

The New Criterion

Books

September 2000

A stereopticon

by [Guy Davenport](#)

A review of Nabokov's *Blues: The Scientific Odyssey of a Literary Genius*, by Kurt Johnson & Steve Coates & Nabokov's *Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings*, edited by Brian Boyd & Robert Michael Pyle.

When Alfred Russel Wallace, who postulated the theory of natural selection neck and neck with Darwin, was netting specimens of insects in Sumatra in 1861, a butterfly he was chasing (*Kallima paralekta*, one of the Purple Emperors) disappeared before his eyes. It had cunningly perched on a bush and pretended it was a leaf, because its folded wings looked exactly like the leaves it was among, stem and all.

Wallace's "Mimicry and Other Protective Resemblances among Animals" (1867), now the third chapter in his *Natural Selection and Tropical Nature*, remains the classic study of what we learned in 1917 to call *camouflage*. That mistaken identities, false resemblances, and elaborate deceptions figure as both theme and technique in Vladimir Nabokov's fiction obtrudes, embarrasses, or fuses with any study of his lepidoptery. There is the giddy suspicion that they are the same thing.

These two books might plausibly have been published as a single work, a kind of stereopticon: Johnson and Coates on Nabokov as a lepidopterist who wrote novels, stories, and literary studies of Gogol and Pushkin; Boyd and Pyle on Nabokov as a writer who was a lepidopterist. The "scientific odyssey" of Johnson and Coates's title transcends its triteness, for its account of the intrepid scientists who completed and vindicated Nabokov's taxonomy of a small butterfly called the Karner Blue is authentically heroic. The adventures of the Israeli lepidopterist Dubi Benyamini in South America among flooding rivers and revolutionaries is a little epic in itself.

Nabokov netted butterflies in Wyoming, never far from the family car (driven by his wife, Vera). The men who, years later, carried on his work on the Blues penetrated jungles in the Dominican Republic, braved the upper reaches of the Amazon, endured capture by rattle-taggle soldiers of obscure political factions in Peru, and ran up high meadows of the Andes tracking the mating affairs of butterflies not much bigger than your thumbnail.

Lepidoptery in Johnson and Coates's brilliant and lucid book unfolds as a history involving extraordinarily interesting people—the Hungarian Zsolt Bálint's troubles with European museum nabobs resembles a Nabokovian short story—as well as many adjustments of scientific theories over the past twenty-five years: continental drift, cladistics, and the evolutionary branching of species.

Nabokov's place in all this was his six years of microscopy at Harvard's Museum of Natural History counting scales on butterfly wings and sorting out species according to the shape of their genitalia. He had no degree in etymology. He was a professor of Russian at Wellesley, a novelist, a critic, and

a refugee twice over, from Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany. He had shared a streetcar with Kafka in Berlin and read to an audience of Russian émigrés in Paris with Joyce (and a soccer team) among them. Behind him was a career as a Russian novelist (under the name Sirin) and poet. He was perfectly at home in English and French, and would soon, like Conrad, become a master of English prose.

Johnson and Coates's thorough study is nicely miniaturized in *Nabokov's Butterflies* by Robert Michael Pyle's introductory "Nabokov Among the Lepidopterists," an essay of much charm and skill, charting the link between Nabokov and the brilliant next generation that continued his work. Pyle, who has also contributed "Butterflies and Moths Named By and For Vladimir Nabokov" to this big book, gives us a fine sense of the kind of people, "the leppers," who study butterflies. They're a chummy confraternity with more than a whiff of dottiness and eccentricity. Nabokov with his net in the gorges is Cornell folklore. Darwin as an undergraduate at Cambridge was more often in the fens collecting bugs than at lectures. The villain of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is a lepidopterist. One of Iris Murdoch's nastier characters studies spiders.

At the time of his death in 1977, Nabokov was working on an iconography of butterflies in art. One hopes that, as with his pioneer taxonomy, someone will continue this work. There are butterflies in Egyptian frescoes (eyed by a tabby cat climbing through reeds). Dutch still lifes are rich in butterflies. There's a Red Admirable (not *Admiral*, as Nabokov was forever correcting this misnomer) smack in the center of Seurat's *Sunday on La Grand Jatte*, and a fritillary (it looks like) dead center in Tchelitchev's *Cache-Cache*. Shakespeare knew his butterflies (six images, all focused on their beauty). Keats's "fly" is a butterfly. Whistler used one for a monogram. The Bible mentions only the butterfly's cousin, the moth.

One of the world's most beautiful books is Moses Harris's *The Aurelian, or Natural History of English Insects; Namely Moths and Butterflies, Together with the Plants on which They Feed* (London, 1766). The eighteenth century was the heyday of the curio cabinet and the mania for collecting. The modern museum was invented in Copenhagen by Ole Worm (1588–1654), with a stuffed crocodile as its chief wonder. The next age saw the advent of order—Carl Linnaeus, a Swede, and his assistants (like Peter Kalm in North America) inventing a system for naming everything by family, genus, and species. In deepest perspective, Nabokov was carrying on Linnaeus's work: distinguishing species with finer and finer differences. Aristotle started it all by noting that some mammals, like dogs, pee forward, and that some, like cats, pee backward. Two-and-a-half millennia later we're still classifying.

Johnson and Coates are wonderfully clear about the two schools of taxonomy, the "splitters" (among whom, Nabokov) and the "lumpers." Nature is so strange that the great Agassiz did a brisk business in getting together the young and adults of marine critters previously thought to be different animals. And all of this cataloguing of nature is mystified and complicated by metamorphosis (caterpillar, cocoon, butterfly; alternate forms for ferns year by year) and mimicry. There's a zebra who's actually a striped horse. And moths that look like butterflies, and butterflies that look like moths. And there's a plant, *Lolium temulentum*, that looks like wheat and knows how to camouflage itself in with it. It is bearded darnel and is host to a poisonous smut; Jesus called this invisible interloper *tares*, and made a parable about it, because it can only be sorted out in winnowing. Jesus also liked the Greek word for "actor," *hypocrites*, a dissembler.

The recurring theme in Nabokov's fiction is obsession, usually by self-deception. His characters destroy themselves in one big mistake. They see exact resemblances where there is none at all. They live in horizon-to-horizon delusions. They plot enterprises so contingent on improbabilities that a child could point out the hazards. Shakespeare's tragedies depend on mistaken identities leading to rash and irreversible actions; his comedies, on disguises leading to happy laughter. Nabokov saw only senseless violence where Shakespeare saw tragedy, only sardonic humor where Shakespeare

saw comedy. Aloof and detached, he *observed*. He had an Olympian interest in human folly, the only truly interesting thing in the universe, and a human, exacting, and finely attentive interest in the universe itself.

Guy Davenport's most recent book is *The Death of Picasso: New and Selected Writing* (Shoemaker & Hoard).

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 19 September 2000, on page 74

Copyright © 2012 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/stereopticon-davenport-2359>