"Eve's Neighborhood": Fictionalized Factual Place Names in an Off–Campus Novel

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"Then what's he doing in our neighbourhood?" Eve demanded.
Tracy looked at her in surprise. "Our neighbourhood?"
Eve had to explain it several times. (Liz Rosenberg, *Home Repair*, 312).

When, on June 11–12, 1974, I attended what was optimistically but, as it turned out, justifiably called the First Annual Conference on Literary Onomastics at the State University of New York at Brockport, I was probably one of the very few people present who did not come from a background in literary studies in general or in literary criticism in particular. On the other hand, I shared with most of the other attendees a keen interest in onomastics while at the same time carrying in my mental freight a well–developed fascination with folk–narrative and oral tradition. It was therefore natural that my very first contribution to a gathering concerned with names in literature should explore "Place–Names in Traditional Ballads" (Nicolaisen 1974). Thirty–seven years of enjoyable involvement in the study of names embedded in literature later, that 1974 novice has the good fortune of being able to look back to many stimulating opportunities—in research, lectures, academic courses, professional meetings, publications—to investigate the remarkable richness and flexibility of the ever–varying, bridging relationships between the world of literature, especially fiction, and its creative nomenclature, as shown by some selected themes, several of them first aired at the Brockport/Rochester conferences and subsequently included in the journal *Literary Onomastics Studies*[1]: Names as verbal icons, names in fictitious environments, desert–island onomastics, Robinsons as namers, recognition and identity, names as keys and disguises in regional novels, place names as structuring elements, the deployment of names by individual authors in individual works, "colonial" names in New York, names as texts within texts, the toponymy of literary landscapes, names as masks and illusions, place names as linguistic ruins, onomastic vernaculars in fiction, names of strangers in traditional ballads, names as intertextual devices, names in derivative literature and parodies, maps of fiction, the past as space, an onomastic autobiography, the uses of names, landscapes as plots, methods of literary onomastics, names in childhood reminiscences, place–name legends, onomastic interaction, etc.

It was therefore tempting, and would have been by no means inappropriate at this time of rebirth, either to continue or to reopen from new perspectives the interrogation of any of these attractive themes which have challenged me

before, or, as an alternative, to attempt a stocktaking overview of the conspicuous development in recent decades of significant activities related to literary onomastics. The decision for following a different course of action, however, has largely been influenced by the timely publication, in 2009, of a novel that will allow us to combine an examination of one of the most fundamental and in its simplicity most testing questions in the study of names in literature with an opportunity to illustrate our argumentation with examples from one of its most telling applications. The question at issue is "What is a Literary Name?," and the novel concerned is *Home Repair* by Liz Rosenberg; more importantly, the discussion will be almost completely limited to toponymic evidence gleaned from "Eve's neighborhood," "The West Side of Binghamton, known as the university ghetto, with its flat streets, gardens, boxy old 1920-houses, square front porches" (HR 30), and its wider surroundings. The question has, of course, been asked before, although it seems to have been of greater interest to German name scholars than to anglophone students of literary onomastics. There is no need, therefore, to roll it out again, except to remind readers that previous answers have differed greatly and have demonstrated anything but unanimity. Karl Gutschmidt, for instance, adhering to a strict division between "literary" and "non-literary," is persuaded that not all names found in a literary work are "literary names" and that consequently all names of authentic persons and objects [places] inserted into a text are "non-literary" (Gutschmidt 69); a similar position is taken by Henrik Birus who contrasts "literary names in a narrow sense" with "literary names in a wider sense" (Birus 39 n3). My own view coincides with Ines Sobanski's statement that "every name found in a literary text is to be understood to be a literary name, irrespective of whether it (a) refers to people, places or material objects, (b) has been extracted from the real name inventory of a speech community or created by the writer, (c) denoted fictive characters, locations or objects, or refers to an actually existing name bearer (Sobanski 57).[2]

What makes Rosenberg's novel—her first for an adult readership—so appealing from that point of view is the realisation that, as already mentioned, its toponymicon consists almost exclusively of names and locations from the alleged environs of "Eve's neighborhood" on "the West Side of Binghamton" [in upstate New York], i.e. of fictionalized, factual, extra-literary place names which can be verified in the relevant cartographic sources[3] and directories and which therefore would be classified by Gutschmidt, as "non-literary" names and by Birus as "literary names in a wider sense," distinctions which we regard as invalid. Examples in *Home Repair* represent a wide variety of name categories: local street names like Beethoven Street (complete with local pronunciation as Beeth-oven), Chestnut Street, Court Street, Main Street, Rec(reation) Park, Riverside Drive, West End Avenue; the wider urban setting in the Triple Cities (Binghamton, Johnston City and Endicott) and Broome County; landscape-defining water-courses

like the Susquehanna and its tributary, the Chenango; educational, medical, ecclesiastical, sporting (the Binghamton Mets), accommodation, eating and drinking establishments, car dealerships, commercial and other undertakings, such as Broome Community College, State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton, Binghamton High School, Binghamton General (Hospital), Lourdes, Beautiful Plain Baptist Church, Holiday Inn, Oakdale Mall, Binghamton Plaza, Wegman's Supermarket, Price Chopper, Van Cott's jewellers, Chuck E. Cheese, Applebee's, Denny's, Little Venice, Pizza Hut, TGI Friday's, Thirsty's, Jack Sherman Toyota. This inventory of named locations, all verifiable, is easily recognisable as the specific Binghamton actualisation of a typical mix of names, and designations in mid-sized U.S. urban communities, available for fictionalisation in the novel as a group or onomastic field and not just as isolated instances. It undoubtedly lends credence to the author's claim that "Binghamton is key to the novel," (46) as long as one bears in mind that her carefully formulated assertion does, indeed, refer to a work of fiction and therefore, by implication, also to its onomastic focus. The novel's central character, Eve, may well walk her dogs past the measurable five blocks to Rec. Park but in its fictional reality the place name serves essentially as the toponym marking the locality of two pivotal events: her encounter, away from home, with Jonah Cement, the park worker, as well as of the memorial service for two boys tragically killed in a car crash.

These primary, if not sole, functions of the name need special emphasis for those readers who have been to Binghamton and its west-side Rec. Park before, whether as residents or sporadic visitors, for their familiarity with the recreational facility may well make it difficult for them to bypass their personal associations, or memories, acquired through previous personal experience. The same, or at least something similar, may be said of the other names listed above although their semantic burden, both fictional and factual, may not be as great individually. In this respect, it is not without significance that the four place names deliberately invented by the author—the Chestnut Arms, the Emerald Gardens (at the corner of Chestnut Street and Main, and off the Vestal Parkway, respectively), the Marywood rehab center and the Universalist Church are associated with the role which Eve's elderly mother, Charlotte Dunrea, plays after her arrival from Tennessee right to the surprise ending of the story. Similarly, the imaginary Diute Ford Agency only functions as the work place of Eve's unreliable, wayward second husband, Chuck, before his sudden departure and erratic reappearances in her life and neighborhood. Although it may look like a careless and almost wilful contradiction on the part of this writer, he wants to put forward the proposition that even the occasional mention of a small number of American states beyond New York—Alabama, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Pennsylvania—and of the Canadian province of Ontario establishes their fictitious status in *Home Repair* in connection with Chuck's unpredictable travels and unexpected phone calls.

Thus, they, too, within the covers of this novel, become unanalysed literary names, joining not only the local and regional place names already paraded but also—on the other, southern side of the Susquehanna River—the names of the academic institution, SUNY-Binghamton, in which Eve works as an administrative assistant in the Art Department and a member of the "administrative staff [who] was an anomaly existing between janitor and provost" (HR 31). As is to be expected, her individually named and molded university colleagues are associated with adjacent departments and programs, such as Art History, Theater, Music, but also, less closely, Philosophy and Comparative Literature, and in passing, the School of Management. In many ways, the administrative, organisational and other professional interactions both complement and confront one another and, at least in their human elements, spill over the campus boundaries and across the river, thus creating a bi-riparian "Eve's neighborhood," both interlinked parts *mutatis mutandis* inhabited by authorially invented literary names. It would be fruitless to search among them for clues to references to, or even caricatures of, the author's own colleagues or other neighbors, for *Home Repair* is not a *roman á clef*.

It would be tempting but misleading to regard the campus component of this novel either as merely supplementary, or as supportive foil, to the events on the west side of Binghamton, or as sufficiently dominant to assign *Home Repair* convincingly as a late comer to the literary genre which, dubbed "campus novel," had its heyday in the second half of the twentieth century conspicuously represented by such examples as Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952), Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954), Malcolm Bradbury's *Eating People is Wrong* (1959), *Stepping Westward* (1961), *The History Man* (1921), and *Rates of Exchange* (1983), and David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984) and *Thinks* (2001). Admittedly, there are certain similarities, including the fact that the authors of these works, like their main characters, are themselves in educational academic positions, Mary McCarthy at Bard College and Sarah Lawrence College, Malcolm Bradbury at the University of East Anglia, David Lodge at the University of Birmingham and Liz Rosenberg at the State University of New York at Binghamton. On the other hand, one of their main differences lies in the employment of, and attitude to, toponymic devices as part of the creation of the stories' academic settings. Both Bradbury and Lodge make a special point in their otherwise conventional *Author's Notes* disclaiming (not only because of their litigious readerships, it would seem) any resemblance of their fictive inventions to existing universities, including their own: in his *Author's Notes* on *The History Man*, for instance, Bradbury emphasises "The location ...is a total invention with delusory approximations, to historical reality...Not only does the University of Watermouth which appears here, bear no relation to the real University of Watermouth (which does not exist) or to any other university..." With particular reference to universities which serve as

the locations of *Changing Places*, David Lodge states "Rummidge and Euphoria are places in the warp of a comic world which resembles the one we are standing on without corresponding exactly to it," and with regard to the trans-Atlantic exchange counterpart, the State University of Euphoria, popularly known as Euphoric State, we learn in the text of the novel that it is situated in "that small but populous state ... between Northern and Southern California." In *Small World*, a kind of sequel to *Changing Places*, we are told explicitly that "Rummidge is not Birmingham," though it owes something to popular prejudices about that city," and that "there are no universities at Limerick or Darlington;" in a similar vein, David Lodge stresses in his *Author's Notes* in *Thinks* that "the University of Gloucester is an entirely fictitious institutions, at least it was at the time of writing."

In contrast to these tongue-in-cheek disclaimers, Liz Rosenberg confesses in one of her interviews that *Home Repair* "was always a Binghamton book" (Coker 3) and is in fact her "hymn to Binghamton," but then, she can afford transparency and does not have to conceal, not even playfully, the origins of the place names in her narrative, nor, though not without humour in the depiction of some of her domestic and academic scenes, to adopt a satirical, distancing style or tone in her use of onomastic evidence; both because of, and in spite of, Binghamton, Rec. Park, Chestnut Street, Holiday Inn, Denny's, Tennessee, the State University of New York, and the very garage sale that sets everything in motion being fictitious and literary names and events in her novel, and their infiltration from the non-literary world creates not just intertextual connections but also cumulative inter-contexts that evoke precedent, not so much in readers who are not familiar with the "real" place names and sites than in those for whom such names and their locations are already filled with contexts acquired through past personal experience. There are, for that reason, considerable risks involved in making that choice, for no writer who selects, for good reason and to good effect, a corpus of ready-made place names from extra-literary landscapes—national, regional or local—can adequately plan for heading off this kind of prejudicial interference, at the pass that leads to the realms of fiction, even if, as the poet in Liz Rosenberg points out (Coker 8) "the universals are always there." To use a different metaphor, she deftly circumnavigates the upstate Scylla and Charybdis lurking on Susquehanna and Chenango, if this writer's reaction after twenty-three years at SUNY-Binghamton (1969-1992), several of them as Liz Rosenberg's colleague, is anything to go by.

To return to the issue of genre, if *Home Repair* is not truly a "campus novel" in the accepted sense, what is it? Its title provides a clue, for the action that really matters and the problems and their solutions which arise from it are centered on the home territory—where "Eve's Neighborhood" is. These are, however, closely linked with university life on the other side of the river, and it seems to be more

appropriate therefore to call *Home Repair* an "off-campus novel," a term which this writer, for one, will use until somebody can think of a better one.

And here is a coda: undoubtedly, the book's place-names inventory can, with some justification and profit, be read and interpreted as reflecting the "real" world; consequently, one reviewer close to SUNY-Binghamton states unequivocally that "the story is set in Binghamton" (Anonymous 46) reinforcing this comment by illustrating it with a photograph of Liz Rosenberg standing in Binghamton's Recreation Park, leaning against one of the pillars of its bandstand. At first glance, this image may look persuasive but it does not take long for the reviewer to realize that this is *not* the Rec. Park of the novel, for there is no orange-jacketed park worker called Jonah in sight shouting to Eve to "get [her] dogs out of the handball court," and that therefore the photo is/must be of another place of the same name because Rosenberg's imaginary inventions like all other fictionalised, factual toponymy cannot permit photographability, and that includes all her literary names from Beeth(oven) Street and the Art Department at SUNY-Binghamton, to Brooklyn and beyond, in this Tale of Two Riverbanks.

Notes

[1] LOS 1 (1974) 84–102; 2 (1975) 58–82; 3 (1976) 1–21; 5 (1978) 110–151; 6 (1979) 75–104; 8 (1981) 27–38; 9 (1982) 1–20; 10 (1983) 268–283; 14 (1987) 49–68.

[2] The original is in German; the English translation is by the author.

[3] I am grateful to my daughter Birgit, a resident of Endwell for confirming the existence of some of the "real" names, and to Liz Rosenberg for kindly acknowledging her invention of a few.

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