

# Lucian of Samosata

## Praising a fly

Translated by H.W. Fowler

Μυίας Ἐγκώμιον  
Muscae Encomium  
The Fly (Praising a Fly)  
The Fly, an Appreciation

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### A paradoxical encomium of the two-winged insect

The fly is not the smallest of winged things, on a level with gnats, midges, and still tinier creatures; it is as much larger than they as smaller than the bee. It has not feathers of the usual sort, is not fledged all over like some, nor provided with quill-feathers like other birds, but resembles locusts, grasshoppers, and bees in being gauze-winged, this sort of wing being as much more delicate than the ordinary as Indian fabrics are lighter and softer than Greek. Moreover, close inspection of them when spread out and moving in the sun will show them to be peacock-hued.

Its flight is accompanied neither by the incessant wing-beat of the bat, the jump of the locust, nor the buzz of the wasp, but carries it easily in any direction. It has the further merit of a music neither sullen as with the gnat kind, deep as with the bee, nor grim and threatening as with the wasp; it is as much more tuneful than they as the flute is sweeter than trumpet or cymbals.

As for the rest of its person, the head is very slenderly attached by the neck, easily turned, and not all of one piece with the body as in the locust; the eyes are projecting and horny; the chest strong, with the legs springing freely from it instead of lying close like a wasp's. The belly also is well fortified, and looks like a breastplate, with its broad bands and scales. Its weapons are not in the tail as with wasp and bee, but in its mouth and proboscis; with the latter, in which it is like the elephant, it forages, takes hold of things, and by means of a sucker at its tip attaches itself firmly to them. This proboscis is also supplied with a projecting tooth, with which the fly makes a puncture, and so drinks blood. It does drink milk, but also likes blood, which it gets without hurting its prey much. Of its six legs, four only are for walking, and the front pair serves for hands; you may see it standing on four legs and holding up a morsel in these hands, which it consumes in very human fashion.



It does not come into being in its ultimate shape, but starts as a worm in the dead body of man or animal; then it gradually develops legs, puts forth wings and becomes a flying instead of a creeping thing, which generates in turn and produces a little worm, one day to be a fly. Living with man, sharing his food and his table, it tastes everything except his oil, to drink which is death to it. In any case it soon perishes, having but a short span of life allotted to it, but while it lives it loves the light, and is active only under its influence; at night it rests, neither flying nor buzzing, but retiring and keeping quiet.

I am able to record its considerable wisdom, shown in evading the plots of its enemy the spider. It is always on the look-out for his ambushes, and in the most circumspect way dodges about, that it may not be caught, netted, and entangled in his meshes. Its valour and spirit require no mention of mine; Homer, mightiest-voiced of poets, seeking a compliment for the greatest of heroes, likens his spirit not to a lion's, a panther's, a boar's, but to the courage of the fly, to its unshrinking and persistent assault; mark, it is not mere audacity, but courage, that he attributes to it. Though you drive it off, he says, it will not leave you; it will have its bite. He is so earnest an admirer of the fly that he alludes to it not once nor twice, but constantly; a mention of it is felt to be a poetic ornament. Now it is its multitudinous descent upon the milk that he celebrates; now he is in want of an illustration for Athene as she wards off a spear from the vitals of Menelaus; so he makes her a mother caring for her sleeping child, and in comes the fly again. Moreover he gives them that pretty epithet, "thick-clust'ring"; and "nations" is his dignified word for a swarm of them.

The fly's force is shown by the fact that its bite pierces not merely the human skin, but that of cattle and horses; it annoys the elephant by getting into the folds of its hide, and letting it know the efficiency of even a tiny trunk. There is much ease and freedom about their love affairs, which are not disposed of so expeditiously as by the domestic fowl; the act of union is prolonged, and is found quite compatible with flight. A fly will live and breathe for some time after its head is cut off.

The most remarkable point about its natural history is that which I am now to mention. It is the one fact that Plato seems to me to have overlooked in his discourse of the soul and its immortality. If a little ashes be sprinkled on a dead fly, it gets up, experiences a second birth, and starts life afresh, which is recognized as a convincing proof that its soul is immortal, inasmuch as after it has departed it returns, recognizes and reanimates the body, and enables it to fly; so is confirmed the tale about Hermodotimus of Clazomenae — how his soul frequently left him and went off on its own account, and afterwards returning occupied the body again and restored the man to life.

It toils not, but lives at its ease, profiting by the labours of others, and finding everywhere a table spread for it. For it the goats are milked, for its behoof and man's the honey is stored, to its palate the *chef* adapts his sauces; it tastes before the king himself, walks upon his table, shares his meal, and has the use of all that is his.

Nest, home, local habitation, it has none; like the Scythians, it elects to lead a wandering life, and where night finds it, there is its hearth and its chamber. But as I

said, it works no deeds of darkness; “live openly” is its motto; its principle is to do no villainy that, done in the face of day, would dishonour it.

Legend tells how Myia (the fly’s ancient name) was once a maiden, exceeding fair, but over-given to talk and chatter and song, Selene’s rival for the love of Endymion. When the young man slept, she was for ever waking him with her gossip and tunes and merriment, till he lost patience, and Selene in wrath turned her to what she now is. And therefore it is that she still, in memory of Endymion, grudges all sleepers their rest, and most of all the young and tender. Her very bite and blood-thirst tell not of savagery, but of love and human kindness; she is but enjoying mankind as she may, and sipping beauty.

In ancient times there was a woman of her name, a poetess wise and beautiful, and another a famous Attic courtesan, of whom the comic poet wrote:

As deep as to his heart fair Myia bit him.

The comic Muse, we see, disdained not the name, nor refused it the hospitality of the boards; and parents took no shame to give it to their daughters. Tragedy goes further and speaks of the fly in high terms of praise, as witness the following:

Foul shame the little fly, with might courageous,  
Should leap upon men’s limbs, athirst for blood,  
But men-at-arms shrink from the foeman’s steel!

I might add many details about Pythagoras’s daughter Myia, were not her story too well known.

There are also flies of very large size, called generally soldier-flies, or dog-flies; these have a hoarse buzz, a very rapid flight, and quite long lives; they last the winter through without food, mostly in sheltered nooks below the roof; the most remarkable fact about these is that they are hermaphrodites.

But I must break off; not that my subject is exhausted; only that to exhaust such a subject is too like breaking a butterfly on the wheel.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> [“Breaking on the wheel” was a form of torturous execution in ancient Greece.]