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PAPILLONAGES: UNE HISTOIRE CULTURELLE DU PAPILLON. By Nicolas Witkowski. 143 pages, copiously illustrated; 10.5" x 11.75". ISBN 978-2-02-089821-8; EUR 40.00. Seuil, Paris. Publication date: 4 October 2007.

This is, to my knowledge, only the second attempt at a coffee-table "cultural history" of butterflies. I reviewed the other (Manos-Jones, 2000) in the *News* (Shapiro, 2001). Its author was a mere autodidact-amateur. Nicolas Witkowski, however, is a French Intellectual and as such his book demands a more formal review. Witkowski is a professor of physics, a cultural historian, a popularizer of science and a translator of Stephen Jay Gould. His forte is drawing connections between scientific themes and cultural trends, a very French Intellectual thing to do. In this visually stunning book he displays his virtuosity. To quote from the jacket blurb (all the translations that follow are my own):

Symbol of beauty and lightness, but also emblem of the soul and of metamorphosis, the butterfly has always fluttered between triviality and seriousness, fickleness and profundity, debauchery and metaphysics. Every epoch has conferred its own particular "take" on this ambivalence. Our own has placed the butterfly somewhere between chaos theory and a snarky tattoo....the butterfly has always adapted itself to the feel of the times and offers a faithful mirror of our most secret anxiety...

The book is divided into nine chapters, each accompanied by sidebars and digressions and a wonderful array of color (often full-page) illustrations. Because of Witkowski's cross-cutting style, only very rough descriptions of the chapters are possible:

I: *The invention of the butterfly*. Very early representations of the butterfly in art, from cave paintings through the Middle Ages and across cultures and continents. In addition to an illuminated manuscript (by Jean Bourdichon, the most distinguished of the French artists who incorporated Lepidoptera in such work—butterflies are much commoner in books produced in Ghent and Bruges, but this is after all a French product!), this chapter reproduces a very rare Yuan Chinese scroll (circa early 14th Century) with an anatomically-correct swallowtail. Almost all butterflies in East Asian art are highly stylized; this is an extraordinary exception.

II: *The ephemeral and the immortal*. Butterflies in European Renaissance art, from the "busy" bouquets of the Dutch still-life masters to idealistic and romantic works of the Masters. (Includes a two-page spread of a bilateral gynandromorph of *Cymothoe sangaris* and a

discussion of its sexual resonances.)

III. *The woman chrysalid*. Focuses on the life and work of Maria Sibylla Merian, reproducing several of her exuberant plates and contrasting their dynamism with the usual static portrayal of insects in isolation. Also discusses Albert Seba and reproduces a painting by Jan van Kessel in which mounted butterflies and other insects are being displayed.

IV. *A butterfly*. A study of the butterfly-and-moth-haunted dreamscapes of the artist Henry Fuseli.

V. *Cunning hunts*. An examination of butterfly collecting as it developed beginning in the 17th Century, particularly in the tropics, and how it fed into the Darwinian revolution. Includes a reproduction of a tropical swallowtail from Alexander Marshall's famous manuscript (1660) in the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences.

VI. *The moral of the butterfly*. Female entertainers at the turn of the century dressed as butterflies; cartoons and illustrations of fables and nursery rhymes; Jean-Henri Fabre as raconteur of true-life butterfly fables; Dante Gabriel Rossetti as romanticizer. The strangest thing in this chapter is a macabre painting by Felicien Rops, a fantasy melding butterfly, woman, and death.

VII. *Nabokov's blues*. Familiar territory thanks to recent books by others. Includes some of V.N.'s fanciful butterfly sketches (juxtaposed with contemporary butterfly tattoos), and the Meadow Brown with the bird's head from Hieronymus Bosch, featured in a Life magazine article about Nabokov in 1947.

VIII. *The wings of chance*. A riff on Edward Lorenz's butterfly metaphor in chaos theory, now almost universally known but seldom understood.

IX. *Under the sign of the butterfly*. A summing-up. The tone is best conveyed by a fairly extended quote which, however, still falls within the boundaries of "fair use:"

At the end of this personal voyage transformed into a cultural history, I rediscover in the Western approach to the butterfly the old drama of which Goethe was the harbinger: *What can one learn of Nature by analysis?* What more can one get besides a cadaver impaled on a blue steel pin? What remains of the magic of flight under the frozen gaze of the researcher? The quarrel is as old as modern science—more or less four centuries—but today it takes on a new sense: the era of great butterfly massacres is at hand [referring to the crisis of biodiversity—A.M.S.]....What science is worth what one sacrifices...the art of seeing, of loving that which one sees? The beauty of the butterfly, immediate, presenting itself to passive contemplation, is irremediably destroyed by

any effort at analysis. How can one be fully satisfied by such fleeting joy? How can one resist the temptation to capture...and to crush between one's fingers the object of one's love? There are the important questions that underlie our everlasting interest in the wonderful butterfly, the precious "little soul" that always causes us such pain because we cannot catch it.

If you are not used to the flowery, intricate idiom of French intellectual discourse this passage may turn you off. Even if you are used to it, it may do so. Whether or not you take all the pretentiousness seriously (and you are permitted, as a mere Anglo-Saxon, to dismiss it as airy twaddle), this is a magnificent book and highly recommended for your coffee table, whether or not you read French. I say this even though it omits any reference to my favorite cultural touchstone for the butterfly in French—the nursery rhyme that goes "*Faites pipi sur le gazon/pour embeter les papillons.*"

(Make weewee on the grass, it drives the butterflies nuts.)

The last image in the book is very disquieting and in the tradition of Medieval *Memento mori*. It is a two-page photograph, larger than life, of a box of Dermestidized 19th-Century *Morpho* specimens – glorious pieces of blue wings and meticulously handwritten labels adrift in a sea of beetle frass. Make of it what you will.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- MANOS-JONES, M. 2000. *The spirit of butterflies: Myth, magic and art.* Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York. 144 pp.  
 SHAPIRO, A.M. 2001. [Review of Manos-Jones.] *News of the Lepidopterists' Society* 43 (1): 16-17.

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