

Stephen H. Blackwell, *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov's Art and the Worlds of Science* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009). pp 276. \$54.95 hb. ISBN13 978-0-8142-1099-4

Interviewing Vladimir Nabokov for a 1964 edition of *Playboy* magazine, the American futurist Alvin Toffler raised the question of the place of the 'irrational' in what he described as "an age when the exact knowledge of science has begun to plumb the most profound mysteries of existence". "In point of fact," Nabokov responded, "the greater one's science, the deeper the sense of mystery. [...] We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought." Readers of that august publication unfamiliar with the author of *Lolita's* parallel career in entomology might have been forgiven for mistaking this verdict for a wholesale rejection of both the scientific method and its more hubristic designs. On the contrary, fascinated as he was by the fragile truth-directedness of scientific rationality, and as the creator of fictional universes so resistant to authoritative readings as are those depicted in such novels as *Pale Fire*, *The Gift*, and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov's deeper reflections on the issue are perhaps better encapsulated by the words of one of his many fictional scientists: "Attainment and science, retainment and art," the nameless narrator of his 1945 story 'Time and Ebb' muses: "the two couples keep to themselves, but when they do meet, nothing else in the world matters". In the sense that it seeks to find the common ground upon which such 'meetings' take place within Nabokov's work, Stephen H. Blackwell's *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov's Art and the Worlds of Science* represents a timely attempt to distil from the growing accumulation of scholarship in this area a comprehensive and unified account of the terms through which it might be plausible to assert, as Blackwell does from the outset,

that the “inseparability of art and science is the core of Nabokov’s creative vision” (1-2).

As he recounted at length in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov’s fascination with the natural world was first and most enduringly stimulated by the butterflies and moths of his native Oredezh valley. Detecting in their remarkable propensity for mimicking their surroundings a “subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator’s power of appreciation,” he imagined himself to have “discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that [he] sought in art. Both were a form of magic. Both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception”. Of especial interest was the way in which lepidopteran mimicry appeared to stand as a counterexample to the monolithic, materialist reductivism he discerned as underpinning the Darwinian theory of natural selection, which by this point had apparently come to command the status of unquestioned fact. As Blackwell maintains across the course of *The Quill and the Scalpel*, Darwinian evolutionary theory, along with behaviourist and Freudian psychology, typified just the sort of self-affirming, hubristic system in disgust at which Nabokov tended most enthusiastically to recoil; as such, close study of a phenomenon that appeared to point to its insufficiency was an extremely attractive proposition. In his own scientific work, then, Nabokov preferred to calibrate his ambitions according to the limits dictated by his belief that, while there may indeed exist “laws of causality and continuity in nature” that are potentially amenable to human perception and understanding, such laws are likely to be ultimately subordinate to “a deeper law,” a numinous authority consisting of “interruptions, exceptions, and discontinuities” (183). For Nabokov, Blackwell asserts, remaining modest in the face of the limits of our knowledge “helps preserve scientists against

excessive faith in the power of their methods and the infallibility of their discoveries – in other words, it protects them against hubris” (183); by the same token, he later adds, Nabokov was convinced that “art and science both point toward what lies hidden at – or even beyond – the limits of reason and consciousness” (201).

Following this logic, *The Quill and the Scalpel* operates in the main as an exercise in description rather than argumentation, and is consequently most successful when consolidating and building upon prior scholarship in the service of a broad survey of the possible connections between Nabokov’s philosophy of science and its corollaries in his fiction. Enlisting a description of the peculiarities of Nabokov’s approach to lepidopterology as a means “to explore what special qualities his scientific practice and discourse embodied” (22), for instance, Blackwell sets out to expose the origins of his subject’s enduring inhabitation, in both his literary and his scientific activities, of “the common border of the aesthetic and the empirical” (22). To begin with, he states that Nabokov “found a career for himself in the practice of *perceiving* with greater care and precision than those who came before him” (23); a unique capability that Blackwell goes on to claim is not just manifested in his fiction, but is equally as evident in his preference as an entomologist for morphology over biology as a means of speciation. Somewhat unusually among his contemporaries, to elaborate, Nabokov opted to base his criteria for the definition of species and sub-species not on the rather romanticised basis of the viability of interbreeding, but by the comparatively atomistic method of producing from incredibly detailed, almost graph-like technical drawings a “coordinate-level description of the variations between wing-pattern features” (25). This seemingly reductive practice – in a sense akin to the belief, parodied in his novel *Bend Sinister*, that “Quality is merely the distribution aspect of

Quantity” – might initially seem an unlikely fit for a novelist usually thought of as a fierce opponent to all forms of positivistic thinking, including deterministic models of reality in physics, behaviourism in psychology, and the politics of social materialism. Nevertheless, in a skilfully negotiated comparison with the scientific practice and philosophy once adopted by Goethe – whom he shows to be in many ways a sort of spiritual ancestor of his principal subject – Blackwell demonstrates the means by which Nabokov ensured that his “scientific work never ossified in the enumeration of measurements” (28), concluding that “his art and science both demonstrate an instructive attraction to basing one’s conclusions upon massively detailed empirical evidence, provided by the sense and available tools, and to preserving an awareness that any such conclusions are always tentative and partial, even when they appear unquestionable” (169).

While the sections of *The Quill and the Scalpel* devoted to biology and psychology offer a number of compelling insights into the origins of certain tensions that pervade Nabokov’s practice as a writer, the aspect of Blackwell’s work that is likely to attract most attention is his attempt to incorporate into this wider narrative a similar role for physics. As he puts it at the beginning of his fifth chapter, “[t]here is little controversy in accepting Nabokov as a naturalist, and hardly any more in supposing that he was a serious student of human psychology. But physics?” (140). Perhaps surprisingly, it is in this chapter that Blackwell sees most fit to deviate from the largely descriptive tenor of the rest of the book and adopt a more speculative and propositional bearing, building this part of his narrative around the demanding ambition to demonstrate that “in every novel from *Invitation to a Beheading* on, a total of ten novels, Nabokov made major or minor use of concepts from twentieth-century advances in theoretical

physics” (165). In some cases – notably *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Bend Sinister*, *Ada*, and *The Gift* – the presence of a significant degree of reflection upon the revolutionary thinking associated with the so-called ‘New Physics’ is undeniable. Equally, Blackwell’s astute use of biographical detail bestows upon his speculations a clear and plausible sense of the chronological trajectory of Nabokov’s familiarity with such principles as relativity, uncertainty, and the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics. Nevertheless, while his discussion of the conceptions of time in *Ada* and relativity in *The Gift*, for example, are largely convincing as individual readings, the credibility of his overall vision is to some extent diminished by a number of instances of unnecessary over-reaching. There appears little value, for example, in discerning in *The Gift* “a reference to Nikolai Lobachevsky, whose non-Euclidean geometry was also crucial to relativity’s discovery” (148), purely by virtue of Nabokov’s use of the word ‘forehead’ – the Russian *lob* – to signify the hood of a van. Likewise, the momentum of an already somewhat unconvincing narrative connecting certain passages in *Pnin* with Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle is abruptly arrested by a dubious logical leap from Nabokov’s description of a “dropped nutcracker [that] does not shatter the crystal bowl beneath the suds” (156) to the claim that “Pnin’s world [...] is one where causality is suspect” (156). These are, however, only minor flaws and, in the sense that they suggest Blackwell’s critical eye is momentarily distracted by the seeming unity of his wider picture, they inadvertently serve to remind us of one of his more pervasive themes: namely, that we should pay “constant attention to the pitfalls and limitations of knowledge, to the need to be wary of the tyrannical impulses of both science and narrative” (15); we ought to remain suspicious of any intermediary agent between ourselves and the object of our attention who may harbour an “inclination to shape our picture of reality” (157); and

we should accept, as Nabokov did, that our “knowledge of the world is gappy and partial; science expands knowledge but does not change its fundamental incompleteness” (169).

Ultimately, Blackwell concludes, it is his “epistemological skepticism, combined with a passion for discovering what *can* be known, that defines Nabokov as an artist *and* a scientist” (169). As Blackwell himself exemplifies, such a stance is also to be admired in the context of the literary monograph, and particularly in one with such a large biographical content as has *The Quill and the Scalpel*. Functioning as both an intellectually agile response to existing scholarship and an imaginatively contrived vehicle for locating discrete readings of individual novels within a largely cohesive overall schematic, then, Blackwell’s work succeeds both as an introduction to a discourse evidently amenable to continued study and an invaluable case study of a novelist who, as Blackwell puts it, “occupies a unique place in modern intellectual history not only because of his dual status as an artist and a scientist, but because his scientific work left him skeptical about the ultimate ability of science to provide answers to questions that most concern humanity” (168).

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