

Butterfly Chronicles: Imagination and Desire in Natural & Literary Histories

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Nabokov's Butterflies by Suzanne Northcott

Sitting in my backyard on a beautiful afternoon in August, books and papers spread about me on a table, a medium-sized brown and orange butterfly fluttered in for a visit. I watched as the creature flitted and fell, glided about gracefully, then descended like an exhaled breath onto the white pages I'd been editing, some six inches beyond my pen-holding hand. I could not move, nor even for a moment breathe, such was the shock and colour of the sighting. This was not a Monarch, but a smaller and more diversely coloured animal. The outer and coastal margins of its forewings were dappled in yellows, whites, and black, while the fur of the thorax was a short, bristling orange and brown. Using the familiar (to me) Spanish third person—for *la mariposa*, rather

than the largely inanimate English *it*—the creature extended six legs, unfurled her proboscis, appeared to relax her wings—though they still shuddered in tension—and proceeded, by doing precisely nothing, to enchant me without effort.

Fragile, ethereal, beautiful, the butterfly is at the same time decidedly strange in appearance. They are without mandibles, unlike most insects, but sport instead a proboscis, sometimes one and a half times their body length, which they use to drink liquids as if through a straw.¹ They have large, compound eyes, tiny nails or claws, and strange tufts of fur sprouting from unfamiliar body parts. Their wings, made of hardened membrane, are covered in tiny, often iridescent scales. The Linnaean binomial appears then to make perfect sense in this case: of the order *Lepidoptera*—from the Greek *lepidō*, meaning “scale,” and *ptera*, “wings”—the butterfly presents an actual Gryphon, a real-life dragon, part reptile and part bird, an unlikely fusion of wings and scales.

The butterfly’s shadow fluttered in greyscale like spirits or smoke across the white of my pages any number of times that afternoon. As I looked up she would descend again to meet her double, to pull out her straw and drink from her shadow, or so it would seem. This strange, wondrous behaviour prompted any number of questions. Did she think these pages a gaudy flower? Or, did she long to imbibe the deep nutrition of my prose? How misguided, dear reader, either of these assumptions would have been.

Soon enough, my partner came out to join me in the backyard of our Cabbagetown rental. She was wearing a light yellow sundress, with sixties-inspired colours splashed across two-inch wide shoulder straps. She sat down, and the butterfly materialized as if from the wind to flutter behind her back and around her head, before touching down on her shoulder straps, where it blended in with the stripes. The butterfly took off and landed time and again, volplaning about my garden like a petal blown on the wind, returning to various positions on the table, beside my hand, and on my lover’s body. She seemed to find the shoulder straps especially attractive, and would rest there, wings folded up in sublime disguise, as if a gift from some other, more peaceful and poetic realm, a place, as Vladimir Nabokov would have it, where prose is banished and kindness, compassion, even ecstasy might reign.²

The long moments may have passed like years in butterfly time (many species live just one or two weeks, “a fleeting transience that is almost painful”³); the episode lasted some two hours in ours. “What spirit has come to visit us?” my partner asked. “Who do we know who has died? What is the message we are meant to receive?” A little flicker of gold dust remained on her dress where the gift of the butterfly had been.

I began that evening to consider the meaning of *Lepidoptera* in our time and others, how such a common, everyday occurrence could have the power to overwhelm us with feelings of beauty and blessing, and prompt

even a reference to the spiritual realm. Having studied and filmed butterflies on several occasions in locations as diverse as Tierra del Fuego and the Amazon delta, in Montana meadows and Algonquin glades, I knew something of their food plants and circadian rhythms, their mastery of metamorphosis and mimicry, their astonishing diversity and range. I had observed closely how butterflies move with both a graceful elegance *and* an unpredictable awkwardness, entrancing and frustrating fawning camera operators alike.

What follows then is a comparative excursus, or series of digressions, into the natural, cultural, and literary histories of the butterfly. The subject, it turns out, is as wide-ranging and ephemeral as the animal itself. But it also means to consider the interaction between aesthetics and environment, between human consciousness and the natural world. The study lends itself to an ethic, even a politics, as I shall attempt to show here. The style, almost a method, is that of the interdisciplinary lyric essay—a language charged with transmitting a (partial) history of the subject, with “individuating emotional histories, both personal and communal.”⁴

Much of this is involved, tricky terrain, as I was to discover. The inherent complexities of butterfly morphology, evolution, classification, distribution and habits, as well as the unresolved professional and technical debates over such matters, result in frequent confusion for the dallying layperson. The butterfly is in many ways more complex to study (and film) than larger organisms, given their specific life stages and ranges, the variable times in which they appear as adults, often in “pulses,” their reliance on particular flowers and food plants in all four stages of life—given, in short, their highly specialized and niche-oriented life cycles.

There are at first the simple facts of abundance, diversity, and range: of around 250,000 known species of *Lepidoptera*—an order dominated by moths—some 18,000 are butterflies.⁵ Butterflies are found all over the earth’s surface, from the Arctic to the equator, and on all continents, save Antarctica. I recalled trying to “capture” their elusive, flickering yellow beauty in the incandescent and perpetual light of the Truelove Lowlands, a series of raised beaches on the northeastern shore of Devon Island, Nunavut. With Ellesmere Island hovering across Jones Sound in the distance, and the massive Devon Ice Cap looming above, there was a delightful shock in seeing them gliding and jerking across the tundra.⁶ Well-nigh ubiquitous in terrestrial biomes, then, and as opposed to the platypus, the salamander or frog, the spider, Scarab beetle, raven, or the improbably large and graceful (when in water) walrus—not to mention other border-crossing creatures that rarely make for graceful figures in English, but can and sometimes do in other languages and traditions—almost everyone knows the butterfly. And it began to seem that almost everyone always has.

Butterflies appear carved on tusk, stone and shell in the late Paleolithic Age, before 10,000 B.C., and have proliferated in the visual arts ever since. They flit about on papyrus from the Eighteenth Egyptian Dynasty, on Mayan

codexes and Mesopotamian glyphs. Generally they symbolize delicacy, but also resiliency and power—the paradoxical power of a fragile chimera that with a flutter of wings in East India may rise a typhoon off Hokkaido.⁷

The Maori, for example, believe the soul returns to earth after death as a butterfly; while in Islamic Sufism, the moth that immolates itself in the candle flame is the soul losing itself in the divine fire. A Nahuan butterfly is “the hand of fire”; the Gaelic word is *dealbhan-dé*, “fire of God.” In Aztec cosmology, the goddess Itzpapalotl, the Obsidian or Clawed Butterfly, represents the soul embedded in stone. In the sacrificial moment at the symbolic center of the culture, the freed soul/butterfly is released from the body by an obsidian blade and simultaneously captured/contained within the stone.

For the O’odham, or Pima, of Arizona and northern Mexico, a farming and town-building people, Hohokimal, Butterfly, is one of the principal characters from the earliest days. A farmer of the desert, he works the land where water soaks to the surface, as butterflies are known to congregate at such seeps. Ba’ivchul Uv?, Kingfisher Young Woman, leaves her newlywed husband to dally with Butterfly, as with other possible life partners, each in a different ecological setting, and with an eye towards forming the marriage at the beginning of “the People,” a covenant with the land that will seal the switch from deer hunting and wood gathering to a plant gathering and agricultural people. In a creation story that appears to be about the necessary adaptability and plasticity of agriculturalists in marginal desert environments, this is Butterfly as model of the world and a key to creation.⁸

Catalogues such as these may tend to mislead, however, in that they offer only an illusion of understanding, a knowledge content to slide over the surface of things. We may realize we know less after we have read them than we did before we began.

Approached from another, broader and more generous perspective, the annotated list suggests larger, integrated relationships. As our bodies are enmeshed genetically in the biosphere, so too are our thoughts, ideas, and metaphors: the images and symbols of culture have quite literally co-evolved with world, and constitute the very signs of cultural adaptation. For Gary Snyder, “Sensation and perception do not exactly come from outside, and the unremitting thought and image-flow are not exactly inside. The world is our consciousness, and it surrounds us.”⁹ And yet the biologist E.O. Wilson has commented on a primate and mammalian bias—a “vertebrate chauvinism”—in the Western sciences, in evolutionary biology specifically, and in the arts and education more generally (we are mammals, and primates, of course, and have long focused on this strong and obvious connection). As David Spooner suggests, however, and as a brief cross-cultural survey explains, there is at the same time “a crucial oblique relationship between metamorphic insects and humans, a connection transmitted through the great works of music and literature, and through many of the paradigms of world religions.”¹⁰

For the Greeks, the spirit or soul at corporeal death left the body in the form of a butterfly; Psyche, goddess of the spirit, mistress (and wife) of Eros, is depicted as a beautiful woman with butterfly wings. *Glauropsyche lygdamus*, the Silvery Blue, is named after her. The Spanish *mariposa*, probably from “la Santa Maria *posa*,” “the Virgin Mary alights or rests,” may recall *Psyche* as butterfly. The Greek word *psyche* (ψυχή) meant, at least by Aristotle’s time, soul, butterfly, and moth. The aspirates and supplementals of ψυχή apparently reproduce and mimic respiration itself; to pronounce the word is quite literally to sound the “breath-soul,” or butterfly.¹¹

In the Greek visual arts, Eros is “often depicted holding a butterfly, even burning it in the purifying fires of love.”¹² As Veronica Bassil explains, Plato describes Eros as the best *synergos*, or helper, of Psyche: “he who causes the wings of the soul to sprout and develop,” and who leads the soul upward in appreciation of physical beauty, then spiritual beauty, and finally Beauty as pure Form.¹³ As Apuleius tells the story of Cupid and Psyche, in our only own known source tale, from *Metamorphoses*, Eros and Psyche are a monogamous couple in love. With no other love interests, they marry. With love, Psyche, our soul, may transform and take flight, a metamorphosis imaged as a butterfly.

The Romans in their turn also associated the soul of a dead person with the butterfly. In Latin, the word for butterfly is *papilio/onis*, from which derives the French *papillon*, and the English “pavilion,” a tent or canopy spread out like wings.¹⁴ Had then our impromptu backyard interpretation of Lepidoptera as harbinger of death and emblem of spirits long ago been plotted for us, a line of thinking and feeling channelled deeply within the culture?

That similar metaphors are both cross-cultural and deeply historical seems to both confirm and deny this simple thesis; butterfly mysteries may run deeper still. Consider the familiar reflection attributed to the Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi Chuang-tse (c. 286 BCE), in which the creature in question is used to illustrate the principle of detachment:

Once upon a time, I, Chuang Chou, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was Chou. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man.

Between a man and a butterfly there is necessarily a distinction. The transition is called the transformation of material things.¹⁵

The transformation of material things. Here is an entry point into the butterfly’s decidedly strange transformations. As I have already intimated, the animal’s intricate designs are produced by thousands of tiny scales, each a single colour, and each only a single cell thick, arrayed in complex patterns and overlapping one another on the wing like shingles on a roof. The scales

acquire their colour and markings in response to simple chemical messages sent from cell to cell. Paradoxically enough, it is the very simplicity of this mechanism that facilitates such explosive diversification. A team of researchers discovered in 1996 that butterflies can alter their wing patterns in just a few generations, using existing genes that served another purpose earlier in embryonic development.¹⁶ Using temperature cues, or environmental regulation, to effect a process that is genetically controlled, the team evolved two new species, one within 16, and another within 20 generations. These changes, and the genes that regulate them, are apparently both *fluid* and *modular*—in that they are independent of body structure. As a narrator of a John Murray story observes, “Butterflies have the capacity for infinite variation. They are changing continuously.”¹⁷ Do not touch butterflies: the gold dust of scales will leave itself behind.

Some species are brown in the dry season, colourful in times of rain—ambient conditions in the chrysalis cause scale colours and eyespot patterns on the wing to change accordingly. Their bodies transform through four stages, each completely different from the rest: egg, larva or caterpillar, pupa, and butterfly. The larva itself sheds its skin five times, and these *instars* (as they are known) can themselves be remarkably camouflaged. The last instar weaves a cocoon and emerges a butterfly.¹⁸

Butterflies then are masters of metamorphosis, but also of mimicry. Benign butterflies come to resemble poisonous or unpalatable species, in a defensive evolution known as Batesian mimicry; or, in a mutualistic or convergent evolution known as Müllerian mimicry, poisonous species evolve to look like each other. In either case, predators may have to learn only one model for avoidance. Mimic and model both benefit, as the clear identity of either may become blurred. The terms *artifice* and *nature* become something like synonyms under these conditions. As Robert Bringhurst has observed, wild things know how to lie, “but wherever those lies succeed, they double back and add new layers to the truth.”¹⁹

Butterflies mimic themselves and the world around them in *behaviour* as well as in aspect: a butterfly will move its antennae like an unpalatable moth if it has evolved to look like one, or shiver its wings like a leaf in the wind if it resembles a leaf. Butterflies can be highly cryptic, of course, and they appear to protect themselves with this camouflage, as we on my partner’s dress. By “flashing” their colours, then shifting position and folding their wings, they leave only the dull ventral surfaces showing, thus blending in with their surroundings, and hopelessly confusing the tiny brains of lizards and birds. This is known as the “flash and dazzle” technique of predator avoidance, in which the pyrotechnics of butterfly patterning appear to have biological purpose.²⁰

Just as remarkably, and perhaps more productively still, butterflies of different markings (different sub-species) may successfully mate with one another, producing healthy, fertile hybrids with variable markings—such

that when the ranges of two species overlap, a third may be produced.²¹ This is to say that the butterfly, immensely adaptable, can also be self-hybridizing. An intense endemism, a localized and explosive diversification, naturally obtains. This form of evolution hints at creation as a form of combinatorial play, of repetition with significant difference—a type of biological intertextuality. There is little vestige of an originary moment in these transformations; some butterfly species seem to consist of a combination of things that have already originated. Nabokov imagines returning to an isolated glade in the Swiss Alps fifty years after it has been studied to find different, but related, species now pollinating its plants.

The butterfly appears then to both require and defeat our definitions. Altogether familiar, easily recognizable, still they evade our categories and call into question our ways of knowing the world, of sub-dividing the continuum of experience into smaller and more manageable units. Such qualities more or less destabilize the Linnaean taxonomy of a hermetic and homogeneous species. The concept of species that descends is more fluid and less certain. It consists of blurred boundaries and broad categories of classification linked together, of unlike elements recombined in pleasantly unexpected ways. This play across boundaries in itself may harbour a secret meaning, in that it posits an order as opposed to that of familiar reality. Biology in this case seems to call for a loosening of the nominative grids of language and taxonomy, for less hierarchical and vertical, more horizontal and multiform methods of classification.

Is there more than mere utilitarian functionalism in the regulation and evolution of the butterfly's phenotypic diversity, resulting as it does in astonishing plasticity, not to mention bright colours and elaborate patterns? Can we agree that butterflies offer a supplement to Darwinian theory, a transgression and surplus that reveals the limits to the canon of natural selection? Can those insights intuited by our artists add meaningful layers to the truths offered by science? In posing such questions, butterfly science, an inexhaustible, complex, and finely nuanced field, becomes not unlike the human imagination, or the field of literature itself.

In the natural history of the animal, we begin to sense its literary and artistic possibilities. And we come to understand why Nabokov, surely the twentieth century's patron saint of lepidoptary, a human bridge and ambassador between *Lepidoptera* and literature, is moved to write of the butterfly's "mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of the predator's power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were games of intricate enchantment and deception."²²

* * *

Cabbagetown is an older residential section of Toronto, beside and above the Don River, on the eastern shoulder of downtown. The river has by now been channelled and choked to near death by storm drains and pollutants; today's geese, ducks and swans bill-feed fresh toxins after each chemical rain. The Lower Don is a quagmire, and however much improved, still frankly a disgrace. The obscured delta needs freeing from the concrete funnel; the abrupt right Keating Channel is forced into under the Gardner and just past the Lakeshore creates a calamity in the docklands' back channel. Commerce holds trump, here as elsewhere, and one longs for no quick fix. But take a look next time you are in town, for here is Toronto *noir*, an unexploited film set at dusk. Mobs of Hitchcockian swallows, backlit by a smoggy orange sunset, compose a cacophony in the trestles overhead; the roar of traffic is seeded with the cries of birds; the smog laid thick with the stench of coagulate river scum, lost balls and water bottles churning amidst washed-down trees and orange lifesaving rings, the urban flotsam of a pestilential river without proper means of egress. The Don's outflow, such as it is, and boomed off so as not to interfere with shipping traffic, appears to await an Erie'ish scourge of fire, or to be walked across by some stunt-seeking environmental penitent of sewage, a keen photographer in tow.²³

Yet the Don, lined with parks, fields, bicycle trails, important habitat, even a type of working farm, and to which spawning salmon have recently returned, remains a vital artery. Further north, it provides a ridge for new enclaves of exclusivity to be built; to the south, condos will soon sprout alongside the Distillery's posh shops. Running one evening in the valley at dusk I came across a large white-tail aggressively thrashing a thicket, tearing velvet off his antlers, eager for the rut. In the dim light I thought I saw a homeless person arranging a sleeping bag, noisily preparing a nest of boughs for a night's sleep—there are tent camps down here; what else could it be? I lingered on the path, stretching, puzzled, the odd oblivious biker careening past, until the shape of deer articulated itself some twenty yards away against the river in the gloaming.

And the Don serves still as a useful barrier: Cabbagetown's east-west streets all dead-end at the valley. With no through traffic, the neighbourhood remains calm, quiet, even serene. Houses and gardens here are for the most part old and well fed, and gardening carries with it senses of community and continuity, of well-being and growth, even grace. Gardening is how we meet our neighbours, what we talk about in the sun and after rain. Cuttings replace cake as icebreakers for new arrivals. Neighbours set up impromptu plant swaps on front stoops; instead of kids selling lemonade, adults sip chardonnay and flip greens. Not your standard activist rabble—yet Cabbagetown's thriving gardens are a butterfly's delight. At least such was my experience in the summer of 2006, having newly arrived. Small white cabbage butterflies, Monarchs, brown-and-orange Admirals, a host of others—

here they all abide. If I had impaled them with my pen like a more studious collector, they might be named here with greater facility.

I turned next to that trove of stories, well-known to many, in which a heroic young explorer spelunks so many dark holes and tunnels, crawls through keyholes into so many gardens and rhymes, that she has by now become an experienced hand at many of the world's riddles. Better yet, her story is usually accompanied by illustrations, as if to prove *exactly* where she has been. In one such picture in my tattered text a blue caterpillar sits on a large mushroom smoking a hookah. His words shimmering in a speech bubble of expelled smoke, he asks our girl Alice an age-old and still vital question—one of the few genuine questions, really: “Who are *you*?” “I-I hardly know, sir,” she replies, “I have been changed several times ... and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.”

“It isn’t,” said the Caterpillar.

“Well, perhaps you haven’t found it so yet,” said Alice. “But when you have to turn into a chrysalis—you will someday, you know—and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you’ll feel a little queer, won’t you?”

“Not a bit,” said the Caterpillar.²⁴

As with Chuang-tse, Lewis Carroll’s choice of creature to voice our human sense of ambiguous and shifting identities is far from accidental. In his 2007 Massey Lectures, Alberto Manguel says the Caterpillar’s “terrible question has always been difficult to answer: in our kaleidoscopic universe, it has become so precarious as to be almost meaningless.”²⁵ But intrepid Alice, feet planted firmly in Wonderland, makes an honest, meaningful attempt, and in so doing she identifies something important. The butterfly’s transformation, from earth-bound larva, a ravenous and lowly worm, to pupa, the chrysalis formed and shed, through to supremely gentle, fluttering winged thing enacts a radical transmutation of body and form, a miracle of metamorphosis that is entirely “normal,” which is to say “natural”—common, unexceptional, true. The butterfly is a living reality, and yet it realizes a seemingly impossible transformation. It is a utopian vision made familiar, concrete, and real. In the animal’s natural life cycle certain borders have been crossed and mixings have occurred, apparent incompatibilities have been fused into a single form. And yet no laws of evolution have been broken as it crosses generally accepted boundaries between creatures and realms, and leaves land behind.

The seventeenth-century Dutch naturalist Jan Swammerdam, who initiated the Western, scientific study of butterfly metamorphosis, clearly figured the butterfly’s three life stages as emblematic of humanity’s life, after-death rest phase, or purgatory, and resurrection; and it comes as little surprise to learn that within the context of Christian eschatology, the butterfly has long served as a useful symbol of hope, rebirth, and resurrection. These may be

conventional, even simple associations, to be fastidiously avoided by the learned author—as Nabokov claims to have avoided them in his work. But the butterfly’s transformations do indeed hint at the elusiveness of things, the permeability of barriers and the powers of sexuality, of the very human desire to depart from the surface of conventional reality, the accumulate haulage of our debt and jobs and time spent in traffic. In the butterfly we might find a correspondence between things, a bridge between the sciences and the humanities, a biological organism as well as a cultural symbol in which reason intersects and overlaps with imagination, until it becomes difficult to disentangle the two. There *is* something fleeting, transitory, and mysterious in the butterfly’s metamorphosis, which *can* be linked to “the enchanting and melancholy evanescence of life.”²⁶ Perhaps the butterfly manages to succeed where many strive and all of us variously fail: to become enchanted, transformed, lighter and more effortless versions of our earth-bound selves.

The range of metaphors associated with the creature—consciousness and spirit, love and death, identity and time—extends, as these things nearly always do, to the realm of language itself. A good thing, too, for we are in perpetual need of terms that cross conventional categories and yoke together terms normally held apart—reptiles and birds. Leo Spitzer, in his lectures in *Linguistics and Literary History*, delivered at Princeton in 1945, identified certain “butterfly words” in language, whose “instability is also connected with the semantic content.” These are “two-track words,” he argued, whose “linguistic creation is always meaningful and, yes, clear-minded.” These words give a feeling for the “appositeness of nomenclature,” such as *conundrum* and *quandary*, and, emblematically for Spitzer, *butterfly*:

In all languages through the world, the words for “butterfly” represent a kaleidoscopic instability. The linguist who explains such fluttery words has to juggle, because the speaking community itself has juggled. This juggling in itself is psychologically and culturally motivated.²⁷

A culture needs to undermine its categories and systems of knowledge, to destabilize its ways of categorizing and conceiving of world, otherwise new forms will find no way of making an appearance, certain concepts and feelings will continue to elude expression. The question I would like to consider next is then both simple and wide-ranging: How does the contemporary novelist deploy such resources? For the record indicates that the butterfly, probably the most collected of all biota, and among the most studied of all insects, has long fascinated scientists and novelists alike. In the work of a range of twentieth-century writers we find the butterfly recurring as productive trope, symbol, and metaphor, an elusive, dynamic element, a single protean idea capable of assuming a multitude of forms. For a number of reasons aesthetic, biological, psychological and socio-political, the uncertainty of the beast, flitting about, recombinant and variable, gentle, heterogeneous and diverse, immensely fragile and adaptable both, seems well-suited to the

demands of the twentieth-century novel, and to our transnational, interlingual, cross-cultural age.

In Tomás Eloy Martínez's *Santa Evita*, for instance, the narrator dreams of Eva Peron "as a butterfly who beat the wings of her death forward as those of her life flew backward."²⁸ Her transformation from poor, illegitimate rural child to the most powerful woman in Argentina is figured as the metamorphosis of a butterfly: "the chrysalis (cocoon) of beauty" she wove ended up "hatching a queen." As the novel's butterfly associations expand and proliferate, Evita becomes "an enormous net that went out to catch desires as though reality were a field of butterflies. In the end, the butterfly comes to serve as the novel's narrative principle and principal metaphor, a structural homology and temporal figure, as the narrator comes to see that "this novel resembles a butterfly's wings—the story of death flowing forward, the story of life advancing backward, visible darkness, oxymoron of similarities."

The Australian writer John Murray's stories expand the referents to include genealogy, culture, and indeed life itself. The narrator of Murray's "A Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies" comes from "butterfly people." "There is something about the transience and the beauty of these insects that gets into your blood," he tells us. "Somehow butterflies became the centre of all our lives." The average monarch butterfly lives some four weeks: "They are nothing but a drop of color in the ocean. A fleeting moment that dazzles and blinds, and then is gone forever." His wife Maya is a brain surgeon; her hands are "as light as that of a butterfly on a leaf. ... It is always a surprise when the brain opens up beneath her hands."²⁹

In the "bleak pastoral" of Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*, it is moths and not butterflies that are most at home. The protagonist, in his houseboat at night, after mopping his plate with bread, falls to studying moths, "supplicants of light," pressed to the window glass. "Eyes black, triangular, a robber's mask. Furred and wizened face not unlike a monkey's and wearing a windswept ermine shako. Suttree bent to see him better. What do you want?"³⁰ In Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, butterflies brand the hybrid Mexican cattle, descendants of generations of desert dwellers that hunt water like antelope and run like deer, not domesticated and not quite wild, borderland creatures of the place, indigenous. When Betonie, the old healer who is "comfortable" in the desert, hums softly his medicine songs, Tayo is reminded of "butterflies darting from flower to flower."³¹ Even amid the generalized, notorious depravities of Jerzy Kosinski's *Steps*, the reader encounters the "pulsating blooms" of butterflies, a "mass of living petals." In colourful counterpoint to this text's burnt-out rubble, a light against which we may gauge the darkness, the text ends with this vision: "Like rebellious shreds of a rainbow, the butterflies swarmed high against the blackened walls."³²

Such novelistic insights provide a sense of the butterfly's antinomian possibilities: the animal is at once awkward, flimsy, strange, bouncy in flight, yet beautiful and immensely sympathetic; it is painfully transient, albeit

capable of extreme migrations and transformations. Images and phrases such as “kaleidoscopic instabilities,” “oxymoron of similarities,” “rebellious rainbows,” “visible darkness” and “souls of stone” have much in common. They bring together the two terms of a conceptual contradiction, thereby facilitating the mixing of what should be discrete and mutually exclusive categories. They enable the coexistence of opposing principles without subordination, yet allow for a necessary traffic, commerce, or flow of energy to circulate uncertainly and in tension between poles. There is no hierarchy between contradictory elements, but also no means to separate them—to ease the tension through dissociation. The energies embedded in such figures refuse to easily resolve. The images they generate are neither stable nor mutually exclusive. We can then speak of the senses of epistemological uncertainty and ontological instability embroiled in butterfly imagery, the loss of solid interpretive ground when confronted with the image of the animal in a text, in a garden, or alongside a mountain stream, net in hand. For Van Veen, in Nabokov’s *Ada, or Ardor*, such is the bewildering, puzzling beauty of a creature that engenders “a dazzling inward shock of despair.”³³

Nabokov describes butterflies with taxonomic precision in virtually all of his works, in which *Lepidoptera* come to represent the flutterings of memory and the fragility of creation; beauty, love, lust, death; the meeting of art and science and the precision of poetry; the imaginary quests of the lepidopterist (for travel, recreation, the development of a fine and arcane knowledge useful only to the specialist); the presence of the author himself, catching butterflies (and images, emotions) on the margin of his texts; and quite possibly a thousand other things.³⁴ In *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, a novel full of incestuous urges and sexualized butterfly imagery, butterflies and moths are referred to as “flutterfriends”: gentle if persistent emblems of memory, desire, and an endogamous longing which may well ensnare a genealogy, as a candle lures “party-crashing hawkmoths with red black-belted bellies” to their incinerated ends.³⁵

Lolita herself is “nymphic,” one “of these chosen creatures I [Humbert Humbert] have proposed to designate as “nymphets.” A *nymph*: a semi-divine being, imagined as a beautiful maiden; a young and beautiful woman, a damsel; an insect in that stage between larva and imago, a pupa.³⁶ Perhaps Nabokov had only to uncover resources previously hidden in the language, to oppose Humbert’s hermetic doubling to the transformative possibilities of the pupa, or nymph.

In Chapter 6 of his memoir *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov subjects his own fascination for the insect to a naturalist’s examination. Observing a caterpillar scurrying to a concealed location, rather than celebrating the possibilities of biological change, he highlights the painful absurdities of such demands, “the awful pressure of metamorphosis, the aura of a disgraceful fit in a public space.”³⁷ Far from a naturalist’s description, one wonders if an illicit sexuality and shamed voyeurism creep into all of Nabokov’s works. In a final, moving passage to this chapter, Nabokov writes that:

the highest enjoyment of timelessness—in a landscape selected at random—is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humouring a lucky mortal.³⁸

If there is to be more than ghosts and magic at work in the butterfly's role in contemporary writing—as surely there is—what other social imaginaries might be at work? It is no secret that according to the evolutionary and environmental determinisms—the primitive and racist historicisms—of the late nineteenth-century natural sciences, biological and cultural hybridity was deemed apocalyptic; it signalled the end of a race or culture. In the dynamics of nineteenth-century nation formation, the purified stock of a common national origin was the ideal to be pursued, and miscegenation became a profoundly negative term. Mixed races meant retrogression, the mestizo was seen as a degenerate type, and political theories were almost entirely pessimistic with regard to the social and economic capacities of mixed races—those products, both culturally and racially, of a tradition basically antithetical to the modern. It may not be too much to figure the butterfly, a delicate herald of heterogeneity and difference, as signalling, in some works at least, a tendency or shift in the valence of radically mixed forms.

Yellow butterflies herald the arrival of the mechanic Mauricio Babilonia into the Buendía household in Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*. A “nocturnal butterfly” flutters about Meme's head in the movie theatre while she waits there for him; then, “One night, while Meme was in the bathroom, Fernanda went into her bedroom by chance and there were so many butterflies she could scarcely breathe.” It is Mauricio Babilonia, an outsider with emblematic name, who plants the nominative and biological seeds of apocalypse in the Buendía family. Every evening he lifts up the tiles “to get into the bathroom where Meme was waiting for him, naked and trembling with love among the scorpions and butterflies.”³⁹ When Mauricio is shot as a thief and Meme is banished to a convent, Fernanda invents the foundling story to explain the existence of their love child, Aureliano.

Issues of class and race are fully operative here, as to why Mauricio, the mechanic with “his smell of grease, and his halo of butterflies,” could not be a permanent, acceptable partner to Meme. The Buendías are aristocratic founders, perpetually anxious about the regulation of difference, and their patriarchal founding model, based on the notion of an homogeneous originary purity and clear lines of filiation and descent, will not admit the newness, diversity and difference—the “syncretic constructions of hybridity”⁴⁰—that it needs in order to survive. The same goes for the exogamous others the Buendía men are drawn to: the “tanned skin” of house-cleaner Pilar Ternera; the “clean young mulatto woman” Petra Cotes; and Nigromanta, “a large black woman with solid bones”: none, for reasons of race and class, are suitable for

stable, long-term inclusion in the family.⁴¹ As Edwin Williamson has pointed out, there is a subtle, pervasive, altogether systemic racism and classicism at work here, one signalled by Mauricio's yellow butterflies, emblems of a necessary, positive change that is systematically excluded from—and hence compelled to burgle into—the Buendía house and line. As Ariel Dorfman has observed, “To have crossed and transgressed the invisible, almost unstated, frontiers of their class and race prejudices, indicates a possible direction that the family never allowed itself.”⁴²

Salman Rushdie, having “borrowed” his ending to *Midnight's Children* from *Cien años de soledad*, and rarely one to let a well-developed strand in the modern novel go unexploited, subjects the emblem to a characteristically hyperbolic exaggeration, a comic inflation that both exhausts and deflates the idea. Butterflies haunt the prophet-girl Ayesha in *The Satanic Verses*. An avatar of an increasingly uncompromising, absolute purity, she is in Rushdie's work a retrograde figure, atavistic and unhybridized, destined to die in an apocalypse, a uncovering that is a revelation of old ideas. The girl eats butterflies for breakfast; a swarm of butterflies follows the villagers of Titlipur on their pilgrimage; they halo her as she leads them to death in the Arabian Sea. The final image is typical of Rushdie—gorgeous, evocative, outrageously overblown:

What was strange was that the spectators did not see the butterflies, or what they did next. But Mizra Saeed clearly observed the great glowing cloud fly out over the sea; pause; hover; and form itself into the shape of a colossal being, a radiant giant constructed wholly of tiny beating wings, stretching from horizon to horizon, filling the sky.⁴³

It is, one suspects, an image of God, god, any God, all gods. From the beach Mizra, husband to one of the pilgrims, watches, “full of amazement, as the butterflies dived into the sea.” With this, the deity is eliminated, a liberating act in Rushdian poetics, as Ayesha and her believers—killers of diversity and eradicators of difference—take their notions of dogmatic purity with them to the bottom of the sea.

The butterfly as novelistic emblem of transformation tends back, as do so many aspects of the modern novel, to the meticulously-constructed architecture of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), in which the appearance of butterflies signal at least three crucial moments in Emma's transformation. Not long after her marriage, walking in the fields beyond Banneville with her “melancholic” greyhound, “près du pavillon abandonné qui fait l'angle du mur, du côté de champs” (near the deserted pavilion which forms an angle of the wall on the side of the country), she approaches for the first time the edges of neatly-ruled village existence, to contemplate the crude, unbound fields beyond.⁴⁴ Emma's boredom, bitterness, and the rancour of a “diffuse egoism” are beginning to take root, her metamorphosis from respectable, young, middle-class newlywed to a corrupt debauch

caught up in a debtor's swoon into voluptuous decay is gathering momentum, and the etymological and aural kinship of *pavillon* and *papillon* draws our attention to the force of impending change:

Her thoughts, at first of no precise character, flitted hither and thither like the greyhound which ran around in circles, barked at the butterflies, hunted the field-mice, or nibbled the cornflowers at the edge of the wheat. Little by little her ideas grew more definite; and as she sat on the grass and dug her parasol here and there into the turf, she kept repeating to herself, "Why did I marry him?"

The usage, however subtle, is also exemplary: the volplaning diptera embody Emma's fluttering thoughts, which coalesce into a precise—and shocking—revelation. Later, while cleaning out a drawer at home, she pricks her finger on her wedding-bouquet, and throws it into the fire. "She watched it burn. The little pasteboard berries burst, the wire twisted, the gold lace melted; and the shrivelled paper corollas, fluttering like black butterflies at the back of the stove, at last flew up the chimney."⁴⁵ This is the last image of the novel's first section; both reader and Emma have turned another page. Finally, and in a well-known scene, after withdrawing from Léon for a time before making her ultimate, fatal break, she and her lover, reunited in a church, scandalously—this is the provinces—hail a tilbury and ride with blinds down across bridges and along rivers on a journey with no destination save erotic containment and disguise. In the scene's last image, "a bared hand passed beneath the small blinds of yellow canvas, and threw out some scraps of paper that scattered in the wind, and alighted farther off like white butterflies on a field of red clover all in bloom."⁴⁶ This beautiful, accessible image calls to mind sacrifice, innocence, and loss, and also perhaps nourishment, passion, pleasure.

A final instance links once again *Lepidoptera* to art, life, creativity, what Nabokov bluntly calls "aesthetic bliss." In A.S. Byatt's "A Lamia in the Cévennes," a story from her *Elementals* collection, a painter named Bernard sets up house in a mountain retreat. He is fascinated by the outdoor swimming pool, which is erotically lubricated, never at rest. Bernard's world—light, water, his perception, the colour of his paints—is in constant motion; the painter struggles to represent the shimmer of light and air and water in colour on a two-dimensional surface. This is his aesthetic problem: how to "*render the transparency in solid paint or air on a bit of board?*"⁴⁷ A snake appears in the pool at dusk; he paints her and solves his problem. A friend comes by and kisses the snake, who becomes a beautiful and garish woman; they drive off in a red sports car. Bernard wakes up the morning after they have left, an artist in need of:

another visual idea. A mystery to be explained by rule and line. He looked around his breakfast table. A rather non-descript orange-brown butterfly was sipping the juice of the rejected peaches. It had a golden eye at the base of its wings and a

rather lovely white streak, shaped like a tiny dragon-wing. It stood on the glistening rich yellow peach-flesh and manoeuvred its body to sip the sugary juices and suddenly it was not orange-brown at all, it was a rich, gleaming intense purple. And then it was both at once, orange-gold and purple-veiled, and then it was purple again, and then it folded its wings and the undersides and had a purple eye and a soft green streak, and tan, and white edged with charcoal ...⁴⁸

Ellipses intercede, signifying the ongoing, endless transformations of the biological realm. Just such a butterfly had begun my own investigations. It was probably an Admiral, quite common in Ontario, the male of which species is even known to associate with humans—thereby reconfiguring the probable gender of my editing companion.

For Byatt, “Lamia” is a well-crafted, rigorous, formally constrained performance. The story can be productively read as a parable of creation, in which the butterfly’s “kaleidoscopic instabilities” serve as an artistic model, the basis for a productive, even ecstatic formal strategy (a means of composition: a methodology, a structure with a demonstrable mechanics; and a style with functional—cognitive and imaginary—significations). The snake was Bernard’s answer in the dark of night; the butterfly his solution in the clear light of day. He gets out his paints, mixes his pigments, and in a moment that clearly chronicles Lepidopteran aesthetics, imagines and desires the butterfly as emblem and embodiment of syncretism, productive fusion, positive, on-going change. With a gesture that I hope will be read as light, allusive, intertextual, possibly even transformative, I will leave the last word here, with Byatt and Bernard:

Exact study would not clip this creature’s wings, it would dazzle his eyes with its brightness. Don’t go, he begged it, watching and learning, don’t go. Purple and orange is a terrible and violent fate. There is months of work in it. Bernard attacked it. He was happy, in one of the ways in which human beings are happy.⁴⁹

Notes

- ¹ Darwin’s Hawkmoth, an exceptional case, has a proboscis four times its body length, which it uses to feed on—and to pollinate—a species of orchid in Madagascar, whose nectar seeps at the bottom of a foot-long tube.
- ² In a well-known phrase from his Afterword to *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov explains: “For me a work of fiction only exists insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm.” New York: Berkeley Medallion Press, 1955, 1966, 286.
- ³ Murray, John. *A Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies: Stories*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003, 112.

- ⁴ Blasing, Mutlu Knuk. *Lyric Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 11.
- ⁵ The cited numbers vary, but there are well over 160,000 scientifically named species of the order *Lepidoptera*, of which butterflies form but a small contingent. There are some 15,000 known and named butterfly species, as well as unknown others not included in the Linnaean scheme.
- ⁶ The butterflies would not stay still, we did not, in that particularly possessive language of media gatherers, “get the shot,” and such in the end was the delightful thrill of the encounter. *Canadian Geographic Presents* “Mars on Earth” was broadcast on Discovery Channel Canada in 2001. I was in the field with the cinematographer Ian Kerr, of Storm Films.
- ⁷ This is the familiar Butterfly Effect, associated with the meteorological science of Edward N. Lorenz—though Lorenz himself did not coin the phrase. See Edward N. Lorenz, “Deterministic Nonperiodic Flow.” *Journal of the Atmospheric Sciences*. 1963. Vol. 20, 130-141.
- ⁸ See Amando Rea, *Wings in the Desert: a Folk Ornithology of the Northern Pimans* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007); Donald M. Bahr, *Pima and Papago Ritual Oratory: a Study of Three Texts* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1975); and Gary Paul Nabhan, *The Desert Smells Like Rain: a Naturalist in Papago Indian Country* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), for more on the northern Pima, self-identified as the Tohono O’odham. I rely on Rea’s interpretation of this story, which others interpret in terms of marital fidelity and sexual tomfoolery.
- ⁹ Snyder, Gary. “The Etiquette of Freedom,” in *The Practice of the Wild*. New York: North Point Press, 1990, 17.
- ¹⁰ Spooner, David. *The Insect-Populated Mind*. Maryland: Hamilton Books, 2005, 9.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 45.
- ¹² Bassil, Veronica. “Eros and Psyche in ‘The Artist of the Beautiful.’” *ESQ*. Vol. 30.1, 1984, pp. 1-21, 2. I am using, primarily, Bassil’s work in this section on the Greek arts. See also David B. Claus, *Toward the Soul: An Inquiry into the Meaning of ψυχή Before Plato*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981, as well as Spooner.
- ¹³ Bassil 1984, 2. See also Erich Neumann, *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine. A Commentary on the Tale of Apuleius*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- ¹⁴ Cupertino, Matthew Rabuzzi. “Butterfly Etymology,” in *Cultural Entomology Digest* 4 (November 1997): <http://www.insects.org/ced4/etymology.html>. Accessed October 2007.
- ¹⁵ The extant text of Chuangtse is only thirty-three chapters, all of which mix philosophy and anecdote or parable. This passage is from “On Levelling All Things,” trans. Lin Yutang. www.religiousworlds.com/taoism/cz-text2.html. Accessed 8 May 2008.
- ¹⁶ Brakefield, P., et al. “Development, plasticity, and evolution of butterfly eyespot patterns.” *Nature*. Vol 384, 1996, 236-242. Both quotations, 236.

- 17 Murray 2003, 112.
- 18 Some hardy butterflies emerge after surviving a long, cold hibernation of months or years on the tundra. The life cycle, from egg to adult, of the Arctic moth *Gynaephora groenlandica* has been estimated at fourteen years. B. Freeman, J. Svoboda, and G.H.R. Henry, "Alexandra Fiord — An Ecological Oasis in the Polar Desert." In Svoboda and Freeman, eds. *Ecology of a Polar Oasis: Alexandra Fiord, Ellesmere Island, Canada*. Toronto: Captus University Publications, 1994, 6.
- 19 Bringhurst, Robert. "Wild Language," in *The Tree of Meaning*. Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2006, 257-276, 268.
- 20 The conditional and subjunctive modes seem necessary here, insofar as we do not know exactly *why* these biological phenomena manifest.
- 21 In many cases, these hybrid offspring are themselves infertile, thus resulting in dead-ends on the Lepidopteran family tree. When they are able to reproduce, a new species may result. Biologists are quite clear, of course, that many species, as well as sub-species designations, constitute arbitrary categories in the shifting, generally uncertain terrains of actual biological population dynamics. The concept of *species* is in the end an *ideal* category—useful, necessary, sometimes an accurate descriptor of biological conditions, but not always.
- 22 Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. Rev. ed. New York: Pyramid Books, 1968, 125.
- 23 The "Task Force to Bring Back the Don" has been active since the late 1980s in restoring this important watershed, and, along with many others, has done much good work. For a history of the Don River, see www.toronto.ca/don/watershed.htm.
- 24 Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass*. 1865. John Tenniel, ill. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1985, 41-42.
- 25 Manguel, Alberto. *The City of Words*. CBC Massey Lecture series. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2007, 125.
- 26 Bodenstein, Jürgen. *The Excitement of Verbal Adventure: A Study of Vladimir Nabokov's English Prose*. Part 1. Diss. Ruprecht-Karl-Universität zu Heidelberg, 1977, 357.
- 27 Spitzer, Leo. *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948, 7-8. I came across Spitzer's work in Edward Said's *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983, 137-138.
- 28 Martínez, Tomás Eloy. *Santa Evita*. Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1995. *Santa Evita*. Trans. Helen Lane. New York: Knopf, 1996, 66. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph: 63, 54.
- 29 Murray 2003, 112, 75.
- 30 McCarthy, Cormac. *Suttree*. New York: Random House, 1979, 99, 89.
- 31 Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986, c1977, 123.
- 32 Kosinski, Jerzy. *Steps*. New York: Random House, 1968, 101.

- 33 Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Ada; or, Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969, 324.
- 34 Bodenstein 1977, 358.
- 35 Nabokov 1969, 250.
- 36 Nabokov worked at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University from 1942 to 1948, first as a volunteer and eventually, on a part-time research fellowship, studying the museum's Lepidoptera collection. He published a number of scientific papers on butterflies, and was an acknowledged expert on Blues, a widespread group of Latin American butterflies. Much of his work was published in the entomological journal *Psyche*.
- 37 Nabokov 1968, 132.
- 38 Ibid, 139.
- 39 García Márquez, Gabriel. *Cien años de soledad*. 1967. Edición de Jacques Joset. Madrid: Cátedra, 1996. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Gregory Rabassa, trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 271.
- 40 López Mejía, Adelaida. "Women Who Bleed to Death: Gabriel García Márquez's 'Sense of an Ending.'" *Revista Hispánica Moderna*. Vol. 52, 1999, 135-150, 143.
- 41 My argument here is indebted to Edwin Williamson, "Magical Realism and the Theme of Incest in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," in Bernard McGuirk and Richard Cardwell, eds. *Gabriel García Márquez: New Readings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 45-63.
- 42 Dorfman, Ariel. "Someone Writes to the Future: Meditations on Hope and Violence in García Márquez." *Some Write to the Future: Essays on Contemporary Latin American Fiction*. Trans. George Shivers with the author. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991, 208.
- 43 Rushdie, Salman. *The Satanic Verses*. New York: Viking, 1988, 502.
- 44 Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary: a Story of Provincial Life*. Alan Russell, trans. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971, 32.
- 45 Ibid, 50.
- 46 Ibid, 192.
- 47 Byatt, A. S. *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1998, 87.
- 48 Ibid, 110-111.
- 49 Ibid, 111.