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Notes on Eryx, Omega, and Ata

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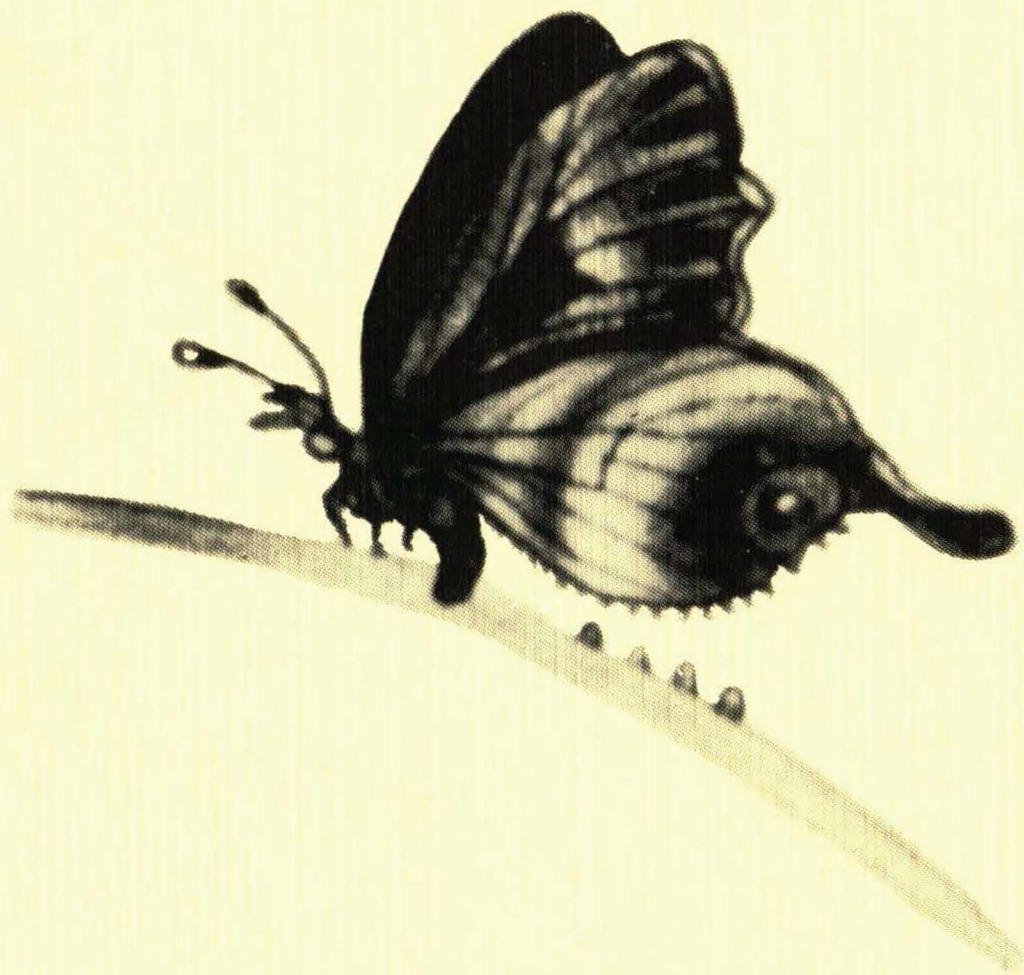
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The Nabokovian



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NOTES ON ERYX, OMEGA AND ~~ALTA~~

ATA

1. Eryx and Onyx

The names of Onyx and Eryx, “two small lakes in the wood” near Camp Q and Lake Climax in *Lolita* (1, 32), happen

to be also lycaenid butterfly names, not listed in the recent exhaustive literature on Nabokov's lepidoptery (see: Brian Boyd & Robert M. Pyle, eds. *Nabokov's Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings*, 2000; Kurt Johnson & Steven L. Coates. *Nabokov's Blues: The Scientific Odyssey of a Literary Genius*, 2001; Dieter E. Zimmer. *A Guide to Nabokov's Butterflies and Moths* 2001). In the *Annotated Lolita* (1991, p. 384), Appel commented on the lakes' names but did not mention any lycaenid connection. However, there are two species bearing *eryx* name in Lycaenidae: one named *Papilio eryx* by Linnaeus himself, the father of zoological nomenclature, now *Artipe eryx* (L., 1771), from East Asia. There is also *Theclopsis eryx* (Cramer, 1777), quite common in South America. In addition, there is *Horaga onyx* (Moore, 1881) from South-East Asia. All three are in Lycaenidae, subfamily Theclinae, and should have been familiar to Nabokov. Thus names Onyx and Eryx definitely look as a playful reference to lycaenids, in addition to the more direct hints toward the "column of onyx" and Venus Erycina.

There are also at least two more *eryx* Lepidoptera: one in the family Danaidae, the East Asian *Papilio eryx* Fabricius, 1798, synonym of *Parantica agleoides* (C. & R. Felder, 1860), and a so-called homonym (i.e. the same Latin name offered by a later author for another species; see *International Code of Zoological Nomenclature*. 4th ed. London, 1999) of the Linnean *Papilio eryx*. Another is a South American moth, *Belemnina eryx* (Fabricius, 1775), family Arctiidae.

Finally, *Eryx* Daudin, 1803 is a genus of snakes, a small sand boa (family Boidae) from Africa and Central Asia, which should have been quite familiar to Godunov-Cherdyntsev senior of *The Gift* and his zoologist colleagues – and possibly to young Nabokov from his readings on Central Asian zoological travels. The snake name is currently valid; thus, no other animal genus can be named *Eryx* since it will violate "the inexorable law of

taxonomic priority” (*Ada*, 1, 8) – while *eryx* species names (epithets) can persist, in Lepidoptera or elsewhere.

2. Omega and Onega

Continuing on lakes theme: Lake Omega in *Pale Fire* was interpreted as Cornell’s Lake Cayuga; another allusion is of course to “alpha and omega” (Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 1999). However, Boyd’s image of Hazel Shade as a “woman spurned” immediately recalls the most famous woman spurned in Russian literature – Tatiana Larina. In his commentary on *Eugene Onegin* (2nd ed., 1975), Nabokov (vol. 2, p. 37) says that “the name [Onegin] is derived from a Russian river, the Onega...; and there is an Onega Lake in the province of Olonets”. Thus, Onegin’s name is derived *both* from a river – as Lensky’s is from Lena (*ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 228) – and a lake. In a later commentary, Yu. Lotman (*Roman A. S. Pushkina “Evgeni Onegin”*, 1983, pp. 114-115) did not mention Lake Onega but discussed river-derived surnames in detail (noting also that for Pushkin’s contemporaries such surnames had a clear artificiality of a literary character’s name, being impossible as a real gentry surname).

To my knowledge, nobody yet commented on this obvious connection of Lake Omega to Lake Onega. The Russian Lake Onega is mentioned in *Pnin* (5, 2). Its geographic twin, Lake Ladoga (located closer to St. Petersburg), finds its place on Antiterra as a burg in Mayne and mutates to Ladore (Russ. Ladora) in *Ada* (1, 1; 1, 22). A geographically familiar to a Russian’s eye sequence of three northern (i.e. closest to Zembla) lakes (west to east: Chudskoe [=Peipus], Ladoga, and Onega) rhymes visually with Omega, Ozero, and Zero (*Pale Fire*) – as well as with Onyx, Eryx, and Climax (*Lolita*).

Tatiana Dmitrievna, of course, did not drown herself; but her precursor, Liza in Karamzin’s *Poor Liza* (1792), did – in a “moonlit pond”, spurned by “a frivolous nobleman graced with

the comedy name of Erast” (Nabokov, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 3, p. 143). So did another Liza in *Queen of Spades* – although not in Pushkin’s 1834 original but in Tchaikovsky’s 1890 “silly opera” (*ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 333). This latter Liza (spurned by Hermann; cf. *Despair*) is mentioned in Nabokov’s *Mary* (“under the same arch where Liza dies in Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades*”; this place in St. Petersburg is Zimnyaya Kanavka (Winter Canal) connecting Moika with Neva; Neva, of course, flows from Lake Ladoga).

Incidentally, no *omega* name is currently valid in Lepidoptera; however, there are two moth synonyms bearing these names: *Argyrogramma verruca* (Fabricius, 1794) (= *A. omega* Hübner, 1823) and *Graphiphora augur* (Fabricius, 1775) (= *G. omega* Esper, 1788) (both in Noctuidae).

3. Ata, Atalanta, Atala

Inspired by Brian Boyd’s marvelous book on *Pale Fire*, I venture to suggest a further decoding to his interpretation for the Haunted Barn message of Aunt Maud containing the broken name “*atalanta*”. Boyd interpreted the first word of the message (“pada”) as equivalent of “padre”, i.e. Latinized “father”. I wonder if the *second* full word, “ata”, could be Nabokov’s indication of the *same* meaning. “Ata” means “father” in Turkic languages, and the word is perfectly known to any educated Russian.

Although it may be too farfetched for Aunt Maud, even from beyond the grave, to use a Turkic-origin word, I am sure that Nabokov was perfectly familiar with the word. Not only was it part of the name of his famous contemporary, Ataturk (Moustafa Kemal; “father of all Turks”, 1881-1938), but furthermore, many toponyms that Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev had to list in his *Lepidoptera Asiatica* would include “-Ata” as a part of a city name, the closest to Nabokov’s childhood reading being the famed Aulie-Ata (“The Holy Father”, center of Syrdaya Region; later Dzhambul, now Taraz

in Kazakhstan). Of course the largest modern Kazakh city's name of Alma-Ata (before 1921, Verny) was known to Nabokov as well; its etymology, however ("Father of Apples") is likely an artificial derivation by analogy with Aulie-Ata.

Turkic (including Tatar, or Tartar) linguistic influences are nothing alien for Nabokov, starting with *his own name* – he claimed the Tatar prince (Murza) Nabok as his ancestor (*Speak, Memory*; note that the Godunov name comes from the baptized Murza Chet of the same 14th century). The pervasive Turkic linguistic influence (through the Golden Horde's "Tatar yoke" and Turkic tribes of the North Caucasus and Crimea) on Russian language in general, and especially on Russian literature, is well known. This influence can be traced from Derzhavin to Pushkin to Lermontov to Tolstoy – and to Nabokov's Tartary, an "independent inferno" on Antiterra. Nabokov's life in Crimea added its load of Turkic, and Crimean Tatars address their elders as "ata". "Ata" is also a Turkic root for the common Russian word "ataman" (title of a Cossack chieftain).

Even if etymologically unrelated, the Sanskrit Atman – "soul", "spirit" (which gave us Greek "atmos") always looks suspiciously close to "ataman" for Russian readers. Brian Boyd (pers. comm., 2003) confirms that Nabokov was quite familiar with this word: "in *Transparent Things* (Ch. 8), he refers to "a notorious fraud, the late symbolist Atman"; and he also had been thinking of using the name for a less incidental character in the early 1950s."

Given all this, it is not inconceivable that *atalanta* hides another "father" in it.

Interestingly, "Ata" is not only a Turkic (=Altaic) word; it means "father" in many other languages: Indo-European "atta", Basque "ata", Sumerian "adda", Dravidian "atu"; Finnic "atti", etc. In fact, "ata" (father) (as well as "dada", "papa" etc.), occurs in so many languages that philologists often consider such words a "sound symbolism", the result of universal childish babble (rather than of their common origin). Finally, I should

add that “Ata” is just one letter removed from “Ada” – as “Ada” is from “Ad” (hell) and “Adam” (man).

Etymology of the name “Atalanta” itself is intriguing. The dictionary (www.etymonline.com) says: “Atalanta – daughter of king Schoeneus, famous for her swiftness, L., from Gk. Atalante, fem. of atalantos “having the same value (as a man),” from *a-* “one, together” + *talanton* “balance, weight, value” (cf. talent)”. In Ovid’s words, “She had features which in a boy would have been called girlish, but in a girl they were like a boy’s” (*Metamorphoses*, VIII, 322-323). Thus, “Ata-” part is not detachable etymologically but Aunt Maud’s message creates a new, “otherworldly” etymology (which Nabokov was always glad to provide), breaking off “father” after “father” (pada – ata –).

Still another *matryoshka*/Scrabble part of *atalanta* appears to be Chateaubriand’s *Atala*, the important reading in *Ada* (1, 14) (on its significance see: A. Cancogni. Nabokov and Chateaubriand. *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (V. E. Alexandrov, ed.), 1995, pp. 382-388). Here is a lepidopteran connection as well, so far unnoticed in the literature: *Atala* Hairstreak, or *Eumaeus atala* (Poey, 1832) (Lycaenidae), from southeastern Florida is the largest and most spectacular eastern U.S. Hairstreak butterfly (also found in Cuba and the Bahamas). With its aposematic (warning) coloration, *Atala* Hairstreak is unpalatable to birds since it sequesters the toxic chemical cycasin from its food plants. It was not collected in Florida from 1937 until 1959 but was rediscovered in 1961. Nabokov should have been quite aware of this species. Moreover, its generic name, *Eumaeus* (after Homer’s swineherd in Ithaca) is a literary pointer to both *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses*. Nabokov’s library contains a copy of a lepidopterological journal *Atala* published from 1973 to 1992 by the Xerces Society in Ithaca, NY (Boyd & Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 55). Two other *atala* are junior synonyms: the Canadian moth *Catocala atala* Cassino, 1918 (valid name *C. semirelictata*

Grote, 1874) (Noctuidae: Catocalinae); and the Australian moth *Hestiarcha atala* Turner, 1922 (valid name *Thermeola tasmanica* Hampson, 1900) (Arctiidae: Lithosiinae).

Unfortunate Atala's lover Chactas was also immortalized in zoological nomenclature in 1844 by a French zoologist Paul Gervais (probably an eccentric admirer of Chateaubriand) as a genus of scorpions, common in South America (family Chactidae).

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