

Forming Liquid Consciousness

Ariel McCleese

A chrysalis shakes when it's afraid. Attached to the host plant from its cremaster and bands of silk, it hangs upside down, sessile. When a threat approaches, is sensed, the chrysalis thrashes from side to side. It transforms, one moment a dead leaf, a twig, a dried up bit of skin; the next a writhing, hanging body. This gesture is a chrysalis' only defense. The butterfly is at its most vulnerable, unable to move or mimic. It shakes to frighten its predator. It shakes as it dies.

In the chrysalis stage histolysis begins. A hormone is released, breaking down the external tissues of the caterpillar as the structures of the butterfly are formed. It is a process of liquefaction, the breaking down before the building up. A thin filmy husk separates inside from outside. The outlines of the butterfly's eyes and legs are visible, hanging upside down, ridged and lined like hardened mummy bandages. Inside there is only goo. When dissected, green fluid balloons out of a punctured thorax and red seeps from a cut to the midsection, mixing to create the beige pink of hospital walls. It's highly viscous in parts and loose in others, spilling from the thin cuticle of the shell as it's pulled apart.

In conversation with biological scientists, a sense of self is defined as the knowledge of where one's body begins and ends. Anything with a central nervous system falls into this category. A scientist demonstrates, putting her arms above her head and wiggling her fingers, swinging them behind her back and wiggling again. The scientist has a central nervous system; she knows where her fingers start and her body stops. During liquefaction the chrysalis' central nervous system does not get broken down, it endures. For science, the chrysalis has a sense of self, it has consciousness.

For Hegel, consciousness "knows in knowing itself."¹ As the scientist begins her dissection, she draws the boundary lines of the chrysalis with her scalpel. In a moment of decision she slides the blade through the golden ridges of the chrysalis, puncturing the papery outer shell, plunging through to its liquid core. The chrysalis feels the point of the flinty steel, knows where it begins and ends, and becomes a body. The scientist's decisive introduction of the scalpel produces the chrysalis' sense of self.

The segmented upper third of the chrysalis jolts to life and begins to thrash. It knows it is threatened and posits its existence in the face of its death. Through the scientist's act of violence, the chrysalis becomes conscious. The scientist and the chrysalis enter into a relationship described by Hegel as lordship and bondage. The scientist is lord, the chrysalis is bondsman.

As Hegel explains, "They exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The

former is the lord, the other is the bondsman.”²² The lord, or the scientist, is the figure of power in the lordship and bondage dynamic. She has complete agency over the butterfly. The butterfly, or the bondsman, exists as a mediation for the scientist. Through the butterfly, the scientist knows the world. As she conducts her experiments the scientist develops a more complete knowledge of the world, insights afforded to her through the butterfly. Her study of the butterfly is a mediated study of the world. The scientist develops her relationship to life through this mediation.

The independence of the scientist’s consciousness is affirmed by her negation of the butterfly, by her domination over it. Following Hegel, “[The lord] must proceed to supersede the *other* independent being in order thereby to become certain of *itself* as the essential being.”²³ As she cuts into the chrysalis, proceeding with her dissection, the scientist feels herself to be more whole. The scientist knows that she is not the thing as she asserts the butterfly’s thingness.

In the dynamic of lordship and bondage, “The lord is the consciousness that exists *for itself*. . . a consciousness existing for *itself* which is mediated with itself through another consciousness.”²⁴ As the scientist experiments and observes, her gaze is cast downwards, upon the thing. She is dominant, above the butterfly, exerting her control on the body beneath her. The butterfly is her mediation to the world. She penetrates it for the purposes of her own knowledge. The penetration is unilateral; the butterfly cannot penetrate her in return.

As Hegel describes, the lord “holds the other in subjection.”²⁵ The scientist holds the butterfly in subjection, opening the chrysalis, splitting it down the center, pinning it in place to prevent its independent movement. The scientist is a scientist because there is a thing she studies. The butterfly exists so that the scientist can posit her own existence. Without the butterfly, without the object of her science, she would not be a scientist. Through her relationship to the bondsman, her holding of it, the lord is certain that her consciousness exists for itself because the consciousness of the butterfly exists for her.

The constitution of the butterfly’s consciousness is dependent on the action of the scientist. It is formed as a consciousness through her investigative action. The violent intervention of the scientist produces the shape of the chrysalis’ consciousness. Because a butterfly’s sense of self rests on the knowledge of where its body begins and ends, the scientist’s dissection fundamentally changes the butterfly’s consciousness, changes its shape. The butterfly is bounded inside of the exterior shell of the chrysalis, but it is liquid on the inside. The chrysalis shakes as the scientist approaches, and continues to shake once her incisions have begun. But the introduction of the scalpel fundamentally alters the butterfly’s consciousness, and the liquid of the butterfly flows out. The boundary between interior and exterior is blurred. The butterfly is still alive, is still liquid, but its sense of self forms around the scientist’s blade. It felt itself whole as a bounded object enclosed inside a shell, and felt itself liquid through the dissection. The chrysalis’ body, its shape, its consciousness is made malleable by the scientist. Her cut demands a renegotiation of the butterfly’s interiority and exteriority. It spills out of itself into itself.

Fear is the constitutive power that shapes the chrysalis' consciousness. As the scientist grips the chrysalis with her forceps, the chrysalis is gripped by fear. The scalpel produces the shake, an announcement of the butterfly's mortal dread. As Hegel explains of the bondsman, "In that experience [of fear] it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations."⁶ The butterfly's consciousness is shaped by a concrete and sudden awareness of the potential for its own death. In fear, the butterfly sees itself as a consciousness.

Fear alters the dynamic of power between the lord and the bondsman, the scientist and the butterfly. Hegel says of the bondsman, "For this consciousness has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord."⁷ The violent actions of the scientist mean that the butterfly fears death, is seized by it, is constituted by it. In the relationship between the scientist and the butterfly, only the butterfly fears. The butterfly's consciousness becomes independent as it recognizes death as its true Lord, not the scientist. It surpasses the scientist as a truly independent self-consciousness.

As Hegel states, "The *truth* of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman."⁸ Fear untethers the butterfly from the scientist and frees it to become a true independent self-consciousness. The lord, or the scientist, does not reach the same independence because, as Hegel explains, "The individual who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a *person*, but he has not attained to the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness."⁹ The butterfly's consciousness, first shaped by the scientist, now supersedes her.

Faced with nothingness, the butterfly is rooted out of itself, out of its existence, and enters into a space of abstraction. Hegel describes, "This pure universal movement, the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self*, which consequently is *implicit* in this consciousness."¹⁰ For the butterfly, the scientist's total negation of its existence is productive, as it frees the butterfly's consciousness from bondage.

Roger Caillois writes in *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia* about the dissolution of bounded space for mimetic insects. As resemblances converge between mimetic insects and their surroundings, foreground and background merge, subjectivity bleeding into space. Caillois explains that, "Mimicry would thus be accurately defined as *an incantation fixed at its culminating point* and having caught the sorcerer in his own trap."¹¹ As the insect's mimesis becomes total, the insect not only becomes indistinguishable from its background to its predator, but also to itself. It is "caught...in [its] own trap." In this formulation, interiority and exteriority can no longer be understood as fixed points.

Caillois explains, "The living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally *no longer knows where to place itself*."¹² The *Kallima* butterfly, having perfectly achieved resemblance to a dead leaf, its venation structures and brown withered spots duplicated exactly, loses any differentiation in space that determines it as the subject of its background. Instead, as Caillois describes, "The feeling of personality, considered as

the organism's feeling of distinction from its surroundings, of the connection between consciousness and a particular point in space, cannot fail under these conditions to be seriously undermined.²¹³ As Caillois points out, the connection between consciousness and the determinism of existing as a point in space is fractured for the mimetic insect.

A clear connection can be drawn between the split consciousness of the mimetic insect and the consciousness of the split chrysalis. The consciousness of the chrysalis is formed through the scientist's actions. In her dissection, the scientist produces the consciousness of the chrysalis, gives shape to it, as the chrysalis becomes afraid. However, the scientist's intervention goes further. As she inserts the scalpel, she not only transforms the chrysalis into a conscious subject, but also alters the shape, the body of its consciousness. Through the slit left by her scalpel, the liquid consciousness of the chrysalis spills out, the murky pinks and bright greens pooling onto the point and dripping down the length of the blade.

Following Caillois, how then can we understand this new shape of the chrysalis' consciousness? The violent act of the scientist does not immediately kill the butterfly. It continues to shake for the duration of her dissection. But once the hardened outer shell is broken, and the liquid interior becomes exterior, the consciousness of the chrysalis is both inside and out. The interior space of the once whole chrysalis is still coated in red film from the ruptured gut, pooling up in the shallows of the parts that remain intact. The drip of the liquid continues in a steady stream down the blade. The consciousness of the chrysalis extends.

In Caillois' formulation of the renegotiated space occupied by the mimetic insect, it "enters into the psychology of psychasthenia, and more specifically of *legendary psychasthenia*" defined as "the disturbance in the...relations between personality and space."²¹⁴ Caillois likens this state of legendary psychasthenia to the mental state of schizophrenics. He says, "To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them."²¹⁵ It is clear that the vivisected chrysalis undergoes a similar psychological reformation as it transitions from a bounded liquid state to that of the leaking liquid consciousness.

Caillois is also describing a relationship of lordship and bondage. The mimetic insect is the bondsman, acting in service of its landscape. The insect remains trapped in a servile position, because "In mimetic species the phenomenon is never carried out except *in a single direction*: the animal mimics the plant, leaf, flower, or thorn, and dissembles or ceases to perform its functions in relation to others. *Life takes a step backwards*."²¹⁶ Following Hegel, the mimetic insect is trapped in its subjection to the thing or space it mimics.

The liquid consciousness of the chrysalis departs from the model of lordship and bondage set forth by Hegel, and followed by Caillois, when it comes to the problem of work. In Hegel, the consciousness of the bondsman is ultimately freed from servitude through his work. As Hegel explains, "Through his service he rids himself of his attachment to natural existence in every single detail; and gets rid of it by working on it."²¹⁷ The

lord is not tied to anything concrete because his experience of the world is mediated. The lord's relationship to the thing is mediated through the bondsman. The bondsman, on the other hand, is in direct contact with the thing, and although working on the thing at his lord's behest, still has an immediate connection to it. This is ultimately freeing because, "Through work...the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is."¹⁸ Through his direct, unmediated relationship to the thing, the "worker comes to see in the independent being [of the object] its *own* independence."¹⁹ Through his work, the bondsman becomes aware that he is a being-for-self, independent from the lord. For Hegel ultimately, the bondsman is freed through his work. Through his work the bondsman is placed in history, in time.

Caillois' mimetic insects, though divorced from their coordinates in space, unmoored by their mimetic impulse, can be understood as mirroring the directionality of Hegel's formulation of the bondsman. The goal of the mimetic insect is to converge with its background. However, this relationship is asymptotic, as that convergence can never be total. The curve of mimesis produces a line that will approach but never reach its axis, infinitely. As such, there is always work to be done for the mimetic insect. It can work towards infinitesimal mimetic progress forever. Following Hegel, through work the mimetic insect can come to see the independence of its model, and in doing so develop an awareness of its own independence. Perhaps Caillois simply did not trace the psychasthenia far enough. The mimetic insect may initially tend toward a "*depersonalization by assimilation to space*," but ultimately become grounded back inside of itself as an independent being through its work toward an impossible goal.²⁰

The liquid consciousness of the chrysalis is a new problem, finally departing from Hegel's model of lordship and bondage. In fear, the chrysalis' consciousness becomes untethered and is therefore made independent from the lord. But this negativity cannot be productive in the case of the chrysalis. Its negation can't be worked on, as there is simply no work for it to do. Unlike Caillois' mimetic insects, there is no directionality for the chrysalis. Unlike the slave it has no relationship to a thing, no background to mimic, no work to be done.

The chrysalis does not possess a relationship to a thing, giving it purpose, moving it forward. As the scientist approaches, her forceps and scalpel coming close, the chrysalis feels fear and shakes. It is faced with its mortality and it is afraid. As it shakes, it becomes an independent self-consciousness, but this consciousness is fixed to the time established by the scientist and her scalpel. It shakes for the duration of her exploration, it shakes while she cuts and pins and empties. The liquidity of the chrysalis' consciousness allows it to extend beyond itself, pass through its own shape. The butterfly and the scalpel are linked as its liquid consciousness drips down the blade. Not only are they fused in space, but also in time. As soon as the dissection ends, the chrysalis will stop shaking. When the scientist ends her investigation, the movement of the chrysalis ends. The chrysalis dies, silently and without motion.

-
- ¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 103.
- ² *Ibid.*, 115.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 111.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.
- ¹¹ Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *October* 31 (Winter 1984): 27.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 28.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 117.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," 30.