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A Rapturous Imagine: Butterflies and Language in a Masquerade

As a lover of language, I often find myself exhilarated by the lyrical quality of words, just as a musician admires the pitch of a song or just as a painter admires the colors on a canvas. Words hypnotize me with their sounds and the images they create inside my mind. Some say language simply serves to label things. I agree with the labeling bit, but language offers more than mere functionality. Language provides us with the means to listen to the lilt of words and speech, explore our creativity, discover how language shapes our thoughts, and connect with the outside world. The building blocks of communication, words express themselves with melodies, and we owe it to ourselves to appreciate them, not just hear them.

At my work desk sits a thick stack of white index cards, each labeled with a different vocabulary word. I sometimes read the words aloud to myself, allowing the vowels and consonants of each word to come to life on my palate. I once spent an hour debating to myself whether the word rapture carries more oratory strength than the more formal term ebullience. (I had a lot of free time, evidently.) Eventually I chose rapture as the better choice: its harsh first syllable gives it a sense of vibrancy, a wonderful parallel to its denotation, or dictionary definition, “extreme joy.”

But I might’ve chosen the wrong word.

Say the two words aloud and decide for yourself which one sounds better. Rapture, ebullience. If you must, make sure no one else can see you. Besides, you don’t have to take an hour to decide which one you like more. Let the words roll in your mouth. Give them personality and attitude. Turn their sounds into poetry.

One could say my love for the lilt of language borders on rapturous. College English majors such as myself tend to develop a passion for the written word and the sounds each one creates. Growing up as a student in remedial English classes, however, I overlooked the power of words at first, unable to hear the symphony of language. As I grew older, I ultimately learned to revere words for the images they convey. Words, in short, resonate with me—with all of us. As poets David Mason and John Frederick Nims state, “Hearing certain sounds cannot fail to remind us of surf or thunder or the hiss of a snake or the whine of the winter wind through telephone wires through the prairie.”¹

For the last several years my favorite word has been masquerade. Listen to the sounds of the word—the rise and fall of syllables, the swaying impetus of the harsh M- and Q-sounds coupled with the S- and light A-sounds. The word sounds like a mini crescendo, connoting rapture—or ebullience, if you prefer—and evoking vivid images of dancing partygoers. Wearing masks as colorful as mammoth butterflies, the people at my masquerade dance and laugh, spin and sashay, bow and drink. Giddy,

¹ David Mason and John Frederick Nims, *Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry*, 5th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2000), 152.

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some of them think they can flutter off into the sky like butterflies themselves. (Someone must've spiked the punch bowl or brought special brownies. Oh, well.)

What does your masquerade look like? Say the word to yourself (no joke; say the word; come on; embrace it; imprint your imagination onto it; maybe it will imprint something onto you, too). What do you hear? What do you see? Turn the image into a story. Give it meaning. For the rest of your life make this word and all the others you encounter your own. Ride on the lilt of language, and let vivid images emerge from your thoughts. They bear tremendous intrinsic strength. Accept that—whatever that strength means to you.

In an old poetry writing class of mine, I was assigned to write a poem using technical language—in my case, the parts of an eyeball. By listening to the sounds of the words and by understanding what they mean, I learned even technical terms sound poetic, that a Corneoscleral junction can become an ebony wedding ring through metaphor. Like every other word used in whatever professional or nonprofessional arena, technical words form melodies. Such words also leave perceptible impressions in our minds, and grant us opportunities to respect language as a whole. Language liberates our imaginations by providing us with the means to express ourselves (my masquerade differs from yours). You don't have to be smitten with every word; even my love has limits. But remember the music they play for us, even if you find pronouncing certain words troubling. Corneoscleral junction troubled me at first. Now the term dances on the tip of my tongue every time I read it aloud.

Let words, no matter how technical, ignite you.

Or remain deaf to them.

No pressure.

Let's play with technical language some more.

Lepidopterology. Say the word aloud. Don't worry about the pronunciation. Allow the sounds of the word to lumber off your tongue like a farmer plodding past a muddy thicket of weeds. Or allow the sounds of the word to fly off the roof of your mouth and spin in the sky with its soft and harsh syllables.

Lepidopterology. The study of butterflies. The word clamors up my throat like a train chugging up a mountain. From that one word, Lepidopterology, a rich history steps forth. According to Dr. Phil Schappert, the love for and symbolic connections between humankind and butterflies predates nearly five thousand years ago: in Greek and Roman societies, butterflies represented the soul.²

In fact, the word *psyche*, meaning "butterfly" in ancient Greek, can be translated as "soul" or "breath"; the word *psyche* is now widely used in the realm of psychology (notice the same root word). In addition, according to a popular Roman myth, a woman named *Psyche* was granted

² Phil Schappert, *A World for Butterflies: Their Lives, Behavior, and Future* (Toronto: Firefly Books, 2000), 43.

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immortality so that she could reunite with her long-lost love, Cupid. In Latin, the word *papilio*, meaning “butterfly,” expresses the transformation of one’s soul into a butterfly, a metaphor of life-everlasting and the human need to change, adapt, and prosper.

By using or even uttering the word *Lepidopterology*, we can express meanings originating way before the advent of the TV, the train, or the Revolutionary War. My clunky pronunciation of the scientific term *Lepidopterology* connotes a history that unites people, especially laypeople such as ourselves. The nature of the word, with all its chugging, crashing consonants, expresses, in part, notions of the immortal soul, which desires to grow and remain alive no matter what. We live within the word, within its lilt, because the word sings for us, even though we created it. In particular, the word includes us in our emotional and scientific fascination with the realm of butterflies, reflections of our spirits.

I’m not a philosopher or a linguist, but I’d argue we invent words and their sounds to allow humankind to connect with the exterior and interior world—the butterfly in the glen versus the metaphorical butterfly, or psyche, growing in all of us (*papilio*). In many places around the world, a group of butterflies is called a *kaleidoscope*, another spectacular word to read aloud and imagine. In fact, a group of adult butterflies is sometimes referred to as an *imagine* (singular: *imago*).

Lepidopterology—the soul, life-everlasting, human metamorphous, bursting array of colors, the imagination seeking substance in the physical world through concrete images. From the sounds come all these ideas—and no doubt a profusion of others.

The lilt of language and its personal connection to us never dies.

The music of the written word never goes silent.

The personal connection we find in its lilting music stays with us forever.

Or at least until we forget or grow indifferent to its lyrical impact. If that ever happens, what would humanity become?

Picture a rapturous *kaleidoscope* of butterflies in a masquerade.

Assuming the butterflies don’t drink booze or eat any special brownies from my masquerade, that image could be a decent starter image for a children’s book. Or the first sentence in a poem. Or the inspiration of a future painting. Or a literary critic’s reason to hate my work: “A Rapturous *Imagine: Butterflies and Language in a Masquerade* sounds clunky and forced,” one might contend. But at least the sentence exists, its rhythm coasting forward like whitecaps slushing along the bottom of a sandstone cliff, melodic yet sometimes discordant in a sea of concrete and abstract language.

We categorize words, placing them along a never-ending spectrum of concrete imagery and abstract ideas. A word can never be fully concrete or abstract, but some words are more concrete or abstract than others. For instance, *butterfly* is in many ways a concrete image, but since it lacks specificity, one finds it challenging to picture exactly what it looks like. The

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word butterfly is in many ways as formless as smog over the Golden Gate Bridge. Once categorized with singsong or galumphing sub-names, the term butterfly gains an interesting blend of music. Its lilts produce crisper images in our imaginations and, dare I say, in our souls. No wonder why poets prefer concrete detail over abstractions. We generally express ourselves in how we perceive life and death. Or in this case, the many different types of butterflies out there.

Consider the following. Let each Latinate imago ignite you with its poetry.

Found in the family Papilionidae, *Graphium weiskei* comes in shades of white, emerald, and lavender. It resembles a bow in a girl's hair or a fancy bowtie below a man's shaven neck. From the family Pieridae, *Prestonia clarki* features bright yellow wings and pink speckles under its hindwing. The butterfly looks like bruised lemons or a face blushing at our attempts to pronounce its name correctly. A member of the Nymphalidae family, *Euploea mulciber* contains dark blue forewings with white speckles. A landscape to the imagination, the butterfly looks as if it dipped itself into a pool of nighttime beauty, the wings resembling a starlit heaven. Its grayish black hindwings look like a hill cloaked in dusk. A part of the Lycaenidae family, *Calycopis cecrops* is predominately brown with striped cerulean and reddish marks, its hairstreaks like leather tassels, the butterfly resembling a dance regalia. A type of butterfly from the Riodinidae family, *Helicopsis gnidus* flashes metallic orange base wings and scarlet tails, elongated like spider legs, artifacts of nature—products of the imagination.

The people who come up with these Latin names either want to perplex, vex, bore, or excite us with technical language. Because of my affinity for the written word, I would like to say the people who decide what to name animals, including the names of butterflies, care about language so much they would choose the most accurate words to render the animals more concrete—more real. Language, as a result, transforms the creatures into mystifying discoveries of humankind's imaginative connection with reality.

Words sing their meanings to the world, revealing beneath their letters, beneath their labels, an assortment of vivid images. The butterflies' names, for instance, denote what they are. But their connotations reveal their significance to us on a psychological level (psyche strikes again).

My kaleidoscope of butterflies, as listed above, surge with color and sound. What do you imagine when you say the technical words above? Maybe nothing. If so, take it a step further: Research the butterflies for yourself. Does my poetic transformation of them conflict with what you see? If so, say the words again to yourself and examine the butterflies closely. Treat them like inkblots: they are what they are, yet so much more. Maybe they can become—literary critics be damned!—a rapturous kaleidoscope of butterflies in a masquerade. Your masquerade.

Anyone who wants to abolish language—that is, to silence the music of language—would be treated like a terrible comedian. We need language to survive. The need to keep the music of language alive within all of us

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implies that all of humanity is interconnected, like the tawny scales on a Monarch's wings (*Danaus plexippus*). Humanity holds in its heart, if we dare to call it that, an inherent desire to see facets of ourselves within the natural world. Without language, humanity plummets into pandemonium, its intrinsic beauty and wonder lost forever. Gone will be our ability to use figurative language to transform even the simplest of things into hallmarks of human creativity. Gone will be our ability to use words to express our love for one another, a love as bright as red gilders in crimson twilight (*Cymothoe sangaris*). Gone will be my stack of vocabulary words. Gone will be the music of our lives and the hopes that remind us we are separate but united.

The lilt of language.

Lepidopterology. (Sick of the word yet?)

The poetry in our souls, projected as butterflies throughout history.

Personal change—the immortal need to be one with the whole of space, time, and science.

Appealing to the ear and to the imagination, even technical language can be poetic. The language summons images within our psyche, developing along with us as we metamorphose throughout the lifespan as stronger lovers of language. (Ignite the *papilio*!) Do not be afraid to say words aloud. They take you to places, luring you with their lilt and handing you a decorative mask. Then you find yourself surrounded by good company in your own masquerade of rapturous butterflies.