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Multitude of Ecstatic Butterflies: A Glimpse of the Sublime in Kitsch

Preface

You can expect now a subversive essay on butterflies, a text fluttering with glimpses rather than conclusions. Let me start perversely with a question which I may/will probably be unable to answer. Is there an opposition to Sublimity in Art? Is Kitsch the answer? Kitsch Capitalised is no longer kitsch, since it becomes an appropriately holy, architecturally capitalised category. Consider a landscape painting: well-fed, impressive specimens of tawny deer roam freely all over the meadow. Now consider another painting which presents the same lush meadow equipped with yellow butterflies. No, I have not finished my essay yet. I am troubled by Umberto Eco's insight: if only a few of the ready-made formulas are used, the result is simply kitsch. "When the repertoire of stock formulas is used wholesale, then the result is an architecture like Gaudi's Sagrada Familia: the same vertigo, the same stroke of genius"¹. If one sticks to the butterfly image, one can think of a famous painting by J. E. Millais, *A Blind Girl*. The arithmetics of the sublime will prove that we have here one butterfly only, one bunch of delicate flowers, one puddle, two rainbows, half a dozen birds, six cows, etc. Everything comes in small numbers. But what would happen, if one painting used all existing and extinct specimens of deer and all existing and extinct butterflies plus all the butterflies to come? I am not sure whether it already approaches sublimity, but it does make a difference. There are literary works which implement magnified kitsch successfully: in G.G. Marquez *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the rain of dead birds is coming down (can we say dead birds are raining cats and dogs?), yellow flowers cover up the

¹ U. Eco Casablanca: "Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage", in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. D. Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), p. 449.

town after the death of Jose Arcadio Buendia, finally: countless clouds of yellow butterflies accompany Mauricio Babilonia's every step². Clouds of yellow butterflies is not just an image, it is a concept which will reappear conveniently in this essay.

Maybe, if properly magnified, into an obsession, the opposite of a given notion will become the very notion itself (similarly to the notion of *sacrum* where the repulsive becomes the holy and vice versa). In other words, maybe butterflies, like divine wind — *kamikaze* — soar towards the sublime making the inevitably suicidal crash?

Are the butterflies supposed to soar towards the sublime, if one considers their topical genesis? In Greek mythology and art and later, Psyche — Eros's beloved princess — is often presented as a beautiful girl with the wings of a butterfly. Psyche is the Soul, the Breath, the Principle of Life, Sublimity of the Soul. She is a butterfly and she is sexually linked to Eros. Eros and Psyche form a topos that cannot be separated. Eros and Butterfly Image cannot be separated. I shall venture a triad: Eros—Psyche—Butterflies. Butterflies are cliches of erotic obsession. If obsession, according to what we said before, equals magnification/excess, then Erotic Obsession borders the Sublime. Since this ground is rather precarious, I shall start again.

A Different Preface: Collecting Butterflies Is Wrong

I do not proceed from my principle; for if I did, I would regret it, and if I did not, I would also regret that.

S. Kierkegaard, *Diapsalmata*

The following is a sketch on the morbid preoccupation with insects, notably butterflies, on the menace of being a collector and on a Literary Mystery. The Mystery is multidimensional: firstly, the assumed parallelism between the passion for collecting butterflies and the mental scape of rapists/murderers; secondly — the assumed parallelism between the above parallelism and the mental scape of young aspiring artists.

It is with extreme distrust, yet a great deal of "fatal attraction" that Kobo Abé, a Japanese classic, approaches his own theory, according to which, there is a direct relationship between a potential sexual perversity and a drive for collecting butterflies and insects. He fortifies his assumption with a safety device, stating it is an opinion of an amateur psychoanalyst:

He claimed that in a grown up man enthusiasm for such a useless pastime as collecting insects was evidence enough of a mental quirk. Even in children, unusual preoccupation with insect collecting frequently indicates an Oedipus complex. In order to compensate

²G.G. Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (London: Pan Books, 1986).

for his unsatisfied desires, the child enjoys sticking pins into insects, which he need never fear will escape. And the fact that he does not leave off once he has grown up is quite definitely a sign that the condition has become worse. Thus it is far from accidental that entomologists frequently have an acute desire for acquisitions and that they are extremely reclusive, kleptomaniac, homosexual³.

This quotation shall form the new starting point of my considerations. It seems that Kobo Abé need not have worried about lack of exemplification for the above theory, presented in *The Woman In the Dunes* in 1960. Contemporary English prose provides a sufficient amount of examples to illustrate this theory and make it one of the trendy symbols of post-Freudian literature. Suffice it to mention the obvious and the most notorious: John Fowles' canonical *Collector*, Ian McEwan's short story *Butterflies* or Clive Sinclair's story *Uncle Vlad*.

This easy, quasi-gothic symbolism is not limited to literature. Oscar winning *Silence of the Lambs* owes some of its appeal to the same imagery, though in all frankness it must be said that the film is based on the book; also the painting by Yosl Bergner, *Butterfly Eaters*, is a tribute to Kobo Abe's assumption. The painting presents a distant, distorted version of Makowski-like open-air picnic, where the only food to be consumed by five participants consists of seven brightly blue butterflies. They are presented in different stages of "captivity"; from being caught in flight, to being held by their frail wings, lying on the plates and lying on the table. One of the butterflies already has a fork in its body. Two more forks are crossed on the table as if on the altar. The atmosphere, deriving from the gothic convention, is reverential, the lamp is lit in the middle of the table; and the painting evokes sinister atmosphere, suggesting at the same time a certain unhealthy orgiastic union among the people who take part in the feast — presumably four women and one man. Only the man does not touch the butterflies and does not look like he is preparing for the sombre feast. He may be the one who watches how his women devour butterflies. Someone's Women Devouring Butterflies is a concept and it could conveniently reappear.

One More Preface: The Unbearable Deadness of Butterflies

Since I never start, so can I never stop; my eternal departure is identical with my eternal cessation.

S. Kierkegaard, *Diapsalmata*

If instead of starting from literature one ventured to start from the sphere of intuitive experiences, one could agree, perhaps, that in butterflies' very *self*, or at least in the perception of the self there is already a certain ambivalence. After

³ Kobo Abé, *A Woman In the Dunes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 5—6.

all, a butterfly appears on the one hand as something frail and over-beautiful and, on the other, an insect retaining its insect-ness and repulsiveness. (Thus *sacrum* in all its complexity). It fascinates and repels, consider moths.

Another, equally crucial aspect of the butterfly topos is the short span of its life. Here the symbol is made more distinct: killing a butterfly is a redundant act, thus more cruel, since a butterfly is almost dead when it is still living. True, this can be said about anything that is alive, as, and this is a cliché, of course: the end is already written in the beginning. Kierkegaard says in *Diapsalmata*, "For I do not stop now, I stopped at the time when I began." Yet, temporality can be measured and compared and the comparison of the physical life span of a crocodile/turtle/elephant and a butterfly does not yield too much for that latter. I will paraphrase here Orwell, if I state for the sake of this essay that although all living creatures are already dead when they live, some creatures, like butterflies, are more dead than others. Ironical Lewis Carroll notices it in *Through the Looking Glass*

"You may observe a Bread-and-Butterfly ..."

"And what does it live on?"

"Weak tea with cream in it."

A new difficulty came into Alice's head.

"Supposing it couldn't find any?" she suggested.

"Then it would die, of course."

"But that must happen very often," Alice remarked thoughtfully.

"It always happens" said the Gnat⁴.

A Shortened Guide to Prize-Winning Young Artists

Contemporary English literature and its insect-loving critics may well be exhausted with the literature of exhaustion. It has happened every now and then, starting from the sixties, that important literary debuts revolve round one, cathartic theme — at least in the communal understanding — namely, oppression. There was theatre of cruelty in drama. There is drama of butterflies and sex in prose. It is quite revealing to notice the sequence of several critically acclaimed debuts:

John Fowles's début, *The Collector* (1963), was immediately acclaimed a masterpiece by many critics. Ian McEvan's début, *First Loves, Last Rites* (1976) becomes the winner of the Somerset Maugham Award for 1976. Clive Sinclair's début, *Hearts of Gold* (1979) becomes the winner of the Somerset Maugham Award for 1981. Reverting to the beginning of our considerations, note that Kobo Abé's *The Woman In the Dunes* (1960), received the prestigious

⁴ L. Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1978), pp. 227—228.

Yomiuri Prize in Japan and three years later Hiroshi Teshigahare's film of *The Woman In the Dunes* won the jury prize at the 1963 Cannes Film Festival. Now, who's obsessed with the blend of sexual violence, oppression and the butterfly-ness? The sublimity of the kitch-magnification makes me more and more suspicious. What about V. Nabokov, *Lolita* and entomology? What about a little known fact of Lewis Carroll's hobby: taking nude photographs, arguably very good photographs of naked girls? Or to use some Polish references: Arkady Fiedler's memoirs in two volumes: *Motyle mego życia* [*Butterflies of My Life*] and *Kobiety mej młodości* [*Women of my Youth*]? What sort of parallelism is that? Numerous pictures of the author stalking butterflies. A cloud of yellow butterflies on one of A. Fiedler's photographs, accompanied by a naked child (Eros?) A woman surrounded by red butterflies and an explanation that there were tens of thousands of them. And for instance the picture of Velomody who "was roaming with me on the edge of the forest and ardently penetrated the mysteries of insectivorous plants"⁵. One more picture: Arkady Fiedler holds a net, a girl nestles to him, they look up as if in rapture and the caption says, "the girl chased the butterflies energetically"⁶. Fiedler himself provides enough material for a whole book on the picturesque and mysterious parallelisms. But let's continue differently.

The Unrivalled Role of the Cataract of Sand

The key concepts for these aberrations can be found not only in Abe Kobo. Any aberration can be traced back to *Moby Dick*. The protagonist of *The Woman In the Dunes* is led to the sea by an invisible, unconscious force. (Freud, of course, knew all the terms for these forces). In the initial chapter he endeavours to reach the end of the land through the dunes. It is this very instinct that is perfectly perceived by Melville in the first chapter of *Moby Dick*. Unconsciously, by loomings, we go to the sea, the place of ultimate peace⁷. The very fact that the protagonist of Abe's novel becomes paradoxically landlocked on the shore, with all the horizon set by sand clearly suggests lack of this ultimate peace. Melville asks in the same chapter, whether anybody would be interested in seeing Niagara Falls, if it were a sand cataract⁸. Once again this is the situation of Abe's collector. He is directly endangered by the very cataract of sand.

⁵ A. Fiedler, *Kobiety mej młodości* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie. 1987), insertion, picture 6 [translations mine].

⁶ Ibid., picture 12.

⁷ H. Melville, *Moby Dick* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 95—97.

⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

In *The Woman In the Dunes* the insect collector becomes a prisoner. He is the insect he was searching for, buried in a sandy hollow — imprisoned — stays with a woman who watches his erratic, insect-like behaviour. Good for him. This is a sanity course — the collector, when collected, is frequently hygienically de-collector-ed, freed of his obsession. The protagonist of Fowles's *Collector* remains the collector to the end, he imprisons the girl, who is but a specimen in his collection of butterflies⁹. He experiences neither the sea nor the cleansing cataract of sand; his is neither peace nor fury of entrapment. He manages only to magnify and multiply his obsession — collecting butterflies/Amanda, cataloguing them and taking their pictures, thus collecting and RE-collecting and then recollecting his collecting in an endless process of re-collecting without redemption. In both novels, the relationship between the victim and the oppressor is not lucidified, although in both cases an erratic/erotic factor plays a decisive role.

A Young Writer's Guide to Perversion

The parallels between Ian McEwan's short story *Butterflies* and Fowles's novel are on a somewhat different level. Similarities, however, are striking. Both present a first-person narration, which results in the impression of heart rendering yet repulsive naivety. Both may provoke a feeling of compassion towards the oppressor and the victim alike.

Both protagonists are mentally unbalanced; they are young men disliked by woman. They are attracted to little girls. In McEwan's story the girl is barely nine years old. The oppressors use clever ARTIFICE — they buy the victims ARTIFACTS of ART. In Fowles's story it is the books on art — a suggestion of the Sublime; in McEwan's story the narrator buys the girl "a small, pink, naked doll" which may be reminiscent of the Cupid image.

Both are attracted by butterflies: Fowles's protagonist consciously, as an experienced collector, McEwan's hero intuitively, as an absolute beginner. (Absolute = Sublime?). (Experience = Sublime?). (Who Is the Tiger; Who Is the Lamb? And Who Made Them? McEwan's protagonist leads the girl to the water — it is not the sea though, but an adequately dirty canal — because there are butterflies there. This reminds me of the justification of Kobo Abe's character. The colours here ring a bell too:

"What colour butterflies?" (asks the girl)
"Red ones...yellow ones."¹⁰

⁹ J. Fowles, *The Collector* (London: Pan Books, 1986).

¹⁰ I. McEwan, "Butterflies", in *First Love, Last Rites* (London: Pan Books, 1976), p. 69.

And later:

"Where are the butterflies?"
 "Not far now and we'll see butterflies. Red ones,
 yellow ones, sometimes green ones."¹¹

Both are impotent molesters, potential rapists, eventual murderers. These regularities seem to form a certain paradigm, followed for instance in *The Silence of the Lambs*.

Finally, allow me a brief look at an even more contrived, even more intertextually conscious Clive Sinclair's *Uncle Vlad*. The first sentence of the first story of the "collection" reads like this:

A small puff of powder cleared and I saw my aunt touch my uncle on his white cheek with such exquisite precision that she left lip marks like the wings of a ruby butterfly¹².

Exquisite precision must be the equivalent to sublimity in mathematics. Resemblance of the kiss-mark to one ruby butterfly might be of course bad taste. But not necessarily. In the next paragraph we learn that she is not like a butterfly. She *thinks* she is a butterfly:

"I believe that Lupus thinks that Vlad married me on purely scientific principles as the best specimen he could find of a modern butterfly.
 The aesthete laughed. "Well, Countess", he said. "I hope he won't stick pins into you."¹³

Lupus, the Wolf, or rather the Werewolf, Countess and Count in the story lead the reader inevitably to Count Dracula, and Uncle Vlad is naturally a collector of moths. He gathers moths by candlelight. During the parties he prepares *Crêpes aux Papillons* [*Pancakes with Butterflies*]. "Butterfly Eaters" by Yosl Bergner reveals a similar "taste". In some glass jars Uncle Vlad keeps frantic beating moths and in one champagne. That is some sublime taste, indeed. The ancestor of the Family is Vlad the Impaler who was fighting against the Turks. In the Great Hall there is a portrait presenting the Impaler "amid the dying Turks who pierced through the middle, and waving their arms and legs, look like a multitude of ecstatic butterflies"¹⁴. If you remember the beginning of the essay notice that this portrait will not be kitsch just like the story is not kitsch because of two elements: multitude of butterflies and the element of ecstasy. This may serve as a definition of a pervert's sublimity: multitude of ecstatic butterflies.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 70.

¹² C. Sinclair, *Uncle Vlad*, in *Hearts of Gold* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 9.

¹³ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

The term "Impaler" is interesting in this context of butterfly collecting and sexual excess. There is a sexual preoccupation called "piercism" or "spike-filing", even if one abstracts from the obvious connotations of impaling. Piercers or Spike-files are people who find sexual satisfaction in piercing the partner with pins and needles.

The preoccupation with butterflies in the story does not end here. The narrator, the Nephew of the Draculian Uncle Vlad dances during the party with a Madeleine. They sometimes dance over the bodies of dead butterflies, and after the dance the girl collects up the bruised bodies of the insects. No wonder she collects up the bodies of butterflies. What else can you do with the butterflies but to collect them? The narrator, the nephew, for a change, wants to collect Madeleine. Here comes the intertextual, exhausted topos, a bow to Fowles's *Collector*:

... the more I studied that priceless object (her lip)
 the more I was filled with an increasing need to make it mine. ...
 ... I had to possess that mysterious lobe (neck) ...
 Madeleine became in that chance instant of illumination
 a collection of individual treasures and temptations;
 I had never done it before, but I knew then that I had to
 kiss her. My desire was inevitable, as inevitable as
 the flame that burned above the candle¹⁵.

The next sentence runs as follows:

In the courtyard beyond the keep, in the centre of a thirsty fountain, a small statue of Cupid was slowly falling to pieces¹⁶.

This is of course the triad Eros/Cupid — Psyche — Butterfly. The nephew does not limit himself to the phase of the collector. He reaches the sublime stage, the stage of a certain excess, so he becomes a vampire and drinks the blood from her neck. This is a perfect kiss concluding the story:

And I leaned back in a chair, well satisfied. As I did so, a rather large *acherontia atropos* flew into a candle flame and fell burning on to Madeleine's cheek. She was too weak to brush it off; her hands fluttered as vainly as the moth's wings.

"Madeleine", I whispered in her ear as I blew off the ashes, "now you are really one of the family"¹⁷.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

Eco's Echoes

I have but one friend, Echo; and why is Echo my friend?
Because I love my sorrow, and Echo does not take it
away from me.

S. Kierkegaard, *Diapsalmata*

There are many butterflies in this essay. I would like to finish this paper attempting a sort of justification. In the beginning I quoted Umberto Eco. I will revert to him yet again. This will still remain within the realm of the theory of numbers:

When all the archetypes burst out shamelessly, we plumb Homeric profundity. Two clichés make us laugh but a hundred clichés move us because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, celebrating a reunion.

Just as the extreme of pain meets sensual pleasure, and the extreme of perversion borders on mystical energy, so too the extreme of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the Sublime¹⁸.

And what is a butterfly topos, if not the extreme of banality? The extreme of the extreme of banality will allow us, then, to catch an extreme glimpse of the Sublime.

¹⁸ U. Eco, "Casablanca...", pp. 453—454.