

INSECTS AND GREEK  
POETRY

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## INSECTS AND GREEK POETRY

*This lecture was delivered by LAFCADIO HEARN before Japanese students in his class in English literature and is here reprinted the first time in book form.*

THE subject which I have chosen for today's lecture might seem to you rather remote from the topic of English literature, at least from the topic of English literature as taught in Japan. Here the Chinese language represents, in your long course of studies, what Greek and Latin represent to the English student. But in England, or in any advanced European country, the subject would not be remote from the study of the native literature, because that is carried on from first to last upon a classical foundation. Any good Greek scholar knows something about the Greek poetry on the subject of insects, and knows how to use that poetry in compositions of his own; so I think that this departure from our routine work is quite justified, and I believe that you will find the subject interesting.

Last year, when lecturing about Keats's poems, I remarked to you that he was one of the very few English poets who wrote about singing in-

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sects—I refer, of course, to his poem on the cricket. Most modern European poetry is barren on the subject of crickets, cicadæ, and insects generally—with the exception of butterflies and bees. Tennyson, indeed, has given attention to dragon flies and other insects. But, as a rule, it is not to European poetry of modern times that we can look for anything of an interesting kind in regard to musical insects. We must go back to the old Greek civilization for that. You know that the old Greeks were endowed far beyond any modern races of the West: their literature, their arts, their conception of life, have never been equaled in later times, and probably will not be equaled again for thousands of years. And it should be interesting to the Japanese student of literature to know that his own people accord with the old Greeks in their appreciation of insect music as one of the great charms of country life.

Most of the Greek poems about insects are to be found in what is called the Greek Anthology. Besides the distinct works of great authors which have come down to us, there have been preserved collections of very short poems—collections which were made by the Greeks themselves, or

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by Greek scholars of a later day, many centuries ago. None of these collections are complete: a great deal has been lost—to the eternal regret of all lovers of poetry. But those that we have represent an immense variety of little poems upon an immense variety of subjects; and among these are a number of poems about insects. Today I want to quote some of these to you, in an English prose translation. There are many poetical translations, also; but no modern poet can reproduce the real charm of the Greek verse. Therefore it is just as well that we should read only the plain prose.

The greater number of these poems are between two thousand and twenty-five hundred years old. Some of them were composed in cities that no longer exist; some of them were written by persons whose names have been lost forever; this makes them all the more precious. They show us how very much like modern human nature was the human nature of those vanished people. And they show us also that there were many points of resemblance in the old Greek and in the Japanese character.

It is possible that the Greeks used to keep insects in cages, for the pleasure of hearing them

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sing. We have in the first Idyl of Theocritus a description of a boy taking charge of a vineyard to protect the grapes from the foxes, and occupying his time by "plaiting a pretty locust-cage with stalks of asphodel, and fitting it with reeds." Also we have in one of the poems of Meleager a reference to the feeding of crickets with leeks cut up very small—which would seem to show that the experience of Greeks and Japanese in the feeding of certain kinds of insects was much the same. A leek, you know, is a kind of small onion, and the soft inner part of a similar plant is used in Tokyo today by insect-feeders.

The poems refer principally to cicadae, musical grasshoppers, and some kinds of night crickets, and these three classes of musical insects correspond tolerably well to three classes of Japanese musical insects. But whereas in Japan the sound made by the semi is considered to be too loud in most cases to be musical, it is especially the cicada that is celebrated in the Greek poem. This fact would not, however, indicate a real difference in the musical taste of the two races; it would rather indicate a difference in the species of the insect. Probably the Greek semi were much less noisy than their relations in the Far East. But, at the

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same time, perhaps most beautiful of all the Greek poems about insects is a poem about a night cricket. It is attributed to Meleager—one of the sweetest singers of the later Greek literature.

"O thou cricket that cheatest me of my regrets, the soother of slumber; O thou cricket that art the muse of ploughed fields, and art with shrill wings the self-formed imitation of the lyre, chirrup me something pleasant, while beating thy vocal wings with thy feet. How I wish, O cricket, that thou wouldst release me from the troubles of much sleepless care, weaving the thread of a voice that causes love to wander away! And I will give thee for morning gifts drops of dew, and a leek ever fresh, cut up small for thy mouth."

The great beauty of this little piece is in the line about "weaving the thread of a voice that causes love to wander away"; listening to the charm of the insect's song at night, the poet is able to forget his troubles. The expression, "thread of a voice," exquisitely represents what we would call today the *thin* quality of the little creature's song. It is also evident that the Greeks observed such insects very closely and noticed how their music was made. The cricket is correctly described as striking its wings with its feet. But in

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the cicada the stridulatory organ is not in the wings but in the breast; and the old poets observed this fact also.

It would also appear that Greek children kept insects as pets, and made little graves for them when they died, just as one sees Japanese children do today. Here is a little poem twenty-six hundred years old, written by a Greek girl of Sicily, a poetess named Anyte. It is the epitaph of a locust and a tettix—by which word we may understand cicada. "For a locust, the nightingale amongst ploughed fields, and for the tettix, whose bed is in the oak, did Myro make a common tomb, after the damsel had dropped a maiden tear; for Hades, hard to be persuaded, had gone away, taking with her two playthings."

How freshly do the tears of this little girl still shine today, after the passing of twenty-six hundred years! There is another poem on the very same subject, by a later poet, in the Anthology—also celebrating the grief of Myro.

"For a locust and a tettix has Myro placed this monument, after throwing upon both a little dust with her hands, and weeping affectionately at the funeral pyre; for Hades had carried off the male songster, and Proserpine the other."

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But if little girls in old Greece were so tender-hearted as this, I am sorry to tell you that little boys were not. They caught cicadae much as little boys in Tokyo today catch semi, and they were not very merciful, if we can judge from the following poem, intended to represent the death-song of a cicada:

"No longer shall I delight myself by singing out the song from my quick-moving wings; for I have fallen into the savage hand of a boy, who seized me unexpectedly, as I was sitting under the green leaves."

You must know that the cicada received religious respect in some parts of Greece; it was believed to be the favorite insect of the goddess of Wisdom, and it was often represented in statues of the goddess. I do not mean that the Greeks worshiped it, but they had many religious traditions concerning it. At one time the Athenian women used to wear cicadae of gold in their hair; and this ornament was afterwards adopted by Roman ladies. As for the merits of the insect we have a very curious little poem in which it is celebrated as a favorite of the gods: "We deem thee happy, O cicada, because, having drunk like a king a little dew, thou dost chirrup on the tops

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of trees. For all those things are thine that thou see'st in the fields, and whatever the seasons produce. Yet thou art a friend of land-tillers, to no one doing any harm. Thou art held in honor by mortals as the pleasant harbinger of song. The muses love thee. Phœbus himself loves thee and has gifted thee with a shrill song, and old age does not wear thee down. O thou clever one—earth-born, song-loving, without suffering, having flesh without blood—thou art nearly equal to the gods.”

Another poet speaks more definitely about the relation of the insect to the goddess of Wisdom—putting his words into the mouth of the insect. “Not only sitting upon lofty trees do I know how to sing, warmed with the great heat of summer, an unpaid minstrel to wayfaring man, and sipping the vapor of dew, that is like woman's milk. But even upon the spear of Athene, with her beautiful helmet, will you see me, the tettix, seated. For as much as we are loved by the Muses, so much is Athene by us. For the virgin has established a prize for melody.”

Meleager also celebrates the tettix:

“Thou vocal tettix, drunk with drops of dew, thou singest the muse that lives in the country,

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thou dost prattle in the desert, and sitting with thy serrated limbs on the tops of petals, thou givest out the melody of the lyre with thy dusky skin! Come thou, O friend, and speak some new playful thing to the wood nymphs, and chirrup a strain responsive to Pan, in order that, after flying from love, I may find mid-day sleep here, reclining under a shady plane tree.”

But the most remarkable poem about a cicada in the whole Greek collection is a little piece twenty-three hundred years old, attributed to the poet Evenus. It was written upon the occasion of seeing a nightingale catching a cicada. Evenus calls the nightingale “Attic maiden,” because in Greek mythology the nightingale was a daughter of an ancient king of Attica; her name was Philomela, and she was turned into a bird by the gods out of pity for her great sorrow.

This is the poem:

“Thou, Attic maiden, honey-fed, hast chirping seized a chirping cicada, and bearest it to thy unfledged young—thou, a twitterer, the twitterer; thou, the winged, the well-winged; thou, a stranger, the stranger; thou, a summer child, the summer child! Wilt thou not quickly throw it away? For it is not right, it is not just, that those

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engaged in song should perish by the mouths of those engaged in song!"

This poem has been put into English verse by several hands. Most of the verse translations are very disappointing; but in this case one translation happens to be tolerably good, so that we may quote it:

Honey-nurtured Attic maiden,  
Wherefore to thy brood dost wing  
With the shrill cicada laden?  
'T is, like thee, a prattling thing,  
'T is a sojourner and stranger,  
And a summer child, like thee.  
'T is, like thee, a wingèd ranger  
Of the air's immensity.  
From thy bill this instant fling her—  
'T is not proper, just, or good,  
That a little ballad-singer  
Should be killed for singer's food.

Another ancient poem represents the insect caught in a spider's web and crying there until the poet himself came to the rescue.

"A spider, having woven its thin web with its slim feet, caught a tettix hampered in the intricate net. I did not, however, on seeing the young thing that loves music, run by it, while [it was] making a lament in the thin fetters, but, freeing

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it from the net, I relieved it, and spoke to it thus, 'Be free, thou who singest with a musical voice!'"

Like the poets of the Far East, the Greek singers especially celebrated the harmlessness of the cicada. We have already had one example in the poem beginning, "We deem you happy," etc., by the great poet Anacreon. Here is another very old composition, of which the authorship is not known.

"Why, O Shepherds, do ye drag, by a shameless captivity, from dewy boughs, me a cicada, the lover of solitude, the roadside songster of the nymphs, chirping shrilly in mid-day heat on the mountains and in the shady groves. Behold the thrush and the blackbird—behold how many starlings are plunderers of the fields! It is right to take the destroyers of fruits. Kill them. What grudging is there of leaves and grassy dew?"

Occasionally, too, we find the Greek poet, like the Japanese, compassionating the insects of autumn, and lamenting for their death. The following example is said to have been composed by an ancient writer called Mnasolcas:

"No more with wings shrill sounding shalt thou sing, O locust, along the fertile furrows settling; nor me reclining under shady foliage shalt



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thou delight, striking, with dusky wings, a pleasant melody!"

By the word locust here is probably meant a kind of musical grasshopper—of the same class as those insects which are so common in this country. In England and in America the word locust commonly refers to an insect frequenting trees rather than grass.

We may now attempt a few remarks upon the social signification of this old Greek poetry, and its charming suggestion of refined sensibility and kindness.

You will not find Roman poets writing about insects—at least not until a very late day, and then only in imitation of the Greeks. This little fact, insignificant as it may seem, serves us as an illustration of the vast difference in the character of the two races. Grand in many respects the Romans were—splendid soldiers, matchless architects, excellent rulers. They had all the qualities of power and foresight, and executive ability. But at no time did they ever reach the standard of old Greek refinement—not even after they had been studying Greek literature and philosophy for hundreds of years. Something of the savage and the ferocious always remained in Roman char-

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acter, which finally developed into the most monstrous forms of cruelty that the world has ever known, the cruelty of an age when the greatest pleasure of life was the spectacle of death.

On the other hand, even in the times of their degradation under Roman rule, the Greeks could not be coldly cruel. They resisted the introduction of the Roman games into their civilization; they opposed, whenever it was possible, the sentiment of humanity and pity to gladiatorial shows. A people who enjoyed seeing men killing each other for sport could not have written poems about insects. And a people that wrote poems about insects could not find pleasure in cruelty.

Indeed, I think that the capacity to enjoy the music of insects and all that it signifies in the great poem of nature tells very plainly of goodness of heart, æsthetic sensibility, a perfectly healthy state of mind. All this the Greeks certainly had. What most impresses us in the tone of their literature, in the feeling of their art, in the charm of their conception of life, is the great joyousness of the Greek nature—a joyousness fresh as that of a child—combined with a power of deep thinking, in which it had no rival. Those old Greeks, though happy as children and as

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kindly, were very great philosophers, to whom we go for instruction even at this day. What the world now most feels in need of is the return of that old Greek spirit of happiness and of kindness. We can think deeply enough; but all our thinking only serves, it would seem, to darken our lives instead of brightening them.

Now, as I have said before, there was very much in the old Greek life that resembled the old Japanese life; and there was certainly in old Japan a certain joyousness and gentleness for which the Western World can show no parallel in modern times. We should have to go back to the Greek times for that. Were some great classic scholar, perfectly familiar with the manners and customs of this country, to make a literary study of the parallel between Greek and Japanese life and thought, I am sure that the result would be as surprising as it would be charming. Although the two religions present great differences, the religious spirit offers a great many extraordinary resemblances. It was not only in writing about insects that the Greek poets came close to the Japanese poets: they came close to them also in thousands of little touches of an emotional kind, referring to the gods, the fate of man, the pleas-

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ure of festival days, those sorrows of existence also which have been the same in all ages of humanity. I wonder if you remember a little poem in the *Man yo shu*, attributed to a Japanese poet named Okura, in which, lamenting the death of his little son, he begs that the porter of the underworld will carry the little ghost upon his shoulder because the boy is too little to walk so far. Is it not strange to find a Greek poet writing the very same thing thousands of years ago? The Greek poet was called Zonas of Sardis by some writers, by others he was called Diodorus—his poem is addressed to the boatman who ferries the souls of men over the river of death.

“Do thou, who rowest the boat of the dead in the water of this lake full of reeds, for Hades, having a painful task to do, stretch out, dark Charon, thy hand to the son of Cinyrus, as he mounts on the ladder by the gangway, and receive him. *For his sandals will cause the lad to slip, and he fears to put his feet, naked, on the sands of the shore.*”

Again, just as it is the custom for little Japanese girls to make offerings of their dolls and toys to some divinity, in various parts of the country, so we find little Greek poems written to celebrate

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the doing of the same thing by Greek girls, ages before any modern European language had taken shape. The poet says in one of these, "Timarete has offered up her tambourine and her ball and her doll and her doll's dresses to thee, goddess, and do thou, O goddess, place thy hand over the girl and preserve her who thus devotes herself unto thee."

Hundreds of examples of this kind might be quoted. I mention them only by way of suggestion.

At the beginning of this lecture I remarked to you on the absence of poems about insects in the modern literature of the West. Of course, such absence means that the Western people have not yet perceived, much less understood, certain very beautiful sides of nature—in spite of their study of the Greek poets. There may be reasons for this of another kind than you might at first suppose. It would not be just to say that Western people are deficient in æsthetic and ethical sensibility—though they have not yet reached the Greek standard in that respect. It is not want of feeling; it is rather, I think, inability to consider nature in the largest and best way, because of the restraints that the Christian religion long placed

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upon Western thought. Christianity gave souls only to men—not to animals or to insects. Familiarity with animals, however, compels men to recognize animal intelligence even while not daring to contradict the opinion of the Church.

Familiarity with insects, however, could not be obtained in the same way, nor have the like result. Even when men could recognize the spirit of a horse or the affectionate intelligence of a dog, they would still, under the influence of the old teaching, think only of insects as automata. In modern times, science has taught them better; but I am speaking of popular opinion. On the other hand, the philosophy of the Far East, teaching the unity of all life, would impel men to interest themselves in all living creatures—just as did the Greek teaching that all forms of life had souls. One thing certainly strikes me as being very interesting. The few modern writers, in France and in England, who write about insect music, are men troubled by the mystery of the universe—men who have faced the great problems of oriental thought, and whose ears are therefore open to all the whispers of nature.

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