

THE RIDDLE OF NAMES IN ROBBE-GRILLET'S ERASERS

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The riddle which the French author Robbe-Grillet uses in his novel The Erasers (1953) combines fragments from the oracle's prediction that Oedipus will slay his father and marry his mother with questions asked by the Sphinx of Thebes: Who has four feet in the morning, two at midday, and three in the evening? By placing the action before the time the son murders the father, Robbe-Grillet may have thought of Sophocles' Oedipus the King as a "sequel" to his novel. Moreover, he may be repeating the cleverness of various twentieth-century writers who like to play with deadly Greek themes as did Jean Giraudoux in his 1935 play La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu ("The Trojan War Will Not Take Place") and as did Albert Camus in his 1939 "Minotaur, or Stopping at Oran."

Robbe-Grillet in "who-dun-it" style gives clues leading to ancient times when he dots the setting, a small town in northern France, with alerts: Corinth Street, Thebes Street, a print of

the ruins of Thebes, and statues of Laius, shepherds, and a lost babe. But he does not openly announce Greek themes and heroes by title or by name. He does not name his characters Oedipus, Creon, Teiresias, and Jocasta. Rather, their names are Wallas, Fabius, Laurent, an unnamed drunk, and the supposed murder victim, Professor Dupont.

By six o'clock in the morning, Wallas, the detective from Paris, has left his room in the dingy hotel with its dimly lit café and is out in the maze of streets in order to become oriented as to the place of the small-town murder before he goes to find out everything Commissioner Laurent knows about the crime. From the beginning of the novel, strange as it may seem, Detective Wallas appears to be the person whose name is the answer to the confusing riddle posed by the old drunk, the "oracle" at the Café of the Allies—"allies" being wines, liquors, and furnished rooms. But the manager of the café who has "[e]ach second in its exact place" pays no attention to the riddle even though "[s]oon unfortunately time will no longer be master."¹

The riddle irritates Wallas who is already furious because the corpse of Professor Dupont is missing. With no corpse for examination and evidence, the investigator must work doubly hard to track down rumors and try to find clues as he pushes his inquiry which lasts twenty-four unnecessary, useless hours. No small annoyance is his watch which stops at this critical moment

and will not run again until after twenty-four hours have gone by. Refusing to be hindered by his stopped watch or upset by the drunk's riddles, he concentrates on being the perfect detective in order to please his superior, Fabius, famous in the Bureau of Investigation in the capital.

Fabius has a name associated with farming, trials, and traps. The name originated, Pliny wrote, from faba 'bean' and means bean grower.² A more appropriate meaning would be an activity carried on in earliest Greek days when the innocence or guilt of a person was at times decided by the color of a bean taken from a bag: black condemned, white absolved.³ Another apt origin is fodius or fovius, a word connected with the digging of pits, foveae, for wolves⁴ and indicative of traps needed by Fabius to catch criminals. The ability to deceive and thus arrest the lawbreaker is not only emphasized but caricatured by Robbe-Grillet in his description of the old hand at criminal investigation:

" . . . Fabius disguised as an 'idler': hat pulled down over his eyes, huge dark glasses, and an outrageously false beard hanging to the ground; bent double, this creature prowls 'discreetly' through the countryside, among the startled cows and horses" (p. 56).

Often disappointed by traps which do not spring at the right time, confused by tricks which throw him off the scent, and deceived by false leads, Fabius has learned the importance

of delaying tactics and has the fortitude and doggedness of Quintus Fabius Maximus, the Roman dictator, who wore Hannibal down by a strategy of containment and harassment — a brilliant war policy which brought him the epithet Cunctator 'Delayer,' a trait disliked by the impatient Roman people.⁵ Because of the same waiting schemes, Chief Fabius is very unpopular with his associates who reproach him "for a kind of irresolution, a marked discretion that makes him hesitate about accepting even the most established **facts**" (p. 56). Chafing at his slowness, they spread the rumor that "he has ceased to believe in the existence of any solution whatever" (p. 56).

How could a police chief function if he believed that no solution was possible? Although those of lower ilk — that is, young detectives and students of the craft — no doubt joke among themselves about their old codger chief slowed down by age, they may be erring in their snide view of their superior. Old Fabius may not be just the Don Quijote of the police force. He may be a nihilist of the human ability to discover and detect very much about criminals or, more likely, about the human condition. At any rate, his nihilism, his inconclusiveness, is always based on first-hand information. He is not content to sit far away in his Paris office and wait for the report of Wallas. No, he disguises himself as a sailor and is present at the Café of the Allies when the drunk asks Wallas about what animal is parricide. At that

very moment, crafty old Fabius knows that the murder has not taken place. But, like Teiresias, he keeps foreboding information to himself with the result that he leaves rookie Wallas free to find the "murderer."

In ignorance then, Wallas continues running down threads of Professor Dupont's life in the expectation of **having a thorough** report for Fabius who, having followed a type of phrenology, has employed the young man in spite of the fact that his forehead does not quite measure fifty square centimeters — the standard required. To be fair, Fabius may have lowered his requirements and accepted Wallas' small forehead because he was impressed by the candidate's previous experience in surveillance of theosophical societies and their mystical insights. No doubt, only a super sleuth could investigate intuition, supersensible reality, and a superior wisdom. No matter how impressed he may have been, Fabius 'bean grower,' 'digger of pits for wolves,' 'delayer,' and 'non-believer in solutions,' keeps an eye on his fledgling investigator.

Also tailing Wallas is the small-town Police Commissioner Laurent who is making his study of the murder and whose work brings the number of investigations to four: those of Wallas, Fabius, the Commissioner, and the underworld which is particularly trying to find the body. The underworld group is led by Bona whose idea of finding the corpse appears to be a "good" one. The four points of

view add thickness, a plural world, reminiscent of The Counterfeiters of André Gide.

Commissioner Laurent, in charge of the public safety of the town, knows about everything in town — or so he believes: rooms rented, criminal activities, and the addresses and telephone numbers of all residents. Related to number symbolism and numerology are the numbers he uses. He discovers that Wallas has a room at number 10 Surveyor Street and that his telephone number is 2-0-2-0-3. Both of these numbers predict good things to come according to Pythagoras: number 10 contains the number of harmony and unity; and number 7 which is the sum of Wallas' telephone number indicates opportunity. Likewise propitious is the telephone number of Commissioner Laurent: 1-24-24. Following Pythagoras again, two is a line and four has the property of Justice.⁶

As soon as the Commissioner gives Wallas his office telephone number, he adds that "it's a direct line" (p. 66). And Wallas thinks, "[a] direct line to what?" (p. 66). Certainly it is a direct line to the person in charge of public safety, Laurent, whose name may be traced back to the Etruscan word lar or lars, meaning lord or master and connected with the idea that the spirits of great statesmen or heroes become public lares to watch over the welfare of a city. The Etruscan idea of guardian spirit appears to have been adopted by the Romans in the word lar 'a household god.'⁷ In this sense, Commissioner Laurent is the

guardian spirit of the town — and of Wallas.

In the role of guardian spirit and director of the local investigation, Laurent says that Wallas is the most likely suspect for the murder. It is Wallas who has the kind of automatic revolver used to kill Dupont; it is Wallas whose revolver has one bullet missing; and it is Wallas who does not have an alibi to prove that he was not at Professor Dupont's house at the time of the murder. But all this theory rests on nothing tangible. There is no corpse, no murder weapon.

This startling hypothesis does not catch the attention of Wallas, who, half listening, is busy planning to go to Corinth Street for a bit of investigation and then on the Circular Boulevard and Plow Street. Everywhere he will notice the same poster: "Citizens Awake! Citizens Awake! Citizens Awake!" (p. 48). But Wallas does not wake up. He rushes back and forth, always feeling safe at number 10 Surveyor Street, an address of harmony and unity. The biggest nuisance for him is the old drunk who often follows him and teases him with riddle fragments: "What is the animal that in the morning" (p. 13); "[t]ell me what animal is a parricide in the morning" (p. 225); "what animal is parricide in the morning, incestuous at noon, and blind at night?" (p. 226); "parricide in the morning, blind at noon . . . No . . . blind in the morning, incestuous at noon, parricide at night" (p. 226); "deaf at noon and blind at night?" (p. 226).

Like the drunk, almost everyone points to Wallas as the murderer. The environment too is menacing through its statues of the Oedipus story, the Sphinx-like debris on the canal, the photograph of Dupont's house with the ruins of Thebes, the perfect but non-existent eraser with all the letters of its brand name lost except "di" (possibly the brand is Oedipus), streets with classical names, and the twenty-two illustrations from the Tarot cards which decorate the stairway of Dupont's house. Wallas by involuntary memory even recalls his childhood visit to this very town where he and his mother saw his father. But the compounding, tripling, quadrupling, multiplying of accusations do not reach Wallas at all. Untouched, deaf, he insists on trapping the murderer and ends by becoming the murderer himself.

Some clues to his personality are found in his name, quite likely derived from Latin vallum 'a palisade made from stakes and set upon a rampart.'⁸ The isolating force of a palisade or wall is found in another meaning of his name, foreigner or stranger. This comes from Old Norse valis; Anglo-Saxon Valas or Wealas — the Welsh, i.e. 'foreigner or stranger.'⁹ Although in the dim past he was probably born in the town, for all practical purposes, he is a stranger who must orient himself in the maze of streets, and he is considered by the townspeople as an outsider from the capital. A historical note on the name of northwestern France where the action of The Erasers takes place is its ancient name,

Walland 'Foreign Land,' the title used by the Norsemen.¹⁰ A foreigner, a stranger, walled away, Wallas refuses to be bothered with riddles which pertain to him. Like Oedipus, he could say to riddlers:

Thou lov'st to speak in riddles and dark words.¹¹

The victim Dupont also has considerable responsibility for his own murder. He plays Russian roulette with free will: he "murders" his own son by denying him; he fakes his own murder; and he slips back into his own house to get important papers at the very time he is supposed to have already been murdered. This last action sets up a chain reaction which leads to his being murdered by his son. He is a Dupont 'bridge' to his own murder.

The conclusion of all this? All conclusions based upon evidence in The Erasers appear to be damned. Conclusions in this novel are upon shaky ground. One possible conclusion is that Wallas, Professor Dupont, no one should have taken the bottom step of the stairs, next to which is the Tarot card zero with a picture of the fool who "knew not where he went, but was absorbed in his chimerical dreams which ran constantly in the same circle. His fool's cap was put on wrong side front. . . . He stumbled, nearly fell, but continued to drag himself along, all the time holding on his shoulder a bag containing useless things. . . ."12

However, the opposite conclusion might recommend more climbing of stairs, more action as preached by Creon in Oedipus the King:

In this land, said the god: "Who seeks shall find:
Who sits with folded hands or sleeps is blind."¹³

But the action called for here could be the treachery of the gods who, riddle-like, encourage man to condemn himself by seeking — a lesson learned by Fabius, a searcher using extreme caution, but unknown to Wallas who walls off the places where he should seek information and unknown to Commissioner Laurent who is always too late guarding the town.

Yet, they would have ended more happily had they recognized correct leads and then followed them:

Are the riddles of the Sphinx the idle
pastime of deluded fancy? Does the wise man turn
his back upon them and go his way, his ears sealed
against them as against the allurements of the
Siren? This is, alas, impossible. The Sphinx is
seated in the soul of each man, and though we
endeavour to be deaf, the penetrating sounds
of riddles . . . will search us out and ask —
what then art thou? . . . Thus life depends

upon the answer, and death, spiritual and physical,
is the penalty for him that answers wrongly.¹⁴

In The Erasers, the tragic hero, Wallas, becomes an Oedipus and pays for not understanding the riddle but, most of all, for not even listening to the riddle.

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NOTES

- 1
Alain Robbe-Grillet, The Erasers, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 7. All further references to this novel will appear by page number in the text.
- 2
Charlotte M. Yonge, History of Christian Names (London, 1884; rpt. Detroit: Gale, 1966), p. 146.
- 3
Richard Cavendish, Man, Myth and Magic (New York: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 1970), II, 230.
- 4
Yonge, p. 146.
- 5
Yonge, p. 147; Mason Hammond and Anne Amory, Aeneas to Augustus 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 28, n. 13.
- 6
Christopher Butler, Number Symbolism (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), pp. 1-11.
- 7
Yonge, p. 172.
- 8
See item 9135, vallum, in W. Meyer-Lübke, Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch (1822; rpt. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1968).

9

For various spellings of Wallace, see Charles Wareing Bardsley, A Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1967), p. 790. For "stranger" or "foreigner" see Henry Barber, British Family Names: Their Origin and Meaning (London: Elliot Stock, 1903), p. 271.

10

Barber, p. 271.

11

Sophocles, Oedipus the King, trans. F. Storr (1912; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), I, 43.

12

P. D. Ouspensky, The Symbolism of the Tarot, trans. A. L. Pogossky (New York: Dover, 1976), p. 23.

13

Sophocles, p. 15.

14

F. C. S. Schiller, Riddles of the Sphinx New and Revised (1891; rpt. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), pp. 7-8.

