Butterfly Dialectics in Modern Poetry

Modern poetry frequently turns to butterflies. The ability of this vulnerable and attractive animal to survive in modern surroundings is of critical importance to poets ranging from Robert Graves to W. B. Yeats, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and D. H. Lawrence.

Their engagement with butterflies reconfirms critical values such as natural wisdom: the ability to see afresh one’s coexistence with others (such as butterflies), a coexistence at once enormous and frail at the point where opposites continue to dissolve into every new now-moment. This wisdom is much needed in a world haunted, as far as modern poets could see, by the one-sidedness of mechanization, nihilism, and the violence that comes with artificial as well as automated perceptions of “reality.”

An ecocritical sense of much-discussed modern poetic dialectics will consequently come into focus here. Whereas extant criticism discusses these dialectics in terms of opposites such as past and present, too little has been said about the moderns’ foregrounding of the equally important opposite pairing of culture and nature. Illuminating butterfly dialectics have been beckoning for attention in this respect.

Not only do butterflies convey important ecocritical values within modern poems, but they shed light on the intriguing, often neglected, continuities between modern poetry and the Romantic movement. At its conclusion the piece briefly turns to this matter, with confidence that it will become increasingly clear in scholarship to come that in modern mode, poetry has a special appointment with nature.
Some modern butterfly poems celebrate the beastie’s habits, as in the case of this poem by Robert Graves:

**Flying Crooked**

The butterfly, a cabbage-white,  
(Its honest idiocy of flight)  
Will never now, it is too late,  
Master the art of flying straight,  
Yet has—who knows so well as I?—  
A just sense of how not to fly:  
He lurches here and here by guess  
And God and hope and hopelessness.  
Even the acrobatic swift  
Has not his flying-crooked gift. (323)

On its tight surface the poem seems to be about little more than a celebration of the butterfly’s crooked flight with which the speaker identifies (l. 5). The poem does its aesthetic duty with regard to this theme by miming hesitations in its “flight.” Graves inserts interruptions that move against the grain of its overall drive toward a climax. One example is the question “who knows so well as I?” with interrupting dashes on either side (l. 5). The poem formally lurches “here and here.” As in many modern poetic instances, one enjoys the aesthetic satisfaction that arises from the carefully construed integrity of theme and form (see also Carter 34). One has here a vivid (even extreme) example illustrating Aaron Moe’s concept of zoopoetics, that is, “the process of discovering innovative breakthroughs in form through an attentiveness to another species” (10).

The poem further emphasizes crookedness by placing it in dialectical (that is, presuppositional) contrast with the straightness of the swift: winding butterfly comes into clearer depiction in terms of the swift’s acrobatic lines or long curves of flight. “Flying Crooked” goes ahead to suggest that the swift’s flight pattern is less valuable than the butterfly’s (final couplet). This probably goes against expectations because the word “crooked” carries an everyday tone of beguiling and silliness. So what is wrong with straight flying and why is crooked flight valued so much? This has to do with the modern poets’ historical moment in which symmetry and straight lines seem to confine and swamp organic existence. The boldest example is the city with its upright and stripped skyscrapers, its angular, flat, and functional avenues, its unwavering underground tubes, and so on.
On the one hand, modern poets welcome this newly emphasized symmetry and compactness into the formal fibers of their poems. Graves’s poem is in fact an example of this terseness and angularity. But they are wary of the natural implications, as his poem further illustrates. They know that the inflexibilities of urban life is an external reflection of an internal problematic. In their time, perhaps for the first time in history, brutal human uniformities impose themselves to their “full length” on human nature and nature. In appallingly violent numbers, “lines” of men get slaughtered in trenches by means of distanced machinery—first in the Great War and, to the horror of the moderns, again in the Second World War. In those days, “science” employed logical “verticality” to justify and perpetrate inhuman behaviors on a monstrous scale.

These are just some of the realities of its time that led to modern poetry’s discomfort with lines that are too persistent and violent in their straightness. For in such times of war and destruction, the aim-less gathers in significance as does greater freedom of movement. This goes for inner spiritual movement as much as for outer concrete movement, a combination of which the butterfly—long since known as psyche—is the perfect symbol. It is therefore no surprise that for W. B. Yeats, it is a symbol of wisdom. He sees it as the spiritual antithesis of the hawk, which symbolizes logic (Schuchard 418).

So crucial is the crooked-flying insect to Yeats’s struggle with the hawk of thought in the critical years of his poetic development, 1916–19, that he has a ring forged with the two symbols (Schuchard 425). It is as though he comes before a personal choice that reflects a massive historical choice between the dominance of logic and the wise surfacing of renewed wisdom, the wisdom of meandering. He enmeshes himself symbolically into this tension by wearing the dialectical ring. On it, the butterfly is dominant (Schuchard 425).

Yeats links straight hawk-logic with “mechanism,” referring in his 1928 poem “Meditations at a Time of Civil War” to a modern world that has lost its sense of magic to give “place to an indifferent multitude, give place/ To brazen hawks” (Yeats 91; Schuchard 425). In contrast, one finds on his ring as well as in his letters and prose a composite hymn to the butterfly: in connection with it he lists here and there critically important, interrelated values such as intuition, aimless joy, the unconscious, the supreme wisdom of ignorance sweeter than knowledge, rebirth, and a girl “outdancing” thought (Schuchard 424–27).

Something about the insect is therefore close to truth for the poets Graves and Yeats, and it has to do distinctly with its habit of wimpling around. But this is no mere artistic folly. Their sense that its winding
and bouncing now here, then there, ultimately embodies greater closeness to truth relates well with concrete reality. The insect flies here *and* here, gaining a more comprehensive set of samplings of the environment within which it travels as it seeks nectar or mates. Simultaneously, this protects it from predators who would want to hunt it in flight.

On the level of art, different angles on, as well as samplings and fragments from, a given situation is a hallmark of the moderns in search of non-realist, nonlinear, non-one-sided views. These views are *more comprehensive, therefore more true* (see Paltin 779; Brooker 188). Consciously or unconsciously, Graves’s and Yeats’s choice of the butterfly as the animal-symbol for giftedness and wisdom may have to do with this truthfulness in multi-perspectival, straying comprehensiveness.

Imperative Fragility

A different aspect of butterfly wisdom in modern poetry comes to light in Marianne Moore’s poem “To a Steam Roller,” which very nearly provides the perfect depiction of opposites set in modern tension.

The illustration
is nothing to you without the application.
You lack half wit. You crush all the particles down
into close conformity, and then walk back and forth on them.

Sparkling chips of rock
are crushed down to the level of the parent block.
Were not ‘impersonal judgment in aesthetic
matters, a metaphysical impossibility,’ you

might fairly achieve
it. As for butterflies, I can hardly conceive
of one’s attending upon you, but to question
the congruence of the complement is vain, if it exists. (84)

The poem depicts core values in Moore’s oeuvre. Influenced by the rich Chinese tradition (with *its* rich emphasis on butterflies), the aim is to achieve a kind of *fu* poetry—whose main function is to find subjective magic *in terms of* the oddities, species, and shapes of a given natural situation (Stamy 97). Such poetry becomes a worthy response to nature in all its seemingly ordinary otherness, a response that—as response—confirms one’s radical participation in that otherness. Once the
response has reached a certain level of precision, especially in terms of visual appearance and its poetic description, the poet’s work is done.

This is an informative way of reading Moore (see also Kenner 15, 23). “To a Steam Roller” now reveals its bafflingly simple secret to a satisfactory extent. Butterflies find themselves in startling, ethical contrast to the steam roller. The steam roller’s actions are acutely and richly described, while the butterflies appear to appear from nowhere. A dialectical space opens up in which the reader fills in the butterfly details, knowing that they are opposite to steam roller details. Butterflies therefore suggest fragility, aliveness, attractiveness, mindfulness, asymmetry, and so forth. The ethic of the fu element Moore achieves in this case by clearing up all possible wooliness gathered around the inner perception of these opposite phenomena. Once the nature of their dialectics has been accurately described, the poem has consequently completed its ethical duty.

The first stanza shows that the steam roller is not exactly linguistic in nature. It has little use for illustration without application, it lacks half-wit, it ensures that it conforms particles and crushes things even further. (Usually in unbending, flat lanes.) The stanza nonetheless celebrates the linguistic expression of this dull thing and its monotonous “intent.” Moore addresses it, calling it “you” (stanza 2, ll. 2–3): this oddity probably intends to intensify the sense of its metallic and ungainly impersonality. As the next stanza reveals, the poor machine is as close as one may come to impersonal judgement in matters of art, because it is artless.

Then, in the final stanza, the striking modern switch to an opposite occurs when butterflies are mentioned (l. 2). In terms of complementariness between opposites, their appearance should be quite logical, even expected. It would certainly be artistically vain and cowardly to question the existence of the complementariness that completes one in terms of the other. At the exact moment of precisely acknowledging this, the poem comes to its abrupt climax. Emphasis on imperative fragility in a mechanical world of brutal sameness therefore triumphs as the important value in this poem, but not without acknowledgment that opposites continue to count. The tension between them is essential to comprehending existence.

Flying Flowers

It is not only the tension between complementary opposites that matters in modern butterfly poetry. It must dissolve for wisdom to be complete. Perhaps Pound’s most effective and well-known Imagist poem—

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Pound, Poems 35)
—owes more to butterflies than meets the eye. The achievement of this poem is underpinned by Pound’s creative translation of a butterfly poem by Moritake (1472–1549):

The fallen blossom flies back to its branch:
A butterfly. (Miner 119)

How well the fleeting presence of the butterfly lends itself to the fleeting presence that this short poem evokes. The image of blossom being (like) butterfly at once erupts and dissolves in the mind’s eye. The similarity of their appearance is of course the key to this: similarity and difference become heightened at once, for once.

But the matter of straightness is still around. The poem with petals on the wet black bough—shorthand for a kind of ideogrammatic, intuitive, Chinese appreciation of natural clarity—carries the title “In a Station of the Metro.” It evokes dark, damp platforms and railway lines, but these black boughs bring into focus something far more organismic and unfolding in nature, something that enjoys the civilized brightness of plants in life and in imagination: the faces that seamlessly turn or dissolve into petals, just as in the Moritake poem, butterfly dissolves into blossom.

And is there not something plant-like about butterflies not only in terms of their food, but also their appearance? This fleeting plant-likeness is the entrance into the aliveness of the faces in the station and the immediate poetic awakening to that recognition.

The little Pound–Moritake poem is also a comment on the making of poetry since flowers are ubiquitous symbols of poems. The butterfly connection underscores that poems, like flowers and those insects, have something about them of an immediacy of appearance and disappearance, too. Also in this way can poems offer telling glimpses into nature’s otherly worlds, leading us into recognitions of our profound, fleeting participation in them. And sometimes, once they have succeeded thus, the poems appear to melt away into those very worlds that they have pointed into.

William Carlos Williams participates in the modern melting of butterfly and flower, but in his case a sudden stillness and outline result:

Here’s that old friend who
went by my side so many years: this full, fragile
head of veined lavender. Oh that April
that we first went with our stiff lusts
leaving the city behind, out to the green hill—
May, they said she was. A hand for all of us:
this branch of blue butterflies tied to this stem. (Volume 1 141)
In the poem from which I take the passage, “A Celebration,” the speaker visits the orchid-house, taking a walk through flowers, seasons, and memories. He contemplates a lifetime in terms of months and vegetation. And then one finds the crisp moment in which lavender blossoms cling to a stem like blue butterflies (final line).

I have used the word “like” to illustrate the comparison, but the image is neither simile nor metaphor or metonym: it is a vehicle into itself. The blossoms are butterflies because, at least for an implied moment, they literally look like them. This has the effect of evoking their crisp suchness, being what they are: nature’s just-so-ness, its IS. This is “a hand for all of us:” the gift of perceiving nature in its abundance, clarity, and effortless unity as it continues to sustain worlds as different and opposing as animals and plants, effortlessly melting them to retain real wholeness—actual continuation of Earth is the crucial acknowledgement. The pattern of the flowers tied to the stem of course also resonates in the pattern of fingers tied to a palm and an arm.

On another occasion of melting imagery, though in a sadder moment, Williams responds with a moth poem to his contemporary Robert Frost. Keen to meet Frost, he gathers the impression that Frost would be interested in his poetic project and acquaintance. But it gradually dawns on Williams that Frost has no respect for his project (Peterfy 101). Upon this, Williams will choose to respond to the conclusion of Frost’s rather archaic poem entitled “My Butterfly,” which reads:

I found that wing broken today!
For thou art dead, I said,
And the strange birds say.
I found it with the withered leaves
Under the eaves. (29)

Williams’s response comes with a poem entitled “Prelude to Winter”:

The moth under the eaves
with wings like
the bark of a tree, lies
symmetrically still—

And love is a curious
soft-winged thing
unmoving under the eaves
when the leaves fall. (Volume 2 90)

Both poems invoke the Romantic season of autumn. The passage from Frost’s poem underlines the sad harmony between broken wing and
falling leaves, of things coming to an end, and painful loss. Williams’s poem is more ambivalent about such Romantic harmony, while it suggests renewed harmonies of its own. Though the moth remains unmoved by the falling leaves, it is able to merge in perfect stillness with bark (final stanza). Moreover, love is like the moth (stanza 2, ll. 1–2): it remains constant even when things around it fall away, and this suggests harmony between the human perception of love and natural phenomena by avoiding the directness of Frost’s sad harmonies.

But the poem clearly further suggests that full understanding of love is not possible. Love remains “curious,” like the secret of the unmoving moth (final stanza). With this it enters dialectics of perfection and imperfection: can perfection be perfect without imperfection, including the imperfection of the lack of complete understanding? it asks.

A paradox therefore gets carried across by means of a moth-comment on a butterfly-lament, or a moth-poignancy in response to a butterfly-loss. Love is pure, it combines things seamlessly, but its pureness is unmoved by human pain. However, the pureness is therefore everything but harsh. It is flexible, it includes events and extremities, and continues to continue, merging unmoving moth and leaves in motion.

Also in these two modern poems we therefore find the proximity of butterflies and moths to leaves and plants. This is not removed from realities in wilderness experienced by lepidopterists (students of butterflies and moths). An array of astonishingly powerful and beautiful butterflies ranging from Kallima to Salamis and Charaxes enjoy leaf-like appearances that make them melt into foliage upon settling, as experienced by the author. In their turn, moths are renowned for their various bark-like guises. From this naturalist perspective the oriental-modern poetic tendency to have flower and butterfly or wood and moth melt into each other amounts to pushing reality just a fraction further to enter a (wholly different) poetic world. It would be a mistake to think that these melting events relate purely to literary worlds and histories.

In his turn, Frost skillfully composes poetry dissolving butterflies and flowers:

Blue-Butterfly Day

It is blue-butterfly day here in spring,
And with these sky-flakes down in flurry on flurry
There is more unmixed color on the wing
Than flowers will show for days unless they hurry.
But these are flowers that fly and all but sing:
And now from having ridden out desire
They lie closed over in the wind and cling
Where wheels have freshly sliced the April mire. (225)

These blue butterflies bring the sky down to Earth in fragments (stanza 1, l. 2). They therefore satisfy the need to see the sky in pieces instead of blue sheets, as another Frost poem advocates (220). The butterflies melt into the plant kingdom along with the fusion of various carefully suggested opposites including the instantaneous mobility of butterflies and the “sessile” flowers who take longer to bring out their colors (stanza 1, l. 4). The poem helps one see how things clearly emerge into the now-moment as opposites continue to dissolve on/in Earth. It brings news not of human atrocities and pettiness, but of big-hearted Earth’s delicate triumphs, starting out with a ringing announcement: “It is blue-butterfly day here in spring” (first line).

I have been hinting at the connections between these modern poems and earthly butterfly-realities, and in Frost’s case this is very significant. In John Elder’s phrase, his work is known as the “poetry of experience” (653). It carries and is carried by Frost’s frequent working and observations in the countryside.

The “blues,” small butterflies in the large family Lycaenidae, sometimes undergo a population explosion, typically in spring. Then they will converge on spring flowers in considerable numbers. They also settle on open, clammy soil to suck minerals from it for the sake of feeding and reproduction—witnessed many times (but never enough) by the author. Lepidopterists refer to this behavior as “mud-puddling.”

Walking close to them on such occasions will literally see a little cloud of blue flakes erupting into the air to settle down again for further sipping, as soon as possible. In strong wind, familiar to springtime, they would actually lie with their wings folded over away from their clinging legs; the word “cling” is very skillfully placed in this poem and it depicts the toughness and brittleness of their hanging on to life (stanza 2, l. 3).

Having “ridden out desire” (stanza 2, l. 2) would then refer to exhaustion after frolicking around, sexual satisfaction, saturation of nectar and minerals, or all of these and perhaps more. That these blues cling to freshly opened April mire is therefore most probably as observant as it is poetic. The freshly sliced mud of human activity (final line) again finds itself in imperfectly perfect harmony with the blues’ announcement of a new season.

In “The Tuft of Flowers,” Frost depicts how a butterfly changes the speaker’s mind when it first circles around a scythed, withered flower of “yesterday’s delight” (22). This image suggests isolation and
entropy. But, being wise enough, the speaker continues to follow the creature as it flies away into the distance, and subsequently flies back to a single living tuft of flowers left standing. He realizes that whoever did the scything the previous day, left this one tuft for the notice and enjoyment of whoever would come to work next. This convinces him that even when men work apart, they work together (Frost 23). Butterfly and plant in this instance “melt” the speaker, so to say, into a heightened realization of the bond between all that is alive, a bond paradoxically sealed by their being apart as individual creatures.

On occasion the modern poetic melting of opposites involves not only animals or plants, but also weather and Cosmos. In a visual poem to which I cannot do full justice here, E. E. Cummings melts butterflies and falling snowflakes, economically describing not only the melting, but also the simultaneity of directions that the snowflakes take as they fall and disappear. Zoopoetics in this instance finds the radical cross-stitching of warm-season animal motions informing cold-season weather patterns. The poem depicts how the snowflake world “BYS FLUTTERFULLY IF” (Cummings 421), that is, the poem follows the manner or “how” of the moving flakes. The flakes pass by, marked by a new verb, “BYS,” moving thus full of butterfly-ness: the poem states that they move “FLUTTERFULLY,” a stunning new adjective brimming with aliveness. The poem reveals how the movement is magical, inducing childlike wonder in a world of perhaps or as-if, that is, “IF” in all its flutterful IS-ness, hence magical, actual.

The butterflies in these modern poems are therefore the remarkable little carriers of the news that opposites continue to remain intact within mind-boggling relations of tension, complementariness, connection, dissolving, crookedness, fragility, imperfection, perfection, movement, stillness, and wisdom on Earth as well as in human work and works. They are the dynamic signifiers of the stupendous actuality of continuation in a world of enormous change.

Setting Free the Butterflies

As Moore’s “To a Steam Roller” already indicates, however, the connection between these opposites is not simply “pretty.” In a wonderfully titled poem, Wallace Stevens rubs the butterfly into worlds that are “ugly.” The title reads (no less) “Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs” (78), which takes the butterfly out of its “usual,” spiritually-laden and beautiful life cycle from egg to adult, to place it in another cycle: the food chain. The poem itself does not mention butterflies again. It describes how a single human life—that of a man who becomes old, arid—is part of an enormous liquid
cycle that will continue to feed itself from the living. This is compared to a river that acts and smells like nosing swine at the troughs. The river is on its way to the sea mouths (78), where the disappearance of water into water and human flesh into nothing will be complete.

In this “ugliness” resides another value related to modern poetic dialectics: that nature is neither sentimental nor beautiful in any glossed-over manner. Even if a frog may be clumsier in outline and less immediately attractive than the brittle, aesthetic butterfly, it is he who has the perfect “right” to devour the delicate, attractive creature. This is “in its nature,” as the saying tellingly goes.

In this way Stevens sets the butterfly free from clichés about its beauty, bringing about fresh perspectives of its attractiveness as a radical part of all that lives. Part of this unfettering realization is that there is no graceful softness for the butterfly without hardness and toughness. Williams depicts this in a poem published in a 1940 issue of the *New Yorker*:

The Graceful Bastion

A white butterfly
in an August garden,
light as it may seem
among the zinnias
and verbenas,
fragile among the red

 trumpeted petunias,
is ribbed with steel
wired to the sun

whose triumphant power
will keep it safe,
free as laughter,

secure against
bombardments no more
dangerous to its

armored might than if
the cotton clouds
should merely fall. (*New Yorker* 51)

On one level, this poem simply says that nature will continue even if humanity will come to a fall, a possibility very much in the air of those
days. It chooses the most fragile creature to illustrate this point. In the process it boldly foregrounds one of the most striking, poetically neglected features of the little beastie: the hard veins that uphold its breakable wings (stanza 3, ll. 1–2). A “hard melting” occurs: the steel-ribbed veins are “wired to the sun.” (Incidentally, it literally is the sun that hardens those veins once the butterfly has emerged from its protective pupa.)

On another level, therefore, dialectics between clichéd and renewing expressions of nature come out to play in this poem. For instance, “cotton clouds” is a hackneyed natural expression, in express contrast to the image of the steel-ribbed insect. Williams underlines this by inserting the adjective “merely” at an acute, grammatically unexpected point (final line). The fall of the cotton clouds is unremarkable because it has been imagined or feared too often. The refreshing image of steely veins triumphantly wired to the sun with incredible toughness and natural integrity (stanza 3) in this reading contrasts itself not only with relative butterfly clichés, but also with “aesthetic” images projected onto clouds.

This is to read the poem in terms of Williams’s entire project with its emphasis on finding the poetic in one’s backyard, in the most ordinary places and manners, and not in clichéd, highfalutin spaces made artificial by mass life. In this regard he is emphatic about seeing things as they are, not in terms of our ideas about them. In his epic poem related to the automating effects of industry on human perceptions, Paterson (6), Williams intertextually meets Stevens on this modern notion. In this view, human ideas about and projections onto nature do not only have the potential to clarify things, but to clutter one’s perception of nature as it is. And the very modernism of Williams’s poems advocates again and again that humanity should urgently move on to more actual perceptions of butterflies and plants.

Also in this case, therefore, a clear poetic eye informs the earthly actuality. The image reading “ribbed with steel” (stanza 3, l. 2) is observant. In some white butterflies, the veins in their wings are indeed very visible. Some are named after their veins, for instance, the “brown-veined white” or the “green-veined white.” Close inspection of any settled butterfly will reveal to the sharp observer hard veins protruding in a striking pattern from the wing surface, an attractive pattern equaled perhaps only by spiders’ webs.

With his gentle and yet steely undermining of clichés that have over time cluttered perception of butterflies, the poet finds in this poem soft refuge against mechanized living and its concomitant fears. The rich layer of words related to war and medicine—“fragile,” “red,” “trumpeted,” “ribbed,” “steel,” “wired,” “triumphant,” “safe,” “free,” “secure,” “bombardments,” “dangerous,” “armored,” “might,”

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“cotton,” “fall”—therefore expresses not so much fear of the actual threat of war, but concern about how war is symptomatic (consider that for Williams, “cotton” reminds of treating wounds) of a humanity out of touch with the actual butterfly. Under such circumstances, the merely falling cotton clouds would amount to a felix culpa toward rediscovering nature in all its dynamic, extraordinary realness, and the speaker escapes with the butterfly that the poem sets free. From this angle, the poem is itself a graceful bastion, like the butterfly: at once of a kin with and different from the age-old notion of the well wrought urn. It is that which affords poet, speaker, and any willing reader a flexible fortress against the “bombardments” of automated perception; the protection is however not incarcerating, but liberating.

Consider the implications. All of this means that the modern poets employ their poetic dialectics, sometimes by switching around the expected relation between opposites, to dissolve language itself. Then the paradox is that it is language, after all, that opens into all that is beyond it, wiring the modern sign to nature afresh, a wiring that is somehow at once fragile, flexible, and incredibly strong. And so is the butterfly at once fragile, flexible, and incredibly strong. It has survived much over the past hundred and ninety million years of its existence (Grimaldi and Engel 556). Its small toughness and wise meandering predict that it will continue to survive, perhaps even when a self-destructive humanity may not.

It is not only Williams who associates the butterfly with setting things free. D. H. Lawrence gives an individual angle on this notion in his poem “Butterfly”:

Butterfly, the wind blows sea-ward, strong beyond the garden-wall!
Butterfly, why do you settle on my shoe, and sip the dirt on my shoe,
Lifting your veined wings, lifting them? big white butterfly!

Already it is October, and the wind blows strong to the sea from the hills where snow must have fallen, the wind is polished with snow.
Here in the garden, with red geraniums, it is warm, it is warm but the wind blows strong to sea-ward, white butterfly, content on my shoe!

Will you go, will you go from my warm house?
Will you climb on your big soft wings, black-dotted,
as up an invisible rainbow, an arch,
till the wind slides you sheer from the arch-crest
and in a strange level fluttering you go out to sea-ward,
white speck!

Farewell, farewell, lost soul!
you have melted in the crystalline distance,
it is enough! I saw you vanish into air. (583)

Dialectics of small butterfly and vast ocean, domestic space and wilderness, perishable insect and strong wind—and so forth—find paradoxical connections in this poem. The butterfly’s incarceration within the speaker’s stone wall as it settles for a moment on his shoe, protects it from the strong wind (stanzas 1–3). The speaker is clearly concerned about its encounter with that wind, which blows seaward, into an element foreign and ultimately deadly to the creature. On the other hand, he would not want it to stay within domestic walls (stanzas 3–4).

Once more relief comes with a kind of melting. This time the butterfly becomes one with the air (final stanza). The image further suggests that what has occurred is beyond the speaker’s full grasp. He sees it disappearing without knowing what will ultimately happen to it. But this lack of knowledge is sufficient (final line), since the speaker will retain the visit itself from his encounter with the creature, including the visitor’s profound disappearance.

Emphasis on the exquisite vanishing-capacities of butterflies occurs also in Emily Dickinson’s poetry of which the fragmentary form is proto-modern in pre-modern time. Here is the poet who asks whether the butterfly, the lizard, and the orchis are not our countrymen (Letters 412), elsewhere adding “In the name of the Bee—/ In the name of the Butterfly—/ In the name of the Breeze—Amen” (21)! In “A Bird came down to Walk” she celebrates the effortless seamlessness of the event when butterflies bounce in(to) the air. “Butterflies, off Banks of Noon/ Leap, plashless as they swim,” just as a bird of the poem “unrolled his feathers/ And rowed him softer home// Than Oars divide the Ocean,/ Too silver for a seam” (Dickinson, Poems 261). The flight of the butterfly, after its leap (like the flight of the bird), reminds one that air is liquid and not simply a transparent vacuum. Air comes alive with butterfly wings flapping. It is as though the air should make splashing sounds in response to the moving wings and the bouncing insects. The text itself, etymologically related to the notion of a cloth in Latin textus, becomes seamless as it expresses the reciprocity of active insects and responding air. In her way, Dickinson radically participates in the
comprehension that comes with following butterfly aeronautics. Of these aeronautics she is an acute poetic observer.

The speaker in Lawrence’s butterfly poem (though decidedly different) is equally observant, as one has come to expect of the moderns. Before the butterfly vanishes in air (final line) its wings are pertinently described as veined and black-dotted (stanza 1, l. 3; stanza 3, l. 2). Such markings are typical of many white butterflies. So is the image of strange level fluttering (stanza 3, l. 5) when strong wind occasionally takes these wanderers seaward. It is an exact description of what the event looks like.

That the butterfly settles on a shoe may well also be based on an actual observation. One may have thought of this as mere “pohetic” fancy. But Lawrence includes the acute observation that it settles there to “sip the dirt” from the shoe (stanza 1, l. 2). Butterflies indeed suck all kinds of things in pursuit of the right minerals, as mentioned in terms of blues and mud. Some go much further than sucking dirt from a shoe: they suck rotten fruit and dung on the ground. This includes some of the most beautiful ones, such as the tiger swallowtail (Papilio glaucus), as observed by the author on a walk at the foot of Mt Chocorua in New Hampshire, in June 2012.

Given their willingness to suck materials from unlikely sources, as Lawrence’s poem affirms, will they dare to dart towards something as human-made as a shoe, and settle on it? Are they not always terribly cautious? Again, knowing them in towns, the countryside, or wilderness shows that they can be curious about their surroundings, engaging in daring actions such as closely inspecting a red shirt hanging from a washing line or a moving body, and even darting toward a red car speeding down a street.

Provisional Conclusion: Modern Butterfly Poetry and Diminished and Enlarged Romanticism

As demonstrated, the moderns stay remarkably true to their butterflies in terms of names, morphology, and habits. They no doubt turn these into the actuality of poetry, where the dream-like and the real enjoy their dynamic meeting; just about the first thing mentioned in discussions about modern artists is that they are not realists. But there can be equally little doubt that their real perceptions of Earth and its creatures are essential to the actuality that their poems achieve, as has been inferred abundantly from the butterfly poems read here.

For example, almost all the butterflies referred to—excepting Frost—are whites. These belong to the family Pieridae (also known as “pierids” or “whites,” “yellows,” and “sulphurs.”). These butterflies
wander into and through gardens, often fly at eye-height, catch the eye with the brightness of their coloration in sunshine, are of a conspicuous size, and certainly meander exuberantly. These are exactly the kind of butterflies that the observant non-specialist would see—and our modern poets are therefore acutely observant. Frost’s observing of blues, which are smaller and less often noticed by nonspecialists, is exceptionally observant in its own right. One should add that not all butterfly groups meander conspicuously. Graves therefore knows his butterflies in “Flying Crooked;” his focus on the “cabbage-white” (l. 1) as a supreme operator of crookedness contains pleasant truth-value.

In one sense, this development is no more than a “sign of the times.” The modern poets participate in a worldwide aspiring to be scientific in some way or another. More interestingly from a literary perspective, though, this aspiration is colored in their case by the historical move away from Romantic engagement with nature’s others. By staying true to butterfly realities, they make it harder to “subjectify” the creature by means of the pathetic fallacy, that is, the tendency to project human emotions onto natural phenomena thus weakening, for John Ruskin, the sense of their nature-bound realities in return for apparent greater identity with nature’s objects and others (483).

This difference between Romantic and modern poetry is not absolute, but it is compelling in its gradations. For instance, even when the modern poems enter the mystery where opposites continue to dissolve—in flying flowers—the imagery is deliberately instantaneous and intuitive, devoid of huge emotion. (I must mention that this striking phrase, “flying flowers,” can be traced back to Augustus Radcliffe Grote, an American expert on moths, in a piece of writing of 1886 (Leach xv).)

And yet, as in the case for instance of Moore’s “To a Steam Roller,” the Romantic sensibility has not gone amiss. The poem makes a statement about the loss of organic fragility that has come about in a world increasingly dominated by a reductive will embodied in machines that rationally flatten everything into sameness. Thus the poem continues the much-discussed Romantic reaction to rationalist and industrial threats to organic perceptions of life.

Because modern poetry is a response to Romanticism, one could say, its entire departure from Romanticism is impossible from the outset. Instead, Romanticism shapes the modern break away from it to a considerable degree. As James Longenbach has brilliantly pointed out, modern poetry’s self-consciousness about “hugeness” and its subsequent propensity toward brevity and smallness are direct consequences of the awareness of its break with Romanticism; modern poetry is a “diminished Romanticism” (102, 104). Deliberate focus on small
creatures such as butterflies is part of this self-consciousness. But this involves as much a continuity as a discontinuity. The moderns find a different way of engaging with nature, a way influenced by the Romantics.

In his valuable discussion of nature in modern poems, Robert Langbaum argues that the fractions of additional “scientific” otherness that we see at work here also in the butterfly poems, force the reader to work harder to reach empathy for the creature (104), and in this sense one has a new kind of pathetic fallacy, at once reduced and enlarged (see Webster 112). This new kind of fallacy—should it be fallacious—limits the liberty of projecting human emotions onto butterflies or other creatures. Simultaneously, a more radical identification with it occurs when one has done the (additional) work of bridging the distance between reader and other via the poem. Unsuspectingly perhaps, one sees more of the creature itself in the images of Graves, Moore, Pound, Williams, and Lawrence, since these images are not as subjective as those of the Romantics.

Romantics may, for example, describe foam in waves as cruel and crawling, just because humans happen to be struggling to row in a boat across the ocean surface (Ruskin 485). But does this do justice to the waves as they are? Given the temptation of such dramatic natural projections, one cannot imagine a Romantic poet at once calling a butterfly by its name, supplying information about its markings, and staying as true to its behaviors as the moderns do. Conversely, one cannot imagine most moderns addressing the insect by means of prolonged and excited apostrophe as William Wordsworth does in “To a Butterfly” (91)—though Lawrence comes close, and Moore skirts with apostrophizing the steam roller!

Investing in the otherness of butterflies by incorporating realities to a larger degree than Romantics, the moderns to a new degree succeed in avoiding the reduction of nature to human emotion. However, since emotional response to nature is valuable, one may ask on another day whether Ruskin is right: whether the pathetic fallacy is either pathetic or fallacious.

Whatever the case, modern poets achieve illuminations in their way. Gary Snyder writes of “how poetry might give human beings a window into the nonhuman. We know that the arts lend us,” he writes,

eyes and ears that are other than human, pointing towards other biologies, other realms. From the fourth to the fourteenth centuries, the poetry of China reached far (but selectively) into the world of nature. Contemporary occidental poetry has been influenced by that aspect, too. (92)
This brings into focus that butterflies are “indicator species” in modern poetry. In searching for alternatives from the past in order to break away from the inauthentic inner being that results from nihilism in their day, the moderns discover China with its brevity and focus on insects. Pound brings the Taoist poet Li Bo’s butterflies into modern poems (Personae 134) along with Moritake’s, but in the particular sense of keeping things brief: he is pleased to announce that there are no long poems in Chinese (Xie 9).

At the limits of knowing and experience, modern poets therefore hold opposites centering on this profound insect in tension, skillfully steering the opposites into significant moments of switching and dissolving, where flying flowers lead the crooked way into the wisdom of continuing to know Earth for the first time.

Works Cited


