

# The Ephemera

## An Emblem of Human Life

Benjamin Franklin

You may remember, my dear friend, that when we lately spent that happy day in the delightful garden and sweet society of the Moulin Joly, I stopt a little in one of our walks, and stayed some time behind the company. We had been shown numberless skeletons of a kind of little fly, called an ephemera, whose successive generations, we were told, were bred and expired within the day. I happened to see a living company of them on a leaf, who appeared to be engaged in conversation. You know I understand all the inferior animal tongues. My too great application to the study of them is the best excuse I can give for the little progress I have made in your charming language. I listened through curiosity to the discourse of these little creatures; but as they, in their national vivacity, spoke three or four together, I could make but little of their conversation. I found, however, by some broken expressions that I heard now and then, they were disputing warmly on the merit of two foreign musicians, one a *cousin*, the other a *moscheto*; in

# 蜉蝣

## ——人生的一個象徵——

卞傑明·富蘭克林

我親愛的朋友，<sup>1</sup>上次在苟麗磨坊<sup>2</sup>舉行園遊會的那天，我們玩得很痛快。那天良辰美景，到會者個個是風雅仕女，可是你也許還記得，我們在散步的時候，我曾經在路上停留了一會，落在大家後面。原因是園裏有很多蜉蝣的殘屍——所謂蜉蝣，是蒼蠅一類的小昆蟲——有人指給我們看了；而且據說牠們的壽命很短，一天之內，生生死死好幾代就過去了。我聽講之後，信步走去，在一片樹葉上面，發現了這種小蟲有一群之多。牠們似乎在討論甚麼東西——你知道我是善知蟲語的；我和你往來這麼久，可是你們貴國美妙的語言<sup>3</sup>我學來學去，始終進步很少，我如何能替自己解嘲呢？只好說我研究蟲語用心過度了。現在這批小蟲在舉行辯論，我好奇心動，不免湊上前去偷聽一番；可是蟲雖小，牠們的心卻大，開口來，都是三四個一起來的，因此聽來很不清楚。偶爾斷斷續續也可聽清一兩句，原來牠們正熱烈討論兩位外國音樂家的優劣比較——那兩位，一位是蚋先生，一位是蚊先生；<sup>4</sup>討論得非常之熱烈，牠

<sup>1</sup> 好朋友即本文最後一段白夫人 (Madame Brillon de Jouy)，白夫人年青貌美，富蘭克林駐法期間，與白夫人過往甚密。

<sup>2</sup> 苟麗磨坊為一英國式花園，位於塞納河的一個小島上。

<sup>3</sup> 白夫人是法國人。富蘭克林的法文，文法準確，而韻味不夠，白夫人時時替他修正。

<sup>4</sup> 本文作於 1778 年。時巴黎愛好音樂人士分兩派，舊派擁護意大利的畢契尼 (Puccini)，新派擁護德國的格魯克 (Gluck)。

which dispute they spent their time, seemingly as regardless of the shortness of life as if they had been sure of living a month. Happy people! thought I; you are certainly under a wise, just, and mild government, since you have no public grievances to complain of, nor any subject of contention but the perfections and imperfections of foreign music. I turned my head from them to an old gray-headed one, who was single on another leaf, and talking to himself. Being amused with his soliloquy, I put it down in writing, in hopes it will likewise amuse her to whom I am so much indebted for the most pleasing of all amusements, her delicious company and heavenly harmony.

“It was,” said he, “the opinion of learned philosophers of our race, who lived and flourished long before my time, that this vast world, the Moulin Joly, could not itself subsist more than eighteen hours; and I think there was some foundation for that opinion, since, by the apparent motion of the great luminary that gives life to all nature, and which in my time has evidently declined considerably towards the ocean at the end of our earth, it must then finish its course, be extinguished in the waters that surround us, and leave the world in cold and darkness, necessarily producing universal death and destruction. I have lived seven of those hours, a great age, being no less than four hundred and twenty minutes of time. How very few of us continue so long! I have seen generations born, flourish, and expire. My present friends are the children and grandchildren of the friends of my youth, who are now, alas, no more! And I must soon follow them; for, by the course of nature, though still in health, I cannot expect to live above seven or eight minutes longer. What now avails all my toil and labor in amassing honeydew on this leaf, which I cannot live to enjoy! What the political struggles I have been engaged in for the good of my compatriot inhabitants of this bush, or my philosophical studies for the benefit of our race in general! for in politics what can laws do without morals? Our present race of ephemerae will in a course of minutes become corrupt, like those of other and older bushes, and consequently as wretched. And in philosophy how small our progress! Alas! art is

們似乎忘記了「蟲生」的短促，好像很有把握可以活滿一個月似的。你們多快樂呀，我這麼想，你們的政府一定是賢明公正，寬仁待民的，你們沒有牢騷可發，你們也用不着鬧黨派鬥爭，你們竟有閒情逸致在這裏討論外國音樂的優劣。我轉過頭來，看見另一片樹葉上有一頭白髮老蜉蝣，牠一個子正在自言自語。我聽得很有趣，因此把它筆錄下來。我的好朋友的情深意厚，我已領受很多，她的清風明月的風度，她的妙音雅奏，一向使我傾倒不已，我這一段筆記，無非博她一笑，聊作報答而已。

老蜉蝣說道：「我們的哲人學者，在很久很久以前，以為我們這個宇宙，（即是所謂苟麗磨坊），其壽命不會超過十八小時的。我想這話不無道理，因為自然界芸芸眾生，無不倚賴太陽為生，但是太陽正在自東徂西的移動，就在我的這一生，很明顯的太陽已經落得很低，快要沉到我們地球盡處的海洋裏去了。太陽西沉，為大地周圍的海洋所吞，世界變成一片寒冷黑暗，一切生命無疑都將滅亡，地球歸於毀滅。地球的壽命一共十八小時，我已經活了七個小時了，說起來時間也真不少，足足有四百二十分鐘呢！我們之間有幾個能夠如此克享高壽呢？我看見好幾代蜉蝣出生、長大，最後又死去。我現在的朋友只是些我青年時代朋友的子孫，可是他們本身，咳，現在是都已不在『蟲世』了。我追隨他們於地下的時候也不遠，因為現在我雖然仍舊步履輕健，但天下無不死之蟲，我頂多也只能再活七八分鐘而已。我現在還是辛辛苦苦的在這片樹葉上搜集蜜露，可是這有甚麼用呢？我所收藏的，我自己是吃不到了。回憶我這一生，為了我們這樹叢裏同胞的福利，我參加過多少次政治鬥爭；可是法律而無道德配合，政治仍舊不能清明，因此為了增進全體蜉蝣類的智慧，我又研究過多少種哲學問題！『道心惟微，蟲心惟危，』我們現在這一族蜉蝣必須隨時戒慎警惕，否則一不小心，在幾分鐘之內，就可以變得像別的樹叢裏歷史較為悠久的別族蜉蝣一樣，道德淪亡，萬劫不復！我們在哲學方面的成就又是多麼的渺小！嗚呼，我生也有涯而知也無涯。我的朋友常常都來安慰我，說

long, and life is short! My friends would comfort me with the idea of a name they say I shall leave behind me; and they tell me I have lived long enough to nature and to glory. But what will fame be to an ephemera who no longer exists? And what will become of all history in the eighteenth hour, when the world itself, even the whole Moulin Joly, shall come to an end, and be buried in universal ruin?”

To me, after all my eager pursuits, no solid pleasures now remain, but the reflection of a long life spent in meaning well, the sensible conversation of a few good lady ephemerae, and now and then a kind smile and a tune from the ever amiable *Brillante*.

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我年高德劭，為蜉蝣中之大老，身後之名，必可流傳千古。可是蜉蝣已死，還要身後名何用？何況到了第十八小時的時候，整個苟麗磨坊都將毀滅，世界末日已臨，還談得上甚麼歷史嗎？」

我勞碌一生，別無樂趣，惟有想起世間眾生，無分人蟲，如能長壽而為公眾謀利者，這是可以引為自慰的；再則聽聽蜉蝣小姐蜉蝣太太們的高談闊論，或者偶然從那可愛的白夫人那裏，得到巧笑一顧，或者是清歌一曲，我的暮年也得到慰藉了。

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