

# The Nabokovian



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## ZOOLOGICAL NOMENCLATURE AND KINBOTE'S NAME OF GOD

In *Pale Fire*, in the very last sentence of the important Note to Line 549 in the commentary (Kinbote-Shade dialogue on religion), Kinbote states: "In trying to find the right name for that Universal Mind, or First Cause, or the Absolute, or Nature, I submit that the Name of God has priority". This rather straightforward sentence, which reflects Kinbote's religious zeal (see also Note to Line 101), appears to have a second layer: a playful message from Nabokov.

"Priority" is a fundamental term in biological systematics concerning the names of living organisms and rules on assigning those names (taxonomic nomenclature). These very strict rules call for establishing (publishing) the priority Latin name. All later names given to the same organism are considered "synonyms" and are superfluous. A zoologist always literally "tries to find the right name", which will "have priority". It is the most standard operation which Nabokov had to apply countless times himself in his entomological research. He gives an imaginary example in *Ada*, I: 8, "*Antocharis ada* Krolik (1884)—as it was known until changed to *A. prittwitzi* Stümper (1883) by the inexorable law of taxonomic priority". In the annotation to this sentence, Brian Boyd mentions that Nabokov refers approvingly in *Speak, Memory* to "nomenclatorial changes as a result of a strict application of the law of priority" (*The Nabokovian*, 1997, 38). Same attention to nomenclatural rules is seen in Nabokov's 1952 letter to Cyril dos Passos (Brian Boyd & Robert M. Pyle, eds. *Nabokov's Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings*, 2000, p. 486-487), where he says "I am all for suppressing doubtful names; but first of all let us discuss those names and prove that they *are* doubtful".

The Law, or rule, of Priority in nomenclature was first formally published in 1905 in the *Regles Internationales de la Nomenclature Zoologique* (Paris), in French, German and

English. The Russian translation appeared in 1911—when Nabokov was already “dreaming his way through” (*Speak, Memory*) lepidopterological literature.

Nabokov used the 1905 Rules of Zoological Nomenclature during all his active life in entomology; it was still under these “inexorable” rules that Francis Hemming in 1960 named the lycaenid genus *Nabokovia*. At this time the Rules were very much discussed in zoological circles, since a new revision was on its way. In 1961—a year before *Pale Fire* was published—the old Rules were replaced by the *International Code of Zoological Nomenclature*, which contained the Law of Priority as its basic operating principle. The latest, 4th edition of the Code (London, 1999) confirms the Principle of Priority as the most fundamental concept (Ch. 6, Article 23).

Kinbote knew nothing about natural history but Nabokov forces him to observe even a very minute detail from zoological nomenclature—such as an incorrect capitalization of the species epithet “*Shadei*” in the Latin name of *Bombycilla shadei*, an imaginary species of waxwing, the bird central to *Pale Fire* (Note to Line 71 in commentary; see also Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, p. 178). This is of course not Kinbote speaking but Nabokov—or maybe also Shade, since Shade liked to know “the names of things” (see e.g. Note to Line 238). Naming is very 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”. Naming a new species was Nabokov’s childhood dream (*Speak, Memory*). St. Augustine, the subject of Kinbote-Shade discussion, wrote in Latin, but Latin is also the language of zoological nomenclature, Linnaeus being its Adam.

Reading “priority” in its technical, nomenclatural sense opens many playful if Talmudic interpretations of Kinbote’s phrase: the supernatural Name of God can be treated as a human-given “name” of a purely natural object, subject to human-made rules. All five “names” quoted by Kinbote

(Universal Mind, First Cause, Absolute, Nature, Name of God) were of course myriads of times spelled out (“published”) by theologians and philosophers. Of all these “names”, it was the “Name of God” that was “published” first—by Moses in Exodus 3 (or, if you prefer, by a so-called Jahwist ca. 900–850 BC).

The names in zoological nomenclature, to be legitimate (“available”), must be accompanied by descriptions (diagnoses), which are allowed to be rather succinct. The God of the Old Testament provides a combined name/description in Exodus 3:14, usually rendered as “I am that I am”, *Ego sum qui sum* (diagnosis) but also interpretable as YHWH (name). Interestingly, this “self-diagnosis” is mirrored by the diagnosis of humans (genus *Homo*) given in 1758 by Linnaeus who used the famous motto *Nosce te ipsum* (“Recognize yourself”).

All other “names” listed by Kinbote do not have formal nomenclatural priority (which is judged strictly by the date of publication). The name of Nature (*physis*) comes from Ancient Greece and does not precede the Hebrew Name of God by time of its first “publication”. The other three names can even be traced to their individual authors, all of whom came much later than Moses. Universal Mind is assignable to Anaxagoras; First Cause, to Aristotle; and The Absolute, to Hegel. Thus, all four other “names” listed by Kinbote are, as a zoologist would say, “junior synonyms” of “the great and terrible” Nomen Dei. The latter holds its Priority.

According to the Code, the junior synonyms are not “valid” but are “available”: if the senior synonym (in this case, Name of God) becomes by some reason “unavailable,” the next-in-line junior synonym (in this case, probably Nature) will take its place by priority. Why can a name become unavailable? Most commonly, this happens if it has not been properly published, e.g. not supplied with a necessary description at the moment of publication. Since the entire Torah can be argued to represent

such a “description,” the Name of God surely seems to be a very secure “senior synonym.”

In the Russian translation by S. Ilyin and A. Glebovskaya (1997), unfortunately, the taxonomic reference to “priority” is lost. The words “the Name of God has priority” are translated as “pervenstvo prinadlezhit imeni Bozhiyu.” “Pervenstvo” in Russian, however, does not double as a term for zoological priority; this word is “prioritet.”

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

—Victor Fet, Department of Biological Sciences, Marshall University