schriek, Johannes Swammerdam and the Theory of Spontaneous Generation', in *Zoology in Early Modern Culture: Intersections of Science, Theology, Philology, and Political and Religious Education*, ed. by Karl A. E. Enenkel and Paul J. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 219; Brian W. Ogilvie, 'Order of Insects: Insect Species and Metamorphosis between Renaissance and Enlightenment', in *The Life Sciences in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Ohad Nachtomy and Justin E.H. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 237–39.

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4. Joanna Wharton, '"The Things Themselves": Sensible Images in *Lessons for Children* and *Hymns in Prose*', in *Anna Letitia Barbauld: New Perspectives*, ed. by William McCarthy and Olivia Murphy (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2013), p. 112.

5. Wharton, 'Sensible Images', p. 113.

6. For examples of how readers remembered their experiences of learning from the *Lessons for Children*, see William McCarthy, 'Mother of all Discourses: Anna Barbauld's *Lessons for Children*', *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 60 (1999), 196–97.

7. Matthew Prior, 'To a Child of Quality, Five Years Old', in *Poems on Several Occasions*, 4th edn (London: printed for Hitch and Hodges, 1742), II, 66–68, lines 13–14; Sarah Trimmer, *An Easy Introduction to the Knowledge of Nature* (London: printed for the author, 1780), pp. 98–99; Priscilla Wakefield, *An Introduction to the Natural History and Classification of Insects, in a Series of Familiar Letters* (London: printed for Darton, Harvey, and Darton, 1816), p. 23.

8. Hannan lists the examples of Ann Williams and Henrietta Rhodes, both of whom were awarded prizes by the London Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in 1778. See 'Experience and Experiment: The Domestic Cultivation of Silkworms in Eighteenth-Century England and Ireland', *Cultural and Social History*, 15 (2018), 509–30 (pp. 512 and 517).

9. Samuel Pullein describes the extraction method as follows: 'Though the silk is not broken, yet the balls which are thus pierced by the moth [emerging from its cocoon] can never be reeled off, on account of the fuzzy burr of silk which is raised and loosened at the hole where the moth comes out, which immediately entangles the threads upon attempting to reel them; therefore, that you may reap the advantage of the worms, it is necessary that the chrysalis or grub should be killed in those silk-balls which you have not leisure to reel off before the time of the moth's piercing them; after having first made choice of a sufficient number of balls to breed from.' Sanuel Pullein, *The Culture of Silk: or, an Essay on its Rational Practice and Improvement* (London: printed for Millar, 1753), pp. 174–75.

10. Compare Nina Edwards's descriptions of weeds as 'despised, voracious plant life if found in the garden border, but in the wild, beyond our perception, when we cannot see or do not care to know what damage they may be doing, it is a matter of live and let live'. Nina Edwards, *Weeds* (London: Reaktion, 2015), p. 8.

11. Alice G. Den Otter also provides the same species identification in 'Pests, Parasites, and Positionality: Anna Letitia Barbauld and "The Caterpillar"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 43 (2004), 209–30 (p. 214). A formal field guide describes the species as follows: 'Head bluish grey with two black spots. Body dully bluish with a sparse covering of dark hairs above the spiracular level and denser, orangey-brown hairs below. Dorsal stripes white, edged with a black line and an orange strike beyond. Subdorsal stripe orange, blackish above and edged below with a black line. Subpiracular stripe orange, edged with black lines.' Barry Henwood and Phil Sterlin, *Field Guide to the Caterpillars of Great Britain and Ireland*, illustrated by Richard Lewington (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

12. Anna Letitia Barbauld, 'The Caterpillar', in *The Collected Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld: Volume 1. The Poems, Revised*, ed. by William McCarthy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 274–76, lines 3–6.

13. Inhye Ha, 'The "Fellowship of Sense": Anna Letitia Barbauld and Interspecies Community', *Studies in Romanticism*, 57 (2018), 453–78, (p. 455).

14. Den Otter, 'Pests, Parasites, and Positionality', p. 211.

15. Heather Keenleyside, *Animals and Other People: Literary Forms and Living Beings in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), pp. 201–04.

16. Conjectural dates of composition are drawn from McCarthy, ed., *The Collected Works*.

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17. Eric C. Brown, 'Reading the Insect', in *Insect Poetics*, ed. by Eric C. Brown (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. ix–xxxiii, (p. ix).

18. 'To Mrs P—, with some Drawings of Birds and Insects', *Collected Works*, pp. 39–43, line 4.

19. On Barbauld's copious production of occasional verse to accompany gifts, see Michelle Levy, 'Barbauld's Poetic Career in Script and Print', in *Anna Letitia Barbauld: New Perspectives*, pp. 37–58 (pp. 42–43).

20. Millie Schurch, '"And Breathes a Spirit Through the Finish'd Whole": Empiricism, Poetry and Devotion in Anna Letitia Barbauld's Poetic Epistemology', *European Romantic Review*, 33 (2022), 777–800 (p. 780).

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ROSALIND POWELL is Assistant Professor in English Literature at the University of Amsterdam. She is the author of *Perception and Analogy: Poetry, Science and Religion in the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester University Press, 2021).

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