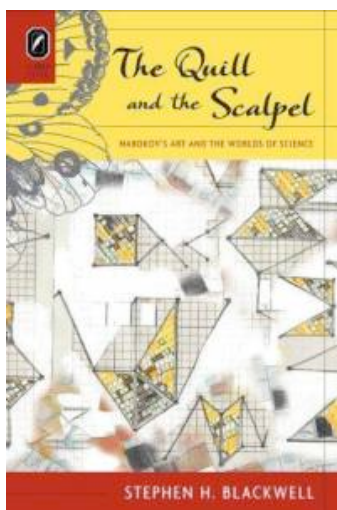


***The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov's Art and the World of Science*, by Stephen H. Blackwell. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 2009; ISBN 978-0- 8142-1099-4, xv + 276 pp.**



Vladimir Nabokov is not the only Russian writer to have more than one string to his bow, and to use more than one string to fire his arrows: his enthusiasm as a lepidopterist populates his fiction, too, with butterflies. Dr Chekhov and Dr Bulgakov apply their medical expertise, as Nabokov uses his zoological knowledge, to strengthen the authority, broaden the basis and even provide structures for their fiction. Nevertheless, Sergei Dovlatov's remark, "I like reading Chekhov, but I would not want to be treated by Dr Chekhov," can be applied to most writers' secondary interests. Stephen Blackwell deals with some length at Nabokov's observations and speculations in lepidoptery, but does not produce any particularly loud acclaim for Nabokov from professional zoologists. He makes his case for the 'scalpel' side of Nabokov's genius, by implication, citing Goethe's contribution to science, *Zur Farbenlehre*. Goethe's all-round prestige made him unique among poets in winning the respect of his physicist contemporaries, but today nobody but the most wayward examiners in the Cambridge Modern Languages Tripos would dare expect a student of Goethe's work to consider *Zur Farbenlehre* with the same respect as *Faust*, and modern physicists regard the work as a

subjective conjecture on how we perceive colour, not a serious counterblast to Isaac Newton.

A passion to know exactly where, how and why his characters act and speak characterizes Nabokov's fiction: one could argue that this demanding curiosity is a precondition for a scientist. Certainly, Blackwell finds examples of scientists, Nabokov's contemporaries, who regard the universe, or whatever aspect of it they investigate, as a cryptogram to be deciphered in much the same way as a critic reads a Shakespearean tragedy. But Nabokov's application to scientific questions of intuition, rather than tested hypotheses, does not amount to being a reciprocal process. Even when he explores an illness, for instance the obsessive madness that overcomes the chess-playing hero of *Luzhin's Defence*, Nabokov shuns the *historia morbi* technique that writers with medical knowledge, such as Chekhov or Thomas Mann, would have used: it is the modern reader, not Nabokov, who would diagnose Asperger's syndrome. Nor does Nabokov's scepticism, even mockery, of scientific theories from Darwin's evolution to Sigmund Freud's neurosis, qualify him to be considered as a scientific innovator. His criticism of the 'Viennese quack' is often funny and sometimes telling, but it does not advance the science of psychology. Likewise, Nabokov's virulent denunciation of previous translators of Russian poetry, particularly of Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*, is hardly justified by his own four volumes of translation and annotation to that novel in verse, for his literal approach to translation merely asserts the impossibility and uselessness of all translation, except, to summarize the words of Euripides' translator Philip Vellacott, in that it leaves the would-be reader with no alternative to sitting down and studying the language of the original. Nabokov's critical work, his lectures on Russian literature and his book on Gogol, are valuable not for their objective, tested reasoning, but for their mixture of wilful obtuseness and subtle observation. When for example Nabokov detects Lev Tolstoy's blunder in *Anna Karenina*, giving Vronsky and Anna an extra year (or a 19-month pregnancy) compared to Levin and Kitty, he does so with the pleasure of Ham revealing Noah's nakedness, not (as Blackwell implies) in order to give a modified example of time moving differently in the Einsteinian relativity imposed by passion.

Blackwell is a fine and perceptive critic, but he overlooks the playful, perverse and provocative in Nabokov's narrative stance.

Much of Nabokov's later English-language fiction can be assigned to the genre of science fiction. Blackwell sees the influence of Planck's quantum mechanics and Einsteinian relativity (with whose conclusions Nabokov, however, seems to be in diametric disagreement) in the creation of *Antiterra*, on which the action of *Ada* takes place. But much earlier science fiction, such as Camille Flammarion's *La pluralité des mondes habités* of 1862, can claim paternity for Nabokov's *Antiterra*. True, we can see the encrypted symbolism of light (Lucette) and water (Marina) in that novel as a reference to new conceptions of matter as waves and light as photons. But this is not a case of the 'scalpel' replacing the 'quill'. The multiple scientific references in late Nabokov, for instance, the obsession with the nature of time, are metaphors and similes; Nabokov's concept of time is no more scientific than Proust's, and owes (like Mandelshtam's) a lot to the Russian language's innate distinction between *vremia* (sidereal time) and *vek* (subjectively lived time).

While this reviewer remained unconvinced by Blackwell's portrayal of Nabokov's fiction as a parallel to what we commonly understand to be scientific research, the examination of Nabokov's main works that Blackwell's thesis requires is nevertheless worthwhile. Scrupulously distinguishing between what Nabokov is known to have read and what he might have read, between recorded and possible contacts with scientists, Blackwell shows how the destabilising concerns of twentieth-century physics, biology and psychology are reflected in Nabokov's work. But Nabokov's ideal of the scientist is very far from the real Einstein or Planck: it is the heroic, misanthropic father-figure of *The Gift* disappearing, presumed dead, in the wilds of Central Asia while hunting new species of butterflies, who inspires Nabokovian heroes. If Einstein, Planck and Freud had never existed, Nabokov would have found other sources for his ideas of other universes and of the subconscious mind. He was more aware of the concerns and vocabulary of modern science, perhaps because the émigré Russian intelligentsia of the 1920s and 1930s still consolidated, socially and philosophically, scientists and artists. But

the ‘quill’ remains Nabokov’s only truly creative tool, even if he sometimes made it as surgically sharp as a scalpel.

*Donald Rayfield,
Queen Mary University of London*

