

FRANZ KAFKA AND PHILIP ROTH: THEIR USE OF LITERARY
ONOMASTICS (BASED ON THE PROFESSOR OF DESIRE)

Elizabeth M. Rajec
City College of New York

The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, so very subtly interwoven into the bygone world of Franz Kafka, seems to come alive in the intricate onomastic pattern of Philip Roth's novel, The Professor of Desire. The world of David Kepesh, the main protagonist, unfolds in front of our eyes: his childhood, his erotic pursuits, his marriage, his teaching career, and his trip to Europe - eventually reaching an emotional climax at Kafka's graveside in Prague.

David is the son of Abe and Belle Kepesh, who make their living by operating a family resort hotel in the Catskill Mountains called The Hungarian Royale. The sentiment and aura of a bygone age are maintained by running the hotel according to principles of European hospitality.

Kepesh, the family name, is of Hungarian origin, and its etymological analysis reveals that it can be translated into English as "the one who is able to achieve a set of goals." Basically, Kepesh means capable, qualified, competent, or fit. Moreover, Kepesh is a polyglot term. The Hungarian noun "kep" means "picture;" thus, the name can also be associated with "pictorial" or "tropological"

connections. But "kepe" also means "shock," as in a group of sheaves of grain placed on end and supporting one another in a field.¹ The aim of this paper is to determine if David Kepesh and his companions live up to their descriptive names.

Basically, five categories of names can be traced throughout The Professor of Desire. To the first group belong the names connected with his childhood, which reflect a strong Austro-Hungarian-Jewish character: Kepesh, Bratasky, Jelinek, Klotzer, Barbatnik, and so on. Even their first names are predominantly Hebrew or Jewish: Abe, Davey, Harvey, Larry, and the like.

In the second category, the more sophisticated German-Jewish names can be observed: Dr. Frederick Klinger, David's psychiatrist; Professor Arthur Schönbrunn, his thesis adviser and the chairman of the comparative literature program; and Ralph Baumgarten, poet and friend but also the first link connecting Roth's novel with Kafka's short story, "The Hunger Artist."

To the third group belong those names which are Anglo-Saxon in character. For instance, Mr. Clark (obviously to be associated with "clerk"), an admired Wall Street lawyer and Belle's boss, for whom she worked as a legal secretary prior to her marriage to Abe; McCormack, an FBI agent, whose name is very common among Irish Americans; Dr. Leigh,

a lascivious London doctor (who prefers "to lay" pretty young girls, which is cleverly implied in the name); Donald Garland, an English investment banker; Jimmy Metcalf, an English Onassis of the Far East; Les Lowery, the future husband of Kepesh's ex-wife; and many other persons, whose first names only are mentioned: Chips, Edgar, Donald, Brian, Colin, Terry, Madge, Patricia, and so on.

In the fourth category we find names with sexual connotations: Elisabeth Elverskog and Brigitta Svanstrom, to mention only the most important ones.

Finally, to the last group of names belong those which cannot be grouped into any of the previous categories. These are universal names, and because of their timeless symbolic images they cannot be defined according to national borders: Eva, Kafka's whore; Helen, David's femme fatale; and Claire, his girlfriend. Since the le-porello of Roth's nomenclature is quite rich, only those who play an important role in the life of the hero of The Professor of Desire or those in connection with the visit to Kafka's graveside will be discussed in detail.

The novel starts by introducing Herbie Bratasky, a conspicuous person, the jack-of-all-trades of the Hungarian Royale. He functions as, among other things, the host, the bandleader, and the comic. Etymologically, "hoer" comes

from the German "beraht" and describes a "shining" person. Herbie does indeed have a warm and cordial personality. (Contrast, for instance, George, the gawky handyman, who is never called "Georgie.") Herbie is a hypocoristic diminutive formation, and as the invigorating social director he lives up to the expectations associated with his name.

"Brat" is a Slavic noun meaning "brother." The "-sky" suffix strongly enforces the masculine image of comradeship and brotherhood. However, Tuerk notes in his study of Jewish names in American literature that "-sky," with which many Jewish names end, influenced the creation of the derogatory term "kike."² But from a philological point of view, as the English "-er" denotes a noun, as, for instance, in mast-er, teach-er, but first of all in brother, so does "-sky" in Bratasky. Herbie Bratasky literally fulfills the role of the older brother David never had. He is not only adored and liked by the guests of the hotel, but he remains the connecting link between David and his family long after their paths have separated.

Roth introduces humorous names, also. For instance, Mr. Klotzer, by profession the soda water king of the region, is a favorite guest of the hotel. The German noun "Klotz" can be translated as "heavy" or "big." Mrs. Ke-

peš's description of Mr. Klotzer as the "heaviest guest" in the history of the Hungarian Royale most appropriately fits his onoma.³

Louis Jelinek, a homely philosophy major, is David's friend during his college years. Jelinek, also of Slavic origin, is a diminutive of "jelen" and means "deer;" Louis can be traced as the "experienced," the "knowledgeable." The character of Louis Jelinek is described in line with the meaning of his first as well as his family name. Long before the gay movement was sanctioned by advocates of the coming-out-of-the-closet philosophy, Louis Jelinek proudly revealed his sexual preference. For his outspoken philosophy, as well as for his way of life, Jelinek becomes the target of the FBI. However, he is a "knowledgeable deer" and cleverly escapes the arrow of the hunter. David Kepesh always felt "pitifully banal" in Jelinek's presence and admired the supremacy of his personality, which enabled him "to look down on the entire world."⁴ Philip Roth obviously implies the complex entity of mythology, folklore, and literary metaphor commonly associated with the deer motif.

To the group of Slavic names belongs the onoma of Mr. Barbatnik. He is a survivor of a concentration camp and is Abe's best friend in his later years. His role in the

novel is to accompany Mr. Kepesh on his visit to David's summer house. However, his main function is to remind David of their mutual past. Barbatnik, although at home in this country, remains in attitude a Jewish refugee. His character is again very cleverly encompassed in his name. He is the stranger intruding into the idyllic summer, and because of his way of life reminds David of his plebeian Jewish roots. The name Barbatnik can be traced back to the Greek **βαρβαρος**, meaning "stranger." According to Eric Partridge, "barbaros" was usually applied by the Greeks to those who did not speak their mellifluous tongue and it was also used to mimic the incomprehensible speech of strangers.⁵ Although, Mr. Barbatnik communicates in English, his soul belongs to the past; all his energy is devoted to the United Jewish Appeal. In the company of David Kepesh, the college professor, who claims to be an authority on Chekov, Mr. Barbatnik remains throughout the visit the undesirable alien. Thus, here again, Philip Roth's choice of the name precisely describes the central core of the hero, whose domineering character comes to the surface only when appropriately decamouflaged.

It is said of almost every post-Goethean German writer that he had to come to terms with the opus of the Olympian. That is, in the final analysis, every writer had to decide

to be pro or contra Goethe. The same principle can be applied to Philip Roth. In his case it is Kafka, the most controversial German writer of our time, with whom Roth has an encounter. From an onomastics point of view, it is obviously of great significance that Kepesh and Kafka start with the same initial and that their names show the same construction. Both have as their components two vowels and three consonants. Professor Kepesh's attitude reveals the well-known Kafka-Roth syndrome. It might perhaps be of some interest to point out here that Kafka was forty years old when he wrote his famous short story, "The Hunger Artist," and that Roth was the same age when he wrote his fictional essay, "I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting, or, Looking at Kafka," in which the main hero is a shy teacher from New Jersey "named, significantly enough, Dr. Franz Kafka," as also mentioned by Pinsker.⁶ It is of some additional interest to note that while the teacher's aunt's name was Rhoda, Kafka's girl was called Dora. The verisimilitude of the names is obvious.

David Kepesh, perhaps more than any other hero of Roth's, either admires Kafka or wishes to be "de-Kafkafied" -- so very wittily expressed by the protagonist himself. Kepesh teaches Kafka; he even tries to imitate his writing. Pierre

Michel, moreover, claims that Roth's fiction actually "out-Kafkas Kafka."⁷ Dervin, too, accentuates the Roth-Kafka-affinity⁸ by attesting that Kepesh (here referred to the synonymously named protagonist) of The Breast, wakes up one morning to find he has turned into a female breast during the night. The analogy to Kafka's cockroach metamorphosis becomes quite apparent.

The culmination of David's European journey is reached in Prague at Kafka's graveside. The "de-Kafkafication" of Kepesh reaches its climax in the old Jewish cemetery at Kafka's tomb, where the common denominator of their Austro-Hungarian-Jewish past becomes the center of focus. Names such as Levy, Goldschmidt, Schneider, and Hirsch on gravestones surrounding Kafka's remind him of his own past. Kepesh recalls that relatives and guests at the Hungarian Royale had similar names, and he realizes that the intricate pattern of his own past can be deciphered here. At Kafka's graveside, his own roots, as well as his struggle for survival, becomes evident. Kepesh realizes that his erotic pursuits are not isolated instances in his struggle for existence but are age-old and are interwoven just as past and present are. Kepesh tries to free himself of his nostalgically cumbersome past by placing a pebble on Kafka's gravestone. Still

full of guilt feelings, however, he emphasizes that he has never before performed this religious ritual, even for his mother. Symbolically, with this gesture of tradition, Kepesh atones for his guilt and simultaneously uses it to rid himself of his burdensome Austro-Hungarian-Jewish past.

In Prague, Kepesh meets a professor by the name of Soska, who proudly shows him Kafka's city. The professor's name again strikingly resembles that of Kafka. Both names demonstrate the same construction: CVCCV. But etymologically, the name hides much more. Soska is a Czech noun which is the diminutive of "philistine." Soska's descriptive name is demonstratively illustrated by his cowardly behavior. Although Roth attributes to him liberal views, Professor Soska's behavior demonstrates the opposite. This becomes particularly evident in his refusal to accompany David Kepesh to Kafka's grave.

But Soska can also be associated with "proboscis," the snoutlike feeding organ of an insect, and the allusion to Kafka's "ungeheures Ungeziefer" (enormous vermin), called Samsa, of the famous short story, "The Metamorphosis," can easily be detected in his name. Moreover, the CVCCV construction must again be stressed.

A second highlight of the Prague trip is a hilarious dream in which David pays a visit to Kafka's ex-whore,

called Eva. If for no other reason but for her name, Eva lives up to the image embedded in her onoma - the eternal mother of all living creatures. Without any inhibitions she invites David to examine the most intimate part of her body, claiming that "it might hold some literary interest" for him.⁹

As seen so far, Roth loves to coin appropriately fitting names for his heroes, particularly for those whose sexual appetites are most titillatingly described. Brigitta Svanstrom, for instance, is sent by her parents to London to improve her English. Instead of taking courses in philology at a London university, she devotes all her time to a study of David's anatomy. She literally lives up to her coined name. The Swedish noun "svans" means "tail," and "strom" stands for "stream" or "flow." The picturesque sexual connotation implied in the name Svanstrom is quite obvious throughout the entire novel. Brigitta, with her unlimited sexual appetite, her youthful body, and her wild lasciviousness, is a constant sexual inspiration of David's copious ejaculations. Needless to say, her first name, meaning "strength," is a cleverly chosen accompaniment to a sexually unfathomable female.

Elisabeth Elverskog is Brigitta's roommate and a

promiscuous partner of this three-way sexual arrangement. Elverskog's onomastic disrobing matches that of Svanstrom's. "Elve" means a "junior learner," and "skog" can be translated as "wood." A superficial interpretation based on Elisabeth's sexual behavior could perhaps be summarized as the eager student whose body is not made of wood. But by adding a bit of an etymological twist to her name, "skoj" brings out the lust, the passion, the sexual desire in which Elisabeth delights. The Hebrew meaning of her first name, "God hath sworn," is also encompassed in her passionate behavior. She swears to God to love David "the favored, the lovable" forever. Elisabeth and Brigitta are ideal sexual partners for our professor-of-desire-to-be. But as David's academic training is not yet finished, so also is his apprenticeship-in-love limited. The expiration of his London fellowship puts an end to this enviable harem.

After "doubting-hoping-wanting-and-fearing," David marries Helen Baird, a nice girl from Pasadena, California. But he soon learns that not only her name, but her total life, is a saga no "bard" can match. It spans the Far East from Nepal to Singapore, from the China Sea to Bangkok, and includes not only her fifty passionate love affairs but also tales of homosexuals and dope addicts. Helen soon

reveals her true nature and becomes the femme fatale in David's life. The love of the high priestess of Eros of six years (note the allusion to sex) ends in emptiness, dope, and drunkenness. David's only wish is to be "de-Helenized" as fast as possible to overcome the horrifying impotence created by this erotic wilderness.

David is aware that he needs help and that he needs it fast. He turns to Dr. Frederick Klinger, a psychiatrist, whose assistance he hopes will help him overcome his spiritual despair and his physical impotence. But Frederick, the "peace-ruler," is unable to understand David's turmoil and, as implied in "Klinge" (sword or blade), is only able to defend his own point of view. "Eine gute Klinge führen" figuratively means to hold on to one's own. Indeed, Dr. Klinger does hold on to his theories - but so does David cling to his point of view.

As Kliman points out, Roth loves to play with rich connotative meanings.¹⁰ In Portnoy's Complaint, for instance, the principal character's psychiatrist is called Dr. Spielvogel, meaning "performing or playing bird." The chosen names, according to Bettelheim, indicate that the doctors are not Americanized, that they are probably Jewish, and that they are not assimilated into the fabric of our society. Although Roth's heroes try to be assimi-

lated, they go for help to those who themselves are unassimilated.¹¹ Michel notes that the figures of the psychoanalysts reappear like ghosts in Roth's novels but claims that "they have a significant, though unexpected function: that of the chorus."¹²

What Dr. Klinger could not accomplish was achieved by the next female in David's life: Claire Ovington, a loving and orderly young teacher. David was captured by Claire's uncomplicated personality and enthusiastically describes her as the most extraordinary "ordinary" person he has ever met.¹³ Etymologically, her first name can be derived from the Latin "clarus" (clear): hence her poised, coolheaded nature. Ovington, her family name, is an ordinary English surname fittingly chosen to describe an "ordinary" character.

The novel ends with an idyllic summer spent by David and Claire in the Catskill Mountains in a cottage located near the former Hungarian Royale. During his father's visit, the importance of the former name of the hotel is discussed. Abe Kepesh claims that it was the biggest mistake made by the present owner to change the name of an established enterprise. Hugh Hefner (an obvious allusion to Playboy's Hugh M. Hefner), the new owner, insists that in today's day and age, he cannot call a chic ski hotel

The Hungarian Royale and expect to do a big business. Changes of time demand changes of name. Once again, the integral relationship of David's Hungarian-Jewish past and present is measured against a person's outstanding characteristic - his name, which expresses his background and roots.

Basically, the problem is if David Kepesh is "able" (note that "kepes" means "able") to throw away the comforting crutch of his Austro-Hungarian past and make it on his own in the New World. Or will he cling to the past as his father clings to the name of his hotel?

Imaginative writers denominate their protagonists with precise descriptive (although often camouflaged) names by focusing on their most outstanding characteristics. David Kepesh seems to be such a creation presented by the author in the artistic embodiment of The Professor of Desire. Roth has not only created David in the biblical sense "after God's own heart as the favored" but also as a prototype of a modern protagonist who is "able" to survive the erotic wilderness of our time. To survive in an alien world, David, the hero, does not have "to carry his family on his back," as Malin so very appropriately rephrases Kafka's burden;¹⁴ neither does he have to burn the bridge connecting past to present. On the contra-

ry, by conquering the fear created by the shadow of his own genealogy, the protagonist becomes the "hero" by overcoming the difficulties inherent in the roots of his forefathers. Thus, the burdensome past does not have to linger over David's existence as it did over his father's. David is aware that it will eventually disintegrate through an intricate pattern of assimilation, just as the historical elements disappeared into the bygone aura of the Danube monarchy. At the end of the novel David Kepesh appears as a seasoned scholar quite at ease with his surrounding, although still, at heart, a bit of an elegist.

Although Roth's tone is comical, nevertheless, he deals, as pointed out by Bluestein, with two of the most serious topics: sex and identity.¹⁵ David's process of assimilation is shown most strikingly by a single factor, which is the dominant leitmotif of the novel: he prefers non-Jewish females as partners in his sexual encounters. This is expressed quite demonstratively by their Anglo-Saxon names. In his sexual fantasy he might have desired a Ms. Kathie Steiner or a Mrs. Deborrah Schönbrunn; but his robust libido was restored each time by a non-Jewish sexual partner!

In summary: although Kafka once had a strong influence on David Kepesh, this dominance appears to have faded a

bit. While still haunted by the seriousness of a gloomy and repudiating past, David Kepesh awakens from his kafkaesque dream and tries to cope with the realities of his own time. He lives up to his cleverly coined and quite appropriately descriptive name; deracinated somewhat, he does not try to replant the plucked-up roots but melts into the assimilated existence. He survives as a capable grain placed among sheaves of picturesque anthroponyms in a field of well-planted onomastics.

Elizabeth M. Rajec

City College of New York

NOTES

1. Kálmán, Béla, The World of Names: A Hungarian Onomatology. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977, p. 73.
2. Tuerk, Richard, "Jewish Names in Literature: The Americanization of Mr. Finkelstein," Ethnic Names. Edited by Fred Tarpley. Commerce, Texas, Names Institute Press, 1978, p. 10.
3. Roth, Philip, The Professor of Desire. New York, Farrar, 1977, p. 32.
4. Ibid., p. 18.
5. Partridge, Eric, Name This Child: A Dictionary of Modern British and American Given or Christian Names. 3rd ed., rev., and much enl. London, Hamilton, 1951, p. 50.
6. Pinsker, Sanford, "Guilt as Comic Idea: Franz Kafka and the Postures of American-Jewish Writing," Journal of Modern Literature, 6 (1977), p.470.
7. Michel, Pierre, "Philip Roth's: Reductive Lens: From 'On the Air' to 'My Life as a Man'," Revue des langues vivantes, 42 (1976), p. 511.
8. Dervin, Daniel A.
"Breast Fantasy in Barthelme, Swift, and Philip Roth: Creativity and Psychoanalytic Structure," American Imago, 33 (1976), p. 106.
9. Roth, op. cit., p. 191.
10. Kliman, Bernice W., "Names in 'Portnoy's Complaint'," Critique, Studies in Modern Fiction, 14 (1973), no. 3, p. 19.
11. Bettelheim, Bruno, "Portnoy Psychoanalyzed," Midstream, 15 (June-July 1969), p. 4.
12. Michel, Pierre, "What Price Misanthropy? Philip Roth's Fiction," English Studies, 58 (1977), p. 236.

13. Roth, op. cit., p. 160.
14. Malin, Irving, "Looking at Roth's Kafka; or Some Hints About Comedy," Studies in Short Fiction, 14 (1977), p. 273.
15. Bluestein, Gene, "Portnoy's Complaint: The Jew as American," Canadian Review of American Studies, 7 (1976), p. 66.