EMESIS NEMESIS: NAMING BUTTERFLIES

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Emesis nemesis: a pretty word symmetry, suggesting the name of a nostrum to prevent vomiting. It is, instead, the Latin name of a little Texas butterfly. H. L. Lewis’s Butterflies of the World (Follett, 1973) boasts color photographs of more than 5,000 of the lovely creatures. Most of the book does consist of these color plates, and at the bottom of each page are the scientific (genus and species) names. The Latin words encountered form a fitting counterpoint to the fascination of the photographs. If a living being happens to belong to a notorious genus, that name appears as a bold entry in the Webster dictionaries. Butterflies do not fare very well in this regard, but their genus names ought to be as deserving as those of mammals or plants used for human food.

Some genus names are otherwise well-known English words: Idea, Aroma, Hades, Precis, Aides. To those interested in unusual initial letter combinations, there are no less than seven initial trigram genus names with no examples in Webster’s Second or Third editions. These are: Aoa, Eetion, Eooxylides, Tmolus, Xois, Udranomia and Ypthima (as well as Ypthimoides). Names that are obscure, but quickly bring images to mind, include Childrena, Mechanitis and Cigaritis. Starting, too, are the rare two-letter genus or species names: Ge geta, Inachis io, Lycenaia li. The species names of numbers of these insects are formed by noting that some wing marking resembles a letter of the alphabet of a particular color. This results in Liptena o-rubrum, Polygonia c-album, P. c-aureum, P. g-argentum, P. j-album, P. l-album, Strymon m-album, S. v-album and Strymonidia w-album. These, then, are all legitimate single-letter inclusions within words — perhaps a topic for Word Ways investigators. And all word-wayers will recognize that Ucalegon (a neighbor whose house is on fire) qualifies as the most obscure word in English — yet we find Graphium ucalegon and G. ucalegonides flying about in Africa, hopefully without arson in their tiny hearts.

Some attempt should be made to bring the richness of Latin creature-names to the logologist’s table. Consider that a tiny ladybird beetle drags about the designation Subcoccinella vigintiquatuorpunctata, when it doesn’t even have 24 spots! We should look more closely into these matters.