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The Nabokovian

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ZOOLOGICAL LABEL AS LITERARY FORM

Dark pictures, thrones, the stones that pilgrims kiss,
poems that take a thousand years to die
but ape the immortality of this
red label on a little butterfly.
(*On Discovering a Butterfly*)

These lines are often quoted. With all the wonderful attention to Nabokov's butterflies these days, it seems, however, that the role of a singular literary tool in Nabokov's work—*the zoological*

label—has not been duly appreciated. The connection, at least to a professional zoologist, is obvious—and yet so complex: so much is contained in one or two tiny pieces of thick paper, pierced by the same pin that passes first through the thorax of a dead but immortalized insect.

The issue belongs to the very interface of science and art where, in the words of Stephen Blackwell, a great challenge is "the question of how the scientific (that is, objective, descriptive) and artistic (subjective, creative) expressions of Nabokov's genius in fact emanate from a common core" ("The poetics of science in, and around, Nabokov's *The Gift*", *The Russian Review*, 2003, 62: 243-261). I would like to argue here that a label's precision, brevity, necessity, and triple authority (collector, identifier, author), along with its dual geographic and taxonomic attention, provide a unique source of inspiration for the wider world of literature—a source, of which Nabokov took full advantage.

Haiku-rivaling in its brevity, the label, about 20 x 10 mm, placed under a dead insect, gives it a glorious afterlife. Today, we use the smallest legible printer font; a traditional label required meticulous mini-calligraphy skills. From his childhood on, Nabokov wrote those labels in the hundreds, as did Ada Veen, as any entomologist does—mini-versions of his famous future index cards.

Labeling derives, of course, from that ancient dual need of a hunter to: first, identify (name) his catch, and second, to mark the place and time of this specific catch, with the obvious goal of coming back. Thus, we always have, in fact, *two* labels. The first contains the field record, the very specific circumstances of the catch. The second is an invented name of the creature. Thus labels address nature but belong to literature.

A good record label accommodates at least three major parts: *locality*, *date*, *collector*. These are three Aristotelian features, not present in a specimen itself: *place*, *time*, and a *protagonist* who noted them. This information is lifted from

the protagonist's field notes, done in a sturdy notebook. Other intermediate documents—manuscripts—accompany the collection process; in butterflies and other insects the record data are penciled on a paper envelope where the insect is placed in the field; or collected creatures are accompanied in their vials or boxes with brief field labels or codes of a sort; all this information boils down to a record label once the creature is pinned, mounted, transferred to a museum collection.

The fourth required attribute—the *name*—comes later, and traditionally is put on a separate, second label, which we may call a name label.

PLACE. Absolutely required; a specimen without a precise locality is useless. Zoologists of old were often vague, and their "habitant in Africa" statements attached to the important descriptions still baffle and annoy experts. By today's standards, a name of the place (locality) on a museum label should include country, closest town, some indication of a precise point, geographic coordinates (latitude and longitude), as well as altitude—all digitally georeferenced these days. A very brief description of environment (vegetation) is optional but useful.

Geography reigns in the congested mini-universe of an entomological label. I would like to think that, along with more conventional sources such as maps and books, it was the label's requirement of a precise spatial locality that nourished and inspired Nabokov's sense of geography. He often and willingly confessed that he remembers certain geographic localities as labels, i.e. places where a certain butterfly was taken (*Strong Opinions*). This emotion—well known to all field zoologists—is akin to a commonplace ability to associate a place with an especially significant event; only a field zoologist recalls dozens, hundreds of those localities, and a trained memory immediately pins a species' name to them.

Thus, Nabokov's geography is a natural rather than earth

science: it stems from, and celebrates, its *biogeographic* aspect—the distribution of life on the face of the planet. Our knowledge of this distribution is literally formed by myriad museum labels.

A traveler entering Nabokov's world is amply provided with attentive and whimsical maps, travelogues, fly-over landscape images, whether of an existing, a conflated, or a completely invented *locality*. With latitude, longitude, altitude, and time duly noted, a distribution record in biogeography becomes a four-dimensional point in a mapped, dynamic *range* of a species—equivalent to the space-time map of a literary character. Nabokov's fans trace with enthusiasm a hero's trajectory through a small town (Fialta or New Wye), a big city (Berlin), a country (Zembla), a large swath of a continent (North America or Central Asia), or an entire planet (Antiterra). Even in the faraway postmodern Russia of *Invitation to a Beheading*, the lay of the land is clear for us as we look with Cincinnatus from the prison tower at Tamara Gardens.

Labels of geographical localities supplied with mnemonic, memorable features constantly serve Nabokov as simple props and complex metaphors. *Lolita* is considered, among many other things, one of the best trans-North American road novels; its travelogue follows Nabokov's travel in pursuit of butterflies (traced in Dieter Zimmer's detailed study, http://www.d-e-zimmer.de/LolitaUSA/LoUSpre.htm). Quoting Zimmer, "in those of his novels and stories he [VN] himself called 'realistic-psychological,' that is in all except *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Bend Sinister* and three of his four last novels, just about all of the seemingly imaginary places have some counterpart on the map. You bet they do."

Brian Boyd specifically notes the motif of *place-names* in his "Notes to *Ada*." These place-names (record labels) often form complex networks. For example, three lakes, Omega, Ozero, Zero in *Pale Fire* reflect not only Ithaca's Finger Lakes but (along with Onyx, Eryx, Climax in *Lolita*) mimic a triad of

northern Russian lakes closest to Zembla: Chudskoye (Peipus), Ladoga, Onega; the latter gave name to Pushkin's Onegin; Lake Ladoga (closest to St. Petersburg), finds its place on Antiterra and also mutates to Ladore (Russ. Ladora) in *Ada* (1.1; 1.22) (for more detail, see my "Notes on Eryx, Omega, and Ata," *Nabokovian*, 2003, 51).

Often Nabokov's geography might seem excessive and mocking: his "A Guide to Berlin" is hardly a guide; his pseudostate names like Utana sound mocking. *Ada*'s boldly conflated Antiterran geography, I think, not so much mocks as celebrates our earthly efforts of naming "that incompletely named world" (*The Gift*). Pushkinists may ridicule Nabokov's "snobbish" attention to exact, scrupulous rendering of natural objects in *Eugene Onegin*—but those are, for a translator who is also a naturalist, not just name- or rhymeholders but precious data points of biogeographic reality, reduced to its geographic (where) and taxonomic (what) dimensions, always in their historical (when) context. If a translator fails to pay attention to these simple and unmistakable elements of nature, how can he or she be trusted with more complex matters? This is why Nabokov demolishes, with disgust, Babette Deutsch's "wake the birds in beech and larch" (*Eugene Onegin*)—sorry, no beeches *or* larches in northern European Russia. Not knowing a natural fact is no excuse. Nabokov the geographer assigns labels to Pushkin's vague localities—and literally puts on the map for us two country manors where the action of the famous verse novel takes place, playfully nicknaming them "Larino" and "Onegino."

Biogeography is what gives poise to one of the most famous Nabokovian images: a boy walking into the picture from a Russian to a US spruce forest. The important detail here, usually not appreciated by the commentators, is that in Russia the spruce forest was latitudinal (zonal), located at the northern latitudes, but in America it is altitudinal (vertical zones in the Rockies); thus Nabokov's movement is not just east to

west as any Russian emigrant's; it is also clearly directed quite literally upward—from the Russian lowlands to the American highlands. A label, recall, includes not only longitude and latitude but also altitude: it is three-dimensional—if a third dimension is an option in your world.

TIME. The *date* of collection, e.g. "July 22, 1959," accompanies a locality on a specimen's label. This information is less critical for a museum scientist than place—but it is absolutely important for a naturalist who wants to return and explore living creatures. A serious collector visits the same locality several times a year, observing seasonal "aspects" of vegetation and the insect life. A writer maps a hero's life; a naturalist returns to Arizona next April to find creatures of the spring again: an ancient idea of cyclic time that does *not* fly as an arrow. In our temperate latitudes, we talk about "field season" as snow thaws and butterfly nets are prepared.

COLLECTOR. An action has a protagonist; a collector's name is part of the label record. The very physical act of insect collection was cherished by Nabokov as one of the most rewarding experiences possible; he was eager to talk about this rare experience (see ample details in Brian Boyd & Robert M. Pyle, eds. *Nabokov's Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings,* Beacon Press, 2000; Kurt Johnson & Steven L. Coates. *Nabokov's Blues: The Scientific Odyssey of a Literary Genius*, McGraw-Hill, 2001). In a famous scene in *Lolita: A Screenplay*, never filmed by Stanley Kubrick, Nabokov the collector himself is engaged in an important dialogue with Humbert, who, among other things, does not know the difference between general (species) and particular (specimen).

More often than not the roles in the label's quest are split: a *collector* is a person different from the *identifier*, and both are different from the past or future *author* of the species' name. Thus a label can bear as many as three human names.

In an ultimate achievement, however, all these three functions may be combined in one expert who collects, identifies, and describes. The most famous collectors' names are found on museum labels—and the most obscure names are preserved there, just as in a literary text.

A collector is always a traveler (the opposite is woefully not true!). Nabokov's first passion was to become one; he planned at age 17 to organize an expedition to Central Asia, and probably would have done so—if the October 1917 Bolshevik *coup* had not happened. Dieter Zimmer tells an exotic story hidden behind a brief label from "Pilgram/The Aurelian" "Tatsienlu, East Tibet—Taken by the native collectors of Father Dejean" (*Nabokov reist in Traum in das Innere Asiens*, Rowohlt, 2006). Such stories lie behind every label; and sometimes, Nabokov gave us a glimpse into that daring collector's life. Those are marvelously expanded for Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev in *The Gift*, and for Paul Pilgram in "The Aurelian."

SPECIES' NAME. A separate, second label bears the creature's full Linnaean *name*: its genus, species, the species' *author*, and date of description (for fascinating details of the naming process, central to *taxonomy*, see Zimmer's *A Guide to Nabokov's Butterflies and Moths 2001*). While a specialist can identify a familiar species by eye, a collector does not have to be an expert, and the name of the catch itself is often *not known* at the time of collection.

Thus it is not necessarily given on the first, original "field" label but is added later—often years later—when (if) the specimen, long ago dead, is *identified.* An expert discerns the specimen's characters and uses reference literature to match them to the characters of known (*described*) species, i.e. an already *existing name*.

The *identified name* is placed on a separate label, and the record is now complete: it accompanies a specimen into a *publication*. Nabokov's first publication in English ("A Few

Notes on Crimean Lepidoptera," *The Entomologist*, 1920) is a good example: it is, and was required to be, not more than a compilation of records (labels) of butterflies flying in the Crimea (where the family lodged temporarily) in the summer of 1918, before the Crimea was ravished by the Communist troops.

If a procedure does not yield a *known* name, there is a chance of a new species, not yet named. The same or another expert—now the *author*—will go through a process of *description* and establish a new name according to "the inexorable law of taxonomic priority" (*Ada*, I: 8); see in more detail Boyd & Pyle, 2000; Zimmer, 2001; and my note "Zoological nomenclature and Kinbote's Name of God," *Nabokovian*, 2004, 53.) Naming a new species was Nabokov's childhood dream (*Conclusive Evidence/Speak, Memory*). Naming is ultimately important for the naturalist's psyche: see *The Gift* on Fyodor's father who "was happy in that incompletely named world in which at every step he named the nameless." Then, in an old tradition, a so-called type specimen will merit a red label mentioned in Nabokov's famous poem. "Visiting the American Museum of Natural History [in 1942], he gasped with delight when he saw the red type label on his Grand Canyon butterfly" (Boyd, *American Years*, 53).

LANGUAGE. One has to note that a field record, on which the record label's text is based, is often a very Nabokovian, congested jumble of languages, with its own delightful history to trace, and endless possibilities for playful riddles. Names of exotic localities vary depending on a map used; a European collector often honestly garbles local toponyms. Spellings are rarely standard, with ample opportunity for errors, further enhanced by abbreviations and mistranslations. Dates can cause problems: no label space to spell out the month; Roman numerals confuse July and August; European (dd/mm) versus American (mm/dd) date formats are further confusing. Collector's, identifier's, and author's names are transliterated in various

ways; helpful "leg." or "coll." are omitted; the collector's first name is often omitted, leaving his last name to be confused with a locality. Even the name of the species' author (or, to be more exact, the Creator's co-author), is often abbreviated (L. or Nab.), unheard of in literature (imagine abbreviating Pushkin as P.)

And, finally, the creature's name *must*, of course, be given in its own language: Latin (vernacular names, so beautiful in butterflies, such as Red Admirable, are completely optional!). Linnaean binomial nomenclature—names of taxa (species, genus, family, etc.)—is one of the few strongholds where the "dead" language still lives. It is a special joy for a zoologist, "versed in taxonomic Latin," that a name of any species is immediately understood by colleagues across the world. Thus, the name on a label—a universal value of natural science—needs no translation: a pre-Babel condition, an ultimate and unachievable goal of literature.

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