

On Butterflies: Stories and Fables for Children from the 17th Century to the Present Day

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The seriousness of triviality

The flutter of a swooping butterfly. The feverish rush of readers as they move from poem to poem, text to text, as if from flower to flower, pursuing a personal pleasure guided by the law of desire and by reasons that reason has no knowledge of. In the *Dictionnaire universel* of 1690 Antoine Furetière illustrated the word with the following remark: 'On dit proverbialement qu'un homme court après les papillons quand il s'amuse à des bagatelles' (The proverb has it that a man is chasing butterflies when he takes pleasure in trivial things). We are also familiar with the words of Jean de La Fontaine, who did not mince epigrams when, four years earlier, he addressed his old friend thus:

Toi qui crois tout savoir, merveilleux Furetière. (p. 646)
(You who think you know it all, marvellous Furetière.)

Rejecting the formidable, emphatically repeated claims of all science of language (fables for children are at the opposite extreme from the dictionary), the writer of fables turned whimsy to his advantage in his 'Discours à Madame de la Sablière', which was read in 1684 before the Académie Française, where Charles Perrault had a seat. In it he declared:

Je m'avoue, il est vrai, s'il faut parler ainsi,
Papillon du Parnasse et semblable aux abeilles,
A qui le bon Platon compare nos merveilles.
Je suis chose légère et vole à tout sujet;
Je vais de fleur en fleur et d'objet en objet. (p. 645)
(It's true, if we must own up, I admit I am
A butterfly of Parnassus and similar to the bees,
To whom good Plato compares our marvels.
I am a fickle thing, flying off at the drop of a hat;
I go from flower to flower and from object to object.)

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Chasing after butterflies is very typical of childhood, states the *Dictionnaire universel* once again, and also the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* of 1694. And La Fontaine, confusing subject and object in the quest for a frivolity that he considered 'the most precious of his possessions', could cultivate:

Les pensers amusants, les vagues entretiens,
Vains enfants du loisir, délices chimériques. (p. 644)
(Entertaining thoughts, rambling conversations,
Vain children of leisure, ephemeral delights.)

Such a determined affirmation of the pleasure principle, which rejects any attempt to impose a reality principle, is consonant with the arguments of Pierre Darmancourt, who received from the king in 1696 the privilege of printing *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec les Moralités*, dedicated to 'Mademoiselle', Elisabeth-Charlotte d'Orléans, Louis XIV's niece. In the dedicatory epistle to this work, Charles Perrault's son could claim to have the support 'of a noble mind' that 'does not disdain to take pleasure in such trifles'.

If the trifle is 'a frivolous thing', again according to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* of 1694, we can appreciate why, in that same year in his Preface to his *Contes en vers*, Charles Perrault should also have recalled the 'disdain' on the part of 'serious minds' with which his 'Tales Inspired by Sheer Pleasure' had been greeted. The academician made a point of adding that 'those trifles were not pure trifles' and that 'they contain a useful moral'. We shall find that a similar attitude would underlie the passionate enthusiasm that characterizes Fénelon's writing in the stories offered to the Duc de Bourgogne, Louis XIV's grandson, whom he tutored from 1689: the whole attraction of the texts written from 1690 onwards – *Voyage dans l'île des plaisirs*, *Les Aventures de Mélésichton*, *Les Aventures d'Antinoüs* and even a large part of *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, which was intended for the education of the future king – arises from, but then condemns, the principle of roaming about and madly grabbing at pleasures that stamps the mark of the butterfly on a literature of adventure, chance encounter and episode. Indeed, being short forms, the story and the fable have much in common, according to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, whose famous definition, also from 1694, we could usefully recall here:

Le vulgaire appelle conte au vieux loup, conte de vieille, conte de ma mère l'oye, conte de la cigogne, conte de peau d'âne, conte à dormir debout, conte jaune, bleu, violet, conte borgne, des fables ridicules telles que celles dont les vieilles gens entretiennent et amusent les enfants.

(Common people call the old wolf tale, the old crone, Mother Goose, the tales of the stork and the ass's skin, a tale that makes you nod off, yellow, blue, purple tales, a one-eyed tale, silly fables like those that old folk entertain and amuse children with.)

By introducing butterflies into this bestiary, the writers of the late 17th century were implicitly opening an unprecedented space for fantasy that is still working its magic. Literature written for young people is still thought to be intended for capricious minds that can only be attracted to reading by enticement, as has again been suggested by the observations that have followed the amazing success of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. However, the logic underlying this enticement obeys

precise laws, and their effectiveness is refined by writers who get to know ever more clearly, and above all share, their young readers' enthusiasms. By writing those 'trifles', the story and the fable, 17th-century authors, both secular and religious, passed down to us an emblematic object that is still useful when we study the imaginary worlds offered to today's children. I would like to focus on some characteristic features of this writing practice in the pages that follow.

Children's literature combining entertainment and information

My intention will not be to evade the charms of reading for pleasure, what the caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer, a keen reader of Fénelon, called 'zigzag reading'. Indeed I want to take it as my direction-finder and, so to speak, get astride it and urge it on into its furthest outposts, turn it into a method, through a policy of taking it to the limits, as defined in my book *Art baroque, art d'enfance* (Perrot, 1991). The butterfly, emblem of the pointillist sensibility and the spirit of childhood, is itself at the heart of postmodern artistic exploration, as has been demonstrated quite recently by Bertrand Gadenne's *Le papillonnement*, which was shown at the last FIAC (International Contemporary Art Fair) exhibition in 2001: in the artist's projected images butterflies and leaves float in space and it is impossible to pinpoint where they are; only the body of the spectator or the artist can reveal them. Vision, reading and discourse are one. Here we reach the upper limit of a cultural journey that turns the archetypal image of the butterfly into that of the western soul, as La Fontaine, after Apuleius, succeeded in displaying it in *Les amours de Psyché et Cupidon*, 'a fable told in prose' (p. 123). But, as we discover, the butterfly is absent from this final work.

This text, therefore, will merely be a part – in fact the starting point – of a much wider study. For it is upon the meaning of the visual messages, as designed for those I call 'the children of the videosphere' in my book *Jeux et enjeux du livre d'enfance et de jeunesse* (Perrot, 1991), that I wish in fact to reflect. Paradoxically, the combination of text and image has complicated reading; the contemporary book, which carries writing and is 'a product of screen thinking', as Anne-Marie Christin says in *L'image écrite* (1995), holds many surprises, placed as it is at the centre of a galaxy that is no longer the 'Gutenberg galaxy' but is also, as Catherine Millet expresses it in *L'art contemporain en France* (1987), the galaxy of the 'museographic society'.

And so, in this text and in perfect harmony with its declared theme, I can adopt for my analysis the attitude of the *Philosopher watching two butterflies* painted by Hokusai between 1814 and 1819. What interests us in the image of this man contemplating two butterflies' nuptial dance is the vision of a meditation on the mystery of life, but a weightless life embodied in the coming together of two complementary forms. The butterflies' wings suggest movement, airborne presence, but also float above the figure, more like two enigmatic ideograms than living creatures.

This symbolic insect turned out to be a highly significant object and an 'index' for my project, a pointer shedding light on the coherence of systems of thought and culture, just as the cloud does in both western and eastern painting, if we follow the critic Hubert Damisch's arguments in his *Théorie du nuage* (1972). This work was my inspiration for writing a 'Little treatise on the rainbow' in my book *Art baroque, art*

d'enfance, since this meteorological phenomenon, curiously observed by Descartes in *Les Météores*, often accompanies the representation of an apotheosis (a triumph or 'glory') in children's books. Thus, just as with the cloud or the rainbow, the search for the butterfly's presence has not been an impressionist search for motifs, but rather the development of an analytical method that would allow me to take account of all the appearance factors of a system's elements.

In the case of children's books, we shall see, two perspectives are brought together. The first has to do with the symbolic meaning of the insect represented, which is often identified with the young readers themselves. In the Romantic period was it not the German poet and teacher Jean Paul who wrote in 1807, in *La Levana ou traité de l'éducation*: 'What then are children? Only habit and day-to-day preoccupations hide from us the charms of those angelic faces to which we do not know what lovelier names to give; blossoms, dewdrops, little star, butterfly.' Is this a new perspective stimulated by the recognition of the child's subjectivity and identity as emphasized in Rousseau's *Émile* or an archetypal attitude that bases reality in the image of a childhood made sublime by myth? Here we reach the hidden power of the image that transcends boundaries: thus the vision of the child, presented in the shape of a butterfly chrysalis about to open, appears in the frontispiece to the work of another Romantic poet, the English painter and engraver William Blake, in his poem *The Gates of Paradise* (1793). The child is shown under a leaf with a caterpillar on it and with the caption: 'What is Man?'; and the explanatory note to this image tells us that William Blake took his inspiration from the reproduction of Greco-Roman seals that appeared in Bryant's *Mythology*, a work (published in 1774) showing the different stages of a butterfly's metamorphosis, as Kathleen Raine reminds us in her *William Blake* (1970: 36).

The second perspective concerns the scientific knowledge of the object in question: what in fact have we learned about the butterfly's nature since Fénelon studied the usefulness of the silkworm and the 'colours' of the insect's unfurled wings in one of his fables for the Duc de Bourgogne? At that time Antoine Furetière had already noted, again in the entry 'butterfly' for his *Dictionnaire universel*: 'Morin the florist noticed over a period of several months that each plant had its own particular caterpillar and butterfly'. Foreshadowing the standpoint of the *Encyclopédie*, Furetière also pointed out that a start on classification was being made in Swammerdam's work, which had by then described '114 species of moth'. Thus, in the context of childhood culture, the question of passing on knowledge is raised: how should we communicate to children what is concealed beneath the beauty of things and not lose sight of the specificities of the literary text?

I approach these questions from a historical viewpoint, making connections between the predominant notion of the child at a certain period and the corresponding scientific ideas, thus adding a small footnote to the research carried out, following Philippe Ariès, by Egle Becchi and Dominique Julia's team (Becchi and Julia, 1998). In fact I situate myself in the context of a globalization of culture that also affects the culture of every child: never have children been able to access museums so easily, be it directly or through digital reproductions of images in books or CDs. Never has popular culture come closer to the culture known as 'academic'.

So the butterfly's decorative function forces us to re-evaluate literature for

children and young people: we need to put them back at the centre of the current teaching project. Continuity or change, could the life-cycles of butterflies offer a model analogous to the evolution of the world's citizens? This is too vast a question for the subject of this article: so I shall stick with 17th-century literature and analyse in these pages merely the two attitudes which at that time contributed to the appearance of butterflies in books for children: the first has a secular origin and is typical of Charles Perrault, and the second is a consequence of the religious concerns of the Counter-Reformation and defines the new pedagogic utilitarianism explicitly employed by Fénelon. The latter stated in the 1696 version of *De l'éducation des filles* that 'children adore silly tales', but they like even better 'any short, pleasing fable' (pp. 118, 120–1); his strategy, which was decided upon in the first version of this text in 1687, 'following the intentions of the Council of Trent', was 'to teach them to read through play', by telling if not 'silly tales' at least 'curious stories' (p. 1206).

Inaugural version of *Little Red Riding Hood* by Charles Perrault: secular frivolity and morality

There is one respect in which this first version of *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* differs from the popular version of the tale and the equally famous one that the Brothers Grimm included in their *Märchen*. This detail is in the narrative of the forest episode, showing how the innocent child dawdles along and lets herself be fooled by the wolf, who reaches the grandmother's house first, and eats her up. The reasons for this carelessness are conveyed through the use of different images. Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou Contes du Temps passé*, says: 'And the little girl took the longest route, amusing herself picking hazelnuts, chasing butterflies, and making posies of the little flowers she came across'. The secular narrator has considerably expanded on the French popular version, which simply contrasted, with no embellishment, 'the needle path' taken by the little girl and 'the pin path' taken by the wolf. Though gathering hazelnuts is one of the social realist details that determine one aspect of Perrault's tales, the butterfly on the other hand seems a redundant element compared with picking flowers. Only the latter was retained in the German version, in which we read: 'She left the path and went into the undergrowth to pick flowers: one here and another there, but the most beautiful one was always a bit further on and further still into the forest'. The dual motif of flowers picked and butterflies playfully chased brings a specific note from the baroque aesthetic, an aesthetic of redundancy and decorative excess, here closely linked to the child's *païdia*, which has to be domesticated. We should remember that 'Le Petit Chaperon rouge' was included in the first anonymous manuscript copy of Perrault's tales discovered in 1953: bound in red morocco with the coat of arms of Elisabeth-Charlotte d'Orléans, this little volume dating from 1695 was entitled *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* and also contained *La Belle au Bois Dormant* (Sleeping Beauty), *La Barbe Bleue* (Bluebeard), *Le Maître Chat* (Puss in Boots) and *Les Fées* (The Fairies); it was decorated with a frontispiece and five vignettes in gouache. However it should be noted that the illustrations by the engraver Clouzier that accompany the 1697 official version of *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* are copied from the illustrations for the 1695 version but have lost the freshness, liveliness and indeed

baroque quality of the earlier ones. We must see in these differences more than a simple consequence of the contrast between gouache (which is sensual) and engraving (which is more austere because it is more abstract). We can read in it the revelatory sign of a possible twofold interpretation of the tales that was to have a lasting effect on the two major trends in illustrating them.

In the first version the children's tales and stories (and literature in general) express a turbulence and appetite for life that reflect the complex nature (clearly displayed by the aesthetic of the twisting scroll) of the period during which the squires of the rural aristocracy were to be brought into line and transformed into courtiers. In the second the concern for precision and classical realism results in a straightening of the body, following the cultural model identified by Michel Foucault in *Surveiller et punir*, but also a simplification of the gaze which obeys rules and a more ordered system of thought. The text of *Le Petit Chaperon rouge*, which is identical in both versions, conforms at one and the same time to the criteria of the two attitudes, baroque and classical, both of them involved in the process of 'civilization of manners' introduced at Versailles in the late 17th century and described by Norbert Elias. However, by its very presence, the motif of playing with butterflies is paradoxically a sign of modernity. We can see in it a direct and ironical reference to the debates that had brought into conflict Furetière and La Fontaine and, from a humanist viewpoint, advocates of a secular Catholicism and supporters of a less worldly position.

Fairy tale versus pastoral: speaking voice versus song

To be convinced of this argument we have only to compare, for instance, the way in which the forest backdrop is here established on the basis of the few details we have just given, and the description of forests we find, for example, in *L'île de la Félicité*, the first magical tale of the period included by Madame d'Aulnoy in *L'Histoire d'Hypolite, comte de Douglas* (1690). Whereas in Charles Perrault's work the magical is limited to the presence of an animal who talks 'to a little village girl, the prettiest you have ever seen', this 'yearned-for island' is presented by Madame d'Aulnoy as 'an enchanted place' that is richly adorned:

There the air was all sweet-smelling, the dew was an excellent eau de Nafre et de Cordoue, the rain smelt of orange blossom, the fountains rose right up to the clouds, the forests contained rare trees and the borders were full of amazing flowers; streams, clearer than crystal, flowed on every hand with a gentle murmur; the birds sang choruses that were more charming than those by the best music masters, etc. (D'Aulnoy, 1997: 15–16)

It is against this backdrop that the hero Adolphe acts, assisted by Zéphir [sic], who is in love with a 'proud mischievous rose' planted in one of Princess Félicité's borders. The similarity to the plot of *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon* is underlined by Zéphir himself who, after trying to carry Adolphe on his wings, says to him: 'My lord, I will carry you as I used to carry Psyche on the orders of Love, when I carried her to that beautiful palace he had built' (p. 14).

The princess herself is presented in the following manner:

. . . the eyes of Princess Félicité were brighter than carbuncle stones. Her beauty was so perfect that she seemed to be the daughter of the heavens . . . She was dressed with more coquetry than magnificence, her fair hair was decorated with flowers . . . She had around her several little Cupids who were disporting themselves; they were playing many different games, some of them took her hands and kissed them, others . . . (p. 19)

This backdrop and amorous rhetoric are frequently found in the stories contained in *Les Contes des fées*, the first collection published by Madame d'Aulnoy in 1697, the same year as Perrault's prose tales. Thus the 'isle of Tranquil Pleasures' from the story *Le prince Lutin* features 'Diana's hunts, with her nymphs . . . shepherdesses' flocks & their dogs . . . gardens, flowers, bees . . .' (p. 135). And the 'magical garden' from the story *Le Rameau d'or* is full of roses that are 'of crimson diamond and the leaves of emerald', and it is peopled with Cupids who crown the prince and his shepherdess to the sound of a 'gentle symphony' (p. 241). These elements of the description are dictated by the code of the courtly pastoral and tales of shepherds: in Abricotine's marble salon are 'long aviaries full of rare birds' and Léandre, who 'had learnt on his travels how to sing like them, even imitated some that were not there . . .' (p. 138). This scene reappears in Perrault the academician's verse tales and particularly the 1691 'nouvelle' (short story) *La marquise de Salusses, ou la patience de Grisélidis*; its heroine, a shepherdess spinning by the river, touches the prince, who is

Rempli de douces rêveries
Qu'inspirent les grands bois, les eaux et les prairies. (p. 22)

(Full of sweet daydreams
Inspired by the vast woods, the waters and the meadows.)

and finds herself carried off, not by a wolf, but most honourably by the man who marries her. After the test imposed by the jealousy of her husband, the tale ends with a second wedding:

Ce ne sont que Plaisirs, que Tournois magnifiques,
Que jeux, que danses, que Musiques.

(There are nought but Pleasures, magnificent Tournaments,
Games, dances, Music.)

The writer's sobriety and daring, in the episode recounting the meeting between the frivolous little girl and the wolf in the forest, are now more obvious. They appear most specifically when we compare the spirit of *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* with a fable entitled *L'Alouette et le papillon* included in a piece that was fashionable in 1690, *Ésope à la ville* by Edme Boursault, who was then all the rage.¹ This writer, who had become famous (not to say ridiculous!) because of his disputes with Molière, Boileau and Racine, had just published a second collection of fables in his 1697 *Lettres nouvelles*. *L'Alouette et le papillon* reminds us, if it were needed, that the symbolic system of inconstancy was firmly inscribed in the bestiary and the consciousness of polite society of the period. For the lark in question:

Qu'aimait un riche Coucou,
Epousa par amourette
Un fort beau papillon qui n'avait pas un sou.

Outre beaucoup d'indulgence
Il avait tant d'inconstance
Qu'il muguetait les Fleurs, & les poussait à bout . . .

(Who was loved by a rich Cuckoo,
Married out of infatuation
A very handsome butterfly who did not have a bean.
As well as being indulgent
He was so unfaithful
That he courted the flowers and forced them to surrender . . .)

The moral of the tale criticizes the imprudence of someone who accepted 'an unfaithful handsome husband'. As the fable-writer says, 'when you wish to be united till the grave', this type of husband 'is not the equal of an ugly faithful one' (p. 51). A conclusion that might seem rather gloomy and too utilitarian for an advocate of desire! We can discern the similarity between this moral lesson and the wise counsel Little Red Riding Hood's story offers in warning little girls about Morality's 'easy-going gentle wolves'. A sort of flippancy has replaced the sentimentality of the Pastoral.

A more important fact, in my view, is that the rhetoric of bees and birds, Cupids and winged Zephyrs of *précieux* poetry has given way to the butterfly, a silent creature that adds its note of brilliant colour to the surroundings of the forest. By transposing this object into the world of children's literature Charles Perrault dealt a resounding blow to a literary tradition which was destined to carry on being over-worked in volumes from the pen of *fin-de-siècle* female storytellers at the court, such as Mme de la Force, Mme d'Auneuil, etc.: this is the tradition that places the *précieux* tale in the same line of descent and context as court ballets, songs and plays. In this setting birdsong and nymphs' choruses limited references to the intervention of the speaking voice, which comes fully into its own in the nanny's tale. This explains the importance of the hand-written notes in the margin of the anonymous 1695 copy, according to which the wolf's 'All the better to eat you with' must be spoken in a loud voice to 'scare the children'.

There are no birds in *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* but, paradoxically, very few of the illustrated versions of this tale contain butterflies either. Among the most recent publications I have found only two that show them: M. Fauron's (1982) version,² which is faithful to the original text, and an adaptation by Claude Clément (2000) in which flowers and butterflies are combined in a blazing bouquet painted by the illustrator Isabelle Forestier.

Fénelon, 'Ancient' and/or 'Modern': the butterflies thrash the bees

There is another way of breaking with the conventional simperings of the pastoral: with mocking burlesque such as Madame d'Aulnoy uses in *Le Mouton*. This enchanted beast, whose coach is a dried Pumpkin – evidence of explicit intertextuality with Charles Perrault's verse tale *Cendrillon* (Cinderella) – drives his lady into a kingdom that is first of all utterly usual in this type of story: 'Eventually she suddenly

found herself in a vast plain studded with a thousand different flowers whose lovely scent surpassed all those she had ever smelled', the narrator tells us. But soon this mood draws the storyteller into a quite specific weirdness, for she goes on: 'A vast river of orange-flower water was flowing around fountains of Spanish wines, ratafias, hypocras & thousands of other kinds of liqueurs made waterfalls and charming little streams' (p. 335). Then come 'avenues of quails' and 'crayfish soup rain', etc. Here we see an implicit bow to the Ancients and an echo of Lucian of Samosata's *True History*.

This setting is also that of Fénelon's *Voyage dans l'île des plaisirs* where immediately we see 'a sugar island with jam mountains, rocks of candied sugar and toffee and rivers of syrup' (Fénelon 1696: 201), or that of the *Voyage de l'île inconnue*, with its earth tasting of chocolate, out of which sweets are made (p. 263). In these stories the pleasure principle is first heartily indulged and encouraged, then derided and criticized in favour of the policy announced in his book *De l'éducation des filles*, in which Chapter VII bears the revealing title: 'How to instil in children's minds the first principles of religion'.

Here Fénelon is faithful to the evangelism mentioned earlier, which encourages him to make use of baroque images to catch the imagination of the young. As he writes on the subject of children in the same chapter of the 1696 version: 'First of all follow the method of the Scriptures: strike their imagination vividly, do not offer them anything unless it is enveloped in images that appeal to the senses. Show God sitting on a throne, with eyes more brilliant than the sun's rays and more piercing than lightning . . .' (p. 125). In the end children must be given 'charming images of the truths of religion that the body cannot see' (p. 131) and they must 'be gently prepared to withstand the words of the Calvinists' who, 'you may say, wrongly criticize us for overdoing these images' (p. 135).

And so the descriptions of Callimaque's house in the story *L'anneau de Gygès* written for the Duc de Bourgogne, or the setting for the pastoral in *Les aventures de Mélésichton*, share the same features: the shepherdess in the second story 'had bees whose honey was sweeter than the honey that flowed from the hollow oaks' trunks during the Golden Age . . . The little girl helped her mother and had no finer pleasure than singing as she worked or as she led her flocks to pasture. No other flock was the equal of hers; disease and wolves dared not come near. As she sang, her tender lambs frolicked on the grass and all the echoes round about seemed to enjoy repeating her songs' (pp. 246–7).

The power of song, the prime instrument in 'girls' education', holds the characters in the story. But bees and frolicking lambs are soon replaced by butterflies in the priest's pedagogic discourse. For, although these companions of Little Red Riding Hood, like the cicada in Jean de La Fontaine's fable, present a model of graceful but socially useless creatures, it is parasites that Fénelon unwaveringly attacks in his education of the future king. Thus his thinking is more clearly defined in the utilitarian tradition of John Locke and the economic pragmatism of Louis XIV's minister Colbert, who was for a while Charles Perrault's protector. Of course his brief is to mould the personality of a Catholic king, in the spirit of the Counter-Reformation and in complete harmony, as we have seen, with the baroque aesthetic that predominated at the court of Versailles at the time best represented by the gourmet

emblem of the chocolate, as was again emphasized in 1997 on the occasion of the tercentenary of the publication of Perrault's *Contes* (see Perrot, ed., 1998: 176–86).

One of these fables, entitled *Les abeilles et les vers à soie*, is extremely instructive: it describes speech-making contests between bees and silkworms, who each hope to win the approval of the gods. While the bees are supported by Jupiter, who fed on their honey when he was a child, the silkworms are backed by a goddess, Minerva, 'who presides over the arts and who argued to the King of Olympus that there was another species that could compete with the bees for the glory of having invented useful things'. Putting forward his points in opposition to those presented by the aggressive insects, despite their orderly society and their nectar's sweetness, the 'silkworms' spokesman' states: 'We are only little worms and we have neither that great valour for war nor those wise laws. But each of us displays the marvels of nature and labours constantly at a useful task. We have Proteus's advantage of being able to change shape . . .'.

And he goes on to describe the creature's various stages, from that 'of little worms consisting of eleven small interlinked rings with the variety of the most vivid colours that are admired in flowers in the border . . .', devoting themselves to paradoxical activities: 'We spin cloth to clothe the most magnificent men, even those who occupy the throne.' These creatures have the rare gift of sensitivity: 'Finally we turn into a bean, but it is a bean that feels, moves and still shows it is alive.' The last argument they claim gives them an advantage is their metamorphosis: 'After these feats, all of a sudden we become butterflies with the brilliance of the richest colours. That is when we surpass the bees and rise aloft in intrepid flight towards Olympus. Now give your judgement, oh father of the Gods' (Fénelon, 1696: 224–6).

What a strange triumph! The butterfly's metamorphosis is the act that closes a sensual vision of life with an elevation towards the realm of the gods. This is a magical transubstantiation, an apotheosis, probably accomplished by the power of that 'gentleness' that distinguishes butterflies from bees and recalls the gentleness advocated in the quietism of Madame Guyon. In any case this is a baroque dynamic, which the fable turns into a moral. And so the didactic content supports the economic vision: Fénelon, who was a frequent visitor to the salons of Colbert's three daughters in the 1680s, was fully aware of the projects of the man who tried to develop silk manufacture in France. Indeed he wrote a *Histoire naturelle du ver à soie* for his pupil, which resulted from more realistic observation (p. 271) and was partly inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It contains first of all a history of the introduction of the silkworm's eggs 'to Constantinople under Justinian', then a description that does not avoid a baroque influence: 'The worm is enclosed in a skin as transparent as a pearl' (p. 272) – '*Barroco*' means 'irregular pearl' in Portuguese.

In this context a recent 1993 documentary, *Le ver à soie*, published in the 'BT Nature' series put out by Publications de l'École Moderne Française, which was founded by the famous teacher Célestin Freinet, informs us that the cultivation of the mulberry, the only tree the silkworm will eat, was developed in France by Henri IV (400,000 mulberry trees were planted in the south of the country by Olivier de Serres), but that it was Colbert who truly got the production of the mulberry *Bombyx* going again in the second half of the 17th century, initiating exchanges with Japan. In addition, this documentary contains engravings taken from a 1602 publication,

Bref discours sur la manière d'élever le ver à soie, and refers to the most fanciful superstitions about it that had currency at the time: indeed the women workers were believed literally to incubate the eggs, which they placed on their skin or warmed with hot water bottles. A very strong mothering relationship formed a bond between human being and insect. A 1777 *Mémoire sur l'éducation des vers à soie* says: 'The seed is to be given to a woman who puts it between two skirts . . . This woman has to be healthy, of a peaceful nature, not inclined to sweating, and young . . .'. The ambiguity of the word 'éducation' in the title of the work should be noted: the worm is a kind of baby which deserves every care, bringing about an exemplary reciprocity similar to the one that links pupils to their tutors in Fénelon's system: a good mother should result in a good child.

However, the BT documentary very usefully corrects the brief and apparently scientific information given by Fénelon in his description. Thus we learn that the larva of the mulberry Bombyx in fact goes through four changes and that, contrary to what the Duc de Bourgogne is told, it is not beautifully coloured, nor is its butterfly: 'It is a greyish white moth that is not very pleasant to look at.' We may think that appreciation of colours is a subjective matter. But, in the end, is not the insect, which is completely domesticated by humans and used for commercial purposes, the ideal model of the pupil that Fénelon wished to promote?

This is perhaps not exactly the case if we consider the premises of the religious education that he advocates. But in many respects an astonishing analogy in the rhetoric used for the description of the insects shows that this thinking underlay his system. A last remark from that *Histoire naturelle du ver à soie*, in which rigorous observation is combined with superstitious practice, may in the end suggest an explanation for the tutor's extraordinary fascination with such an unusual creature. Indeed Fénelon concludes his piece laconically with these words: 'In springtime they are sprinkled with wine and warm water; they are incubated in women's armpits' (p. 273). Resulting from the union of two dissimilar but complementary forces (the fire of the male wine and that – equally heady? – of the female body), the butterflies' *élevage* (raising – meaning education or elevation?) becomes a pure miracle!

Conclusion: serving the magical

Far from claiming to be an easy 'flutter', our route has in fact brought us round to confirming the twofold symmetrical movement of stories current in the 17th century in the construction of untried reading methods. On the one hand Charles Perrault brought the butterfly down from the Parnassian skies to a much simplified fairytale forest that is hardly magical; while on the other Fénelon, providing an argument against 'good Plato's' bees, helped insects similar to those the Portuguese poet called 'flowers of the air' to fly up to Olympus. So, paradoxically, a butterfly that in fact does not fly achieves elevation.

On one side, this 'trifle' was the core of a strategy that was placed at the service of a useful moral and a realistic warning against the 'wolves' of the 'salons', transforming the butterfly too into a weapon in the war between the Ancients and the Moderns. And on the other side the requirement for pedagogic usefulness worked to

the baroque and unexpected glory of a modest silkworm. In both cases the use of the imagination, that 'madwoman in the house', ended with the exaltation of the literary.

Thus, starting from seemingly contradictory premises (frivolous and useful, worldly and religious), the rhetorical beating of the butterfly's wings now anachronistically evokes the effects predicted by the disciples of 'chaos theory': we know that according to them a butterfly's wing beating off the coast of Brazil is likely to cause a tornado in Texas. Of course, in the case of the stories and fables we have looked at, such a cataclysm was not our intended effect; it was rather the advent of a new kind of reader that we were concerned with. This was an enterprise with apparently no less hazardous consequences, since it had to do with supplying supposedly recalcitrant readers with a literature based on pleasure. In serving magic we could only take the path of desire, the one Little Red Riding Hood took. And this is still a worthwhile enterprise today, as is demonstrated by the impressive number of new versions of the tale. It is an enterprise that encourages us to invent ever more expressive fantasies.

Epilogue: Sleeping Beauty's postmodern dreams for the 'children of the videosphere'

It is the work of the contemporary illustrator and writer Frédéric Clément that, in my view, has exploited most vividly butterflies' shapes and colours, and also their changing states, and drawn from them amazing aesthetic effects in his pictures, to the extent that he makes them the centre of his aesthetic daydream. The artist's fascination burst upon us as early as *Soleil O*, a graphic rhapsody published in 1986 by Editions Magnard in a collection created by Frédéric Clément himself for the occasion and called *Atelier Nuaginaire*, in all probability to stress the formal antithesis between him and the *Atelier du Père Castor*. In that volume without text we saw the sun rise first from the cone of an erupting volcano that vaguely recalled Mount Fuji. Then the mountain burst apart and set free a shape that twisted and turned into a magnificent butterfly. Successive transformations made it take on the shape of a woman wrapped in veils, then a flower which folded and turned into a chrysalis, then a butterfly again. Finally, through this butterfly, there appeared once more by anamorphosis the cone of the volcano. It was a circular series in Japanese style that brought together earthly and heavenly fire, butterfly, woman and flower, in a sophisticated combination of colours and effects of materials pushed to their limits. The book, which was out of print, was republished in 2000 by Albin Michel Jeunesse to introduce the 'Instants Cléments' collection, in a new version entitled *Minium, rare rêve de 1 minute 12*, and the text accompanying it tells us that this daydream occurred on the Quai du Louvre on Saturday 21 April 1986: very close then to the home of culture, the distinguished centre of our French 'museographic society'. Shards of delicate pebbles, wisps of grass, feathers have been added to the original illustrations, emphasizing the shattering of the aesthetic vision at the end of the millennium.

This original research was transposed and transformed into two important works. First of all, in *Songes de la Belle au Bois Dormant*, Frédéric Clément conceived of

representing the much extended dreams of a heroine, Charles Perrault's, who sleeps for 100 years (Clément, 1997), in a book of three parts. The first comprises the beginning of the story and stops at the moment when the young woman, who has pricked her finger on the spindle, falls into a deep sleep; the last part takes up Charles Perrault's text when she awakes; between them comes a narrative of great beauty combining text and pictures.

In fact Beauty's dreams are invaded by a fantastic creature: a moth, an ephemeral nocturnal predator whose impressions are recounted and who feeds on her beauty. Amid a superb oneiric landscape of Venice revisited, using a sombre post-impressionist technique, Clément plays on the disturbing aspects of the tale with a voyeur's passion that evokes the protagonist of Yasunari Kawabata's *Sleeping Beauties*, a book which he illustrated. 'Drinking the dew from Beauty's eyes', this night visitor confounds oral drunkenness and intoxication of the gaze. The illustrations accentuate a sense of fantastic proliferation, and emphasize how pleasure is deeply embedded in the quality of the fabrics, the material of the furnishings, the shimmer of the water. The scopic urge culminates in the representation, in the style of the painter Klimt, of a double image of a sleeping woman framing the Place Saint-Marc, where shadowy forms are wearing moths' wings for coats. Their 'eyes' are disproportionately enlarged as if by the scanning process used in scientific documentaries to show how lepidoptera scales fit together. Finally, in the following plate Beauty appears naked, as if floating above the Piazza San Marco which is flooded with water. A dream of death or of pleasure, this book is the unexpected secular version of a sensual Visitation.

A second even more ambitious work by Frédéric Clément, entitled *Muséum* (Clément, 1999), is the fictional notebook of an entomologist who has gone off to Brazil to study butterflies. He also receives specimens from many other countries. Each of the 12 chapters is thus devoted to a specific species linked to a story and with illustrations that make use of the paper's transparency to achieve effects of superimposition and anamorphosis. The book is also intended as a tribute to Vladimir Nabokov, the novelist who was also an entomologist who discovered and gave his name to a butterfly, and with whom Clément shares a passion for collecting: it ends with fragments of genuine notebooks by the Russian American writer, demonstrating the gradual invasion of the literary imagination by this phantasmagoria. A map of St Petersburg even suggests that the pools in the Winter Garden, where Nabokov met his first love, have the same shape as a butterfly's wings (1999: 156).

Frédéric Clément, who with others has opened his own artists' notebooks to us, is a sophisticated connoisseur of Japanese painting and calligraphy (see Perrot, 2000). And so the striking 'feature chapter' on Japan in *Muséum* is a baroque parade: a 'procession beside the cherry-trees: 12 exquisitely pale young ladies are walking along with tiny measured steps'. One of them, the fifth, recalls 'the silvery white of a firefly's wing stuck on the birch bark . . .', and the other, the eighth, 'is wearing the white of a pink ochre hue of the silkworm butterfly, the powdery Kaiko that has alighted in the neck of the kimono . . .' (Clément, 1999: 70).

With this sensual evocation the silkworm butterfly brings us full circle on our journey, which began with Fénelon and Charles Perrault. But now description is transformed into a poem. It is no longer the normal everyday value, whether com-

mercial or moral, that is claimed, but the prestige value: Japan is promoted and elevated to the rank of artistic model through the representation of these objects. The artist Frédéric Clément's 'Instants Cléments', in which he departs from pure impressionism, sprinkles the page with wisps of grass, shells, bird feathers and ideograms in his coded message. Offering a fragmented spectacle, the central plate of this chapter devoted to Japan is a construction of collages, a palimpsest of dead butterflies' wings, dried flowers and leaves that half hide a face: the white in the middle of the picture is the marker of an exhaustion of the human landscape evoking the atmosphere of the illustrator's *Livre épuisé*. Death of the landscape, therefore end of the game: art triumphs in the shadow of an eclipse; life fades away behind the concrete matter of visions.

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Notes

1. See Boursault's fable quoted by Norman R. Shapiro in *The Fabulists French* (1992: 51).
2. I should like to thank Professor Isabelle Chevrel who brought this edition to my attention.

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