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The Nabokovian



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NABOKOV'S SILVERFISH

An expert in Lepidoptera, Nabokov often mentioned other insects as well. Some of these served him famously, such as the *cigale* in *Pale Fire*, the Chateaubriand's mosquito in *Ada*, or several genera of true bugs (Heteroptera, also in *Ada*; see my note "Adakisme, Dolykisme: the

Kirkaldy connection”, *The Nabokovian*, 2006, 56: 14-19). Nabokov gladly admitted that his knowledge of general entomology was only introductory. He was, however, perfectly aware of high-level insect classification and, as any entomologist, could easily identify common non-butterfly insects, assigning them to higher categories such as orders (there are about 20 of those) or, even further, families.

Oblako, ozero, bashnya (first published in Russian in 1937), better known by its English title, *Cloud, Castle, Lake* (below, *CCL*; first published in English in 1941), mentions, in the same sentence, two non-butterfly insects that inhabit the fragile and cruel world of this short story. First is the “mature bedbug” (the Russian text uses a folksy adjective *materoi*) that pre-tortures Vasili Ivanovich, the hero of *CCL*. An infamous bloodsucking, flightless bedbug (Russ. *klop*, Lat. *Cimex lectularius*, Order Heteroptera) inhabits many pages of Russian literature. Its bedbug lore stretches from Pushkin’s roadside hotels where *klopy da blohi zasnut’ minuty ne daiut* (“bedbugs and fleas don’t give one a minute’s sleep”) (*Eugene Onegin*, 7, XXXIV, Nabokov’s translation) to Mayakovsky’s 1929 satirical play *Klop* [*The Bedbug*]. Some “blood motif” places in Antiterra (the shooting gallery in Ardis) “crawled with bedbugs” (*Ada* 1.34: 212.11) long before this Old World pest became a true trouble in North America in the 21st century.

The same sentence that mentions the “mature bedbug” in *CCL* contrasts it with another animal, not so well known. In the Russian text of *CCL* that is currently widely reprinted (*Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda... vol 4*, Simpozium, St. Petersburg, 2000, p. 586) it reads: “*no est’ izvestnaia gratsiia v dvizhenii shelkovistoi lepizmy* [but there is a certain grace in the motions of a silky lepisma].” What is this creature?

Lepisma is a Latin genus name for a primitive, wingless but fast-moving insect, commonly found in human habitations, that belongs to the Order Thysanura, “bristletails” (in zoological Russian, *shchetinokhvostye*). It is known in English as *silverfish*; other less common names include silver louse, silver witch, and sugarfish. The currently reprinted English translation of *CCL* (“by Peter Pertzov and the author” says “*there is a certain grace in the motions of silky silverfish*” (*Nabokov’s Congeries*, Viking, 1968, p. 104).

Unlike bedbugs, silverfish are harmless and do not bite. They are, however, “one of the most troublesome enemies of books, papers, card labels in the museums” (C. L. Marlatt. *The silverfish: an injurious household insect. US Dept. Agric. Farmer’s Bulletin*, 1915, 681: 1-4). *Lepisma* is listed in any course of general entomology such as the four-

volume Russian one by N.A. Kholodkovsky (1912) that Nabokov used as a child. In Russian, silverfish is called *cheshuinitza* (literally, “scaled”): wingless bodies of thysanurans are covered with minute silvery scales just like moth wings, and leave powder when touched. The Greek “lepis-“ root of *Lepisma* is the same as in Lepidoptera (scale-winged, Russ. *cheshuekrylye*). I am tempted to suggest that this is a wingless, crawling substitute of a butterfly, the best one can get in the warped world of *CCL* (and also *LATH*, see below). Nabokov’s sentence also reflects an important evolutionary contrast, well-known to entomologists, between *primitively* wingless insects such as silverfish (relicts of early Palaeozoic insect groups that did not yet have wings)—and *secondarily* wingless ones such as bedbugs, lice, or fleas that lost precious wings and flight evolved by their ancestors and relatives (such as butterflies), often due to a parasitic way of life.

Silverfish is notably mentioned at least once again by Nabokov, in English, in *Look at the Harlequins!* (below, *LATH*) (1974, Ch. 7) as a “silver louse,” a less common English name of this insect. Vadim, the anti-Nabokov protagonist, makes a clear, very ironic connection to butterflies, and especially silver-scaled moths: “*I know nothing about butterflies, and indeed do not care for the fluffier night-flying ones, and would hate any of them to touch me: even the prettiest gives me a nasty shiver like some floating spider web or that bathroom pest on the Riviera, the silver louse.*”

Sergei Ilyin, in his Russian translation of *LATH*, back-translates “silver louse” as “sakharnaya cheshuinitza” (sugarfish), technically a correct Russian entomological name of a common European *Lepisma* species; however, unnecessary sweetness is introduced, which Nabokov’s text lacks. They indeed inhabit the Riviera, along with others of the less pleasant (and often parasitic) characters in Nabokov’s books.

Interestingly, in the first English translation of *CCL* (*Atlantic Monthly*, June 1941, available online) we find not a silverfish but quite a different animal: “*there is a certain grace in the motions of silky wood lice.*” A “wood louse” is not an equivalent of a silverfish, but a very distant taxonomic choice. Woodlice are not insects at all but terrestrial crustaceans (Order Isopoda). In the U.S., woodlice are more commonly known as pillbugs or sawbugs; children also call them roly-polies or doodlebugs. Woodlice are abundant in moist environments, in rotten wood or under stones on your lawn, but not inside houses with normal humidity. Their Russian name, *mokritsa*, means “moisture-loving.” Like silverfish, they are harmless to humans.

The 1941 translation of *CCL*, in fact, was true to the original Russian journal version (*Russkie zapiski*, 1937, No 2, p. 38). As Yuri Leving noted in his Comments (*Sobranie sochinenii...*, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 778), the 1937 Russian journal had “*v dvizhenii shelkovykh mokrits*” [motion of silky wood lice].”

The first version where we find the animal changed into a “*silky silver-fish*” is the first *book* publication of *CCL* in English, in a 1947 collection *Nine Stories* (New Directions, NY, p. 39). When the Russian version was first published in a book (*Vesna v Fial'te*, 1956, Izd. im. Chekhova, NY), Nabokov changed the Russian *mokritsa* to a much more exotic *lepizma* – hardly recognizable even by an educated Russian reader. The next book publication in English, in *Nabokov's Dozen* (Doubleday, 1958), has “*silky silverfish*” (p. 118). Brian Boyd (pers. comm.) suggests that, in the six years between 1941 and 1947, when Nabokov was a professional lepidopterist at the MCZ, “that must have been what made the decisive difference: working among other entomologists, thinking about entomology scientifically himself most of every day. The translation of *CCL* was finished by March 5, 1941, and Nabokov didn't begin offering his services at the MCZ until October.”

I am sure the animal was changed intentionally. The change strengthens “*certain grace*”: a silverfish moves much faster than a bulky wood louse. More importantly, *silkeness* in silverfish is due to their scales as it is in moths (the motif that later appeared in *LATH*), while woodlice have no scales—they may look silky but do not leave powder. The Russian adjective was also slightly changed to be more precise, *shelkovistaya* (silky to the touch) instead of *shelkovaya* (silk-like, made of silk). All this may not be important for an average reader who cares not about either woodlice or silverfish—but not for Nabokov, with his constant attention to naturalistic detail.

I thank Brian Boyd for his kind comments on this note.

—Victor Fet, Department of Biological Sciences, Marshall University