

WHY STUDY NAMES IN LITERATURE?

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Tonight¹ we are about to ease ourselves into the Ninth Annual Conference on Literary Onomastics, and as far as I am concerned, the first eight conferences, of which I have been able to attend six, have a lot to answer for, especially the first; for until our colleagues at the State University College at Brockport decided to promote an annual gathering exclusively devoted to the investigation of names in literature, I had never seriously contemplated that field of research. Until 1973, I had been, both by training and by inclination, for more than two decades fascinated by place names, particularly river names, and their potential value as evidence for linguistic stratification and settlement history. The meeting of June 11 and 12, 1973, presented a new and stimulating challenge, i.e. to attempt an extension of my interest in the nature, function and use of names to an aspect of onomastic research which was at that time beginning to shape into a discrete, valid, and recognizable area of scholarly endeavor - the study of names in literature or, if you want to give it its respectable, scientific title, Literary Onomastics.

Ever since then - for almost ten years now - that field of research has held my attention. The initial challenge to roam more widely intellectually and to be more innovative in my scholarship has become an addiction. Succumbing to it, I have looked at names

in traditional ballads, I have examined the place names of those two English counties of the mind, Wessex and Barsetshire, I have played with names in the literary landscapes created not only by Thomas Hardy, Anthony Trollope, Angela Thirkell, and William Golding, but also by George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Emily and Anne Brontë, and Sir Walter Scott, as well as the fictions regarding desert islands - Defoe, the two Wyss, Jules Verne, Captain Merryat, R.M. Ballantyne, Johann Gottfried Schnabel, James Fenimore Cooper, and I have scrutinized the ways in which names are deployed and employed in early New England literature and by such modern authors as Edmund Wilson, Robert Kroetsch, and Robertson Davies. I have explored literary names as verbal icons, as structuring features in the recollected landscape of autobiographical writing and of travelogues, and as devices to make identity possible and facilitate recognition; and as far as I can see, there is no end to that craving yet. I can no longer read a work of literature of any kind and on any level without being deeply conscious of the names of its characters and locations, and of the fashion in which they work together, intertwine, bounce off each other to produce what I like to think of as a text within a text, an onomastic web, a subtly displayed pattern in the artfulness of textured verbal tapestry.²

For me, the last eight or nine years have therefore been a pleasant, exciting voyage of discovery and revelation and, if the first seven volumes of Literary Onomastics Studies (LOS) are anything to go by, there have been many congenial fellow passengers on this

onomastic "love boat," probing, testing, searching, questing, exploring a plethora of chosen, in all likelihood favorite, authors for evidence of the deployment and function of names in literary contexts - librettos by Gilbert, novels by Gabriel García Marquez, Benito Pérez Galdós, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, André Gide, Thomas Mann, Victor Hugo, Zane Grey, Pio Baroja, William Faulkner, Thomas Pynchon, Emile Zola, Honoré de Balzac, Raymond Chandler, George Meredith, Dashiell Hammett, Philip Roth, Herman Melville, Albert Camus, Ian Fleming, Cervantes, John Gardner, Juan Rulfo, Rabelais, Gudiño Kieffer, plays by Chekhov, Shakespeare, Beckett, Albee, Ionesco, Peter Shaffer, Boris Vian, and Frank Wedekind, the poetry of Melville, Milton, Lorca, Fernando Pessoa, Hart Crane, Carl Sandburg, Sir Philip Sidney, William Carlos Williams, and Walt Whitman, short stories by Fitz-James O'Brien and Flannery O'Connor, the writings of Hans Henny Jahn, Saint Teresa, Franz Kafka and Voltaire, Norse sagas, the Gilgamesh epic, Beowulf, Sanskrit literature, Esperanto authors, comic strips, Hispanic literature in general and the Spanish picaresque novel in particular, films, science fiction, slave narratives, black poetry, popular literature and the Awntyrs off Arthure. An impressive, kaleidoscopic array, one might say, of genres, authors, periods, nationalities and languages - certain proof of honest academic engagement with the onomastic stuff that literature is made on. The good ship Onoma cruising in the oceans of literary creative endeavor.

But why this sudden and persistent upsurge of interest in the

study of names in literature? Is it enough to say that a new annual conference devoted to the subject and an annual journal derived from it are sufficient explanation because they have offered tempting opportunity to publicize and to publish where there was little stimulus before? Surely, the organizational concentration of interest and effort, however valuable, and however suggestive, can only be ancillary, secondary to the real intellectual movement behind it, must largely be effect and not cause. What, then, are the more profound impulses which prompt the study of names in literature? Perhaps a brief survey of motivations, aspirations, comments and conclusions culled from the same seven volumes of Literary Onomastics Studies can provide at least a hint of an answer. These are some of the things my fellow passengers have said about their expectations and their discoveries between 1973 and 1980 - first a selection of their expressions:

- I,1 "It is the purpose of this study to consider the feasibility of applying onomastic methodology to the diffusion of myth..."
- I,74 "Our purpose is to establish some basic aspects and functions of proper names in his novels."
- I,105 "...a definitive study of character names ... would elucidate major aspects of their works, serving as a magnifying glass."
- I,106 "...it should be legitimate to approach such criticism of literature through the use authors make of the names of persons, places, and things."

- II,84 "...these names will serve as an introduction to the problems of translating names in ancient texts; and also an indication of the way names deeply effect [sic!] a narrative line and the concept of character in a literary work."
- II,157 "The main thing I have tried to show in this paper is that the names of characters play important roles in the three novels chosen for discussion."
- III,33 "I wish ... to highlight the interpretations of his writings which have already been done, and to show that an onomastic approach cannot only illuminate and substantiate these interpretations, but can also throw light on his biography and writing technique."
- III,34 "It is my contention that the analysis of names in literature, though an interesting pursuit in its own right, becomes more significant and fruitful when seen in the context of a broader interpretation of the structure and symbolism of a literary work."
- III,34 "For me, an investigation of the names in literature is not an end in itself, but rather a means for getting at some of the central preoccupations of the author and the essential characteristics of his works."
- III,110 "[The author's] themes and images are often reinforced through onomastic devices."
- III,124 "As for names in his fiction, [the author] could never be dubbed painstaking ... Yet an investigation of names in his work proves rewarding."

- IV,1 "The customs, folk etymologies, and the secret power encoded in them, makes the study of names an exciting adventure."
- IV,65 "The aim of this paper is to show that [the author], in his novel ... uses names ... as a technique in two ways: first, to situate each character in its particular literary tradition ..., and, secondly, to indicate ... the characters' condition as marginal men, in a literary and social sense."
- IV,98 "We shall attempt to prove that in [the author's] poetry there is a prismatic perception of reality, perception which is dispersed and reflected through the three heteronyms."
- V,154 "... emphasis will be on the contribution of onomastics to the universal meaning of the book."
- VI,43 "... An examination of the [author's] ingenious use of names and epithets in the novel should illustrate this point."
- VI,67 "... to demonstrate that the ... writer was well acquainted with the technique of employing names to set forth many of his one-dimensional characters."
- VI,131 "... an opportunity to examine a unique feature of literary onomastics: that is, the relationship between the autobiographical name and the more fictional name."
- VI,230 "... my analysis of some of the names may go beyond what [the author] knew or intended. If the analysis helps in understanding the novel, however, ..."

VI,247 "... the critic should seek the meaning of the names under which [the author] exhibits his characters. ..."

VI,261 "... literary onomastics ... how an examination of names and the way in which they reflect or expand the author's intentions can add to our understanding and appreciation of a work of literature."

VII,177 "... If we look at [the author's] characters we encounter a variety of names."

I have deliberately stripped this selection of quotations, culled from the introductory passages of papers published in the first seven volumes of LOS, of references both to authorship and to the writers and works studied, in order to show how little the intentions and expectations vary, whether the work under consideration is a Spanish picaresque novel or a modern American play. It is perhaps a little unfair to do so and to give, through such bland quotations, the impression of rampant repetitiveness when, of course, the papers in question were published over a period of several years and were not all presented at any one conference or published in any one volume. It is not my purpose, anyhow, to chide any of the scholars for their intentions which are altogether legitimate and worth pursuing, sometimes even exciting. What I am trying to demonstrate is that our expectations are not bold and imaginative enough but far too limited, as long as they are confined to establishing an author's credentials and competence as an onomastic strategist, or to sifting and classifying the categories of names displayed in a particular

work. It is not surprising therefore that many of the resulting discoveries are equally limited:

- I,63 "[The author's] humorous names for his characters are also among those important few strokes, which add certain shadings and nuances to his elusive pictures."
- I,72 "... [the author] has used names in their traditional symbolic and allegorical as well as semantic interpretation, ... to name appropriately the personages of his novels."
- I,82 "... literary names are not arbitrary..."
- II,32 "Onomastics ... helps the critic to appreciate how [the author] uses natural situations to convey a sense of reality ..."
- II,50 " ... examining biblical names in [this work] has direct significance for a recognition of [the author's] citation of their meanings, for an understanding of ironic and deeper texture, for a mythic context, sometimes arising from the Bible, and for a realization that, explicitly or implicitly [the author] enhances his message and art by word-play on names."
- II,131 "On the whole [the author's] use of names in his first novel already shows a high degree of artistic refinement."
- II,157 "The main thing I have tried to show in this paper is that names of characters play important roles in the three novels chosen for discussion. The authors naturally give their positive characters good, sincere and meaningful names."

Negative characters have funny, ironical or ridiculous names.

- III,32 "The narrator consciously used fiction when he explained an already existing place name."
- III,117 "[The author's] use of names appropriate for the images and themes of his narrative thus seems quite evident. His onomastics is an integral part of his literary technique and his quest for perfection."
- III,142 "As far as names in literature are concerned, surely the study of names in [this author's] fiction is worthwhile."
- IV,29 "[The author] employed nomenclature that could identify a specific aspect of character in an individual, set against the background of the ... countryside."
- IV,60 "[The author's] names thus rarely seem accidental, but provide a wealth of puns, metaphors, jokes, learned mystifications, Biblical allusions, and scatological references."
- IV,76 "... [the author] uses the names of his characters to reaffirm the idea that literary creation is, in the modern world, the re-creation of the old and the conquest of the new."
- IV,93 "For [this author], a name implies character, but it is neither simple nor fixed ... any name may contain more than one meaning and project more than one destiny ..."
- IV,127 "Her names for God show the desire to begin rather than to conclude. A name may too easily set limits ... "

- V,8 "Thus we have profited from a close look at names in a minor Victorian book of verse."
- V,46 "In general, the names of super heroes have some relationship to their particular powers, origins, or characters, and correlate with their costumes and, on occasion, appearance."
- V,64 "[The author] uses names both ways, overtly and covertly, to economize artistically on simile, metaphor, symbol, and allegory. Each of his novels ... is structured around names, both place and personal ... "
- V,217 "Thus the role of onomastics is significant in the development of [the author's] themes and is of considerable importance for an understanding of his works."
- V,230 "Thus [the author's] use of names is an integral part of his fictional technique."
- VI,13 "Without any doubt, the use of place names represents an important aspect of [this author's] artistry."
- VI,28 "Thus [the author's] onomastic devices, which are often unusual and sometimes obscure, nevertheless contribute to the artistic and symbolic interpretation of his work."
- VI,48 "[The author's] use of names and epithets in this novel is clearly not a stylistic accident, but an important tool in the narrator's exposure of the weaknesses of his characters."
- VI,119 "... naming is very much a conscious part of his art."
- VI,143 "I think it clear that [the author], in his fiction, chose names that tend to make his villains a lot more evil and

his heroes more elegant and admirable; to invest in personal names the function of reinforcing his perceptions of good and evil, ... and to use names of ironic editorializing."

VII,51 "The examples will suffice to illustrate the conditions and manner in which names become the center of gravity, so to speak, of much of discourse, fictional or otherwise."

VII,65 " ... [The author's] choice of names is generally appropriate and often very amusing. His names do not appear to have been chosen at random or without purpose, and they contribute in no small measure to the effectiveness of his satire."

VII,84 "This character ... lives up to his cleverly coined and quite appropriately descriptive name ..."

VII,105 "Onomastics for [this author] is ... not merely an ornamental device, but is the most vital aspect of her art."

VII,187 "It is fascinating to see how the study of names permits us to analyze in a more complete way [the author's] literary work. The names of the characters seem to fall right into place with the rest of his philosophy, reflecting the same unity and diversity constantly present in his art."

VII,265 "[The author] is a true master of the onomastic technique, using it with wit and sharpness to provide additional perspectives of his characters."

These are just some samples of conclusions reached in at least

thirty-one of the papers presented so far at these conferences. Naturally, they vary in quality and insight, as well as in articulateness, but it is not my purpose to quarrel with any one of them, in this context. What does become abundantly clear, however, is that the stated findings are essentially determined by the stated expectations, and that, if the latter are bland, the former are bound to be equally pedestrian. These samples also speak to Len Ashley's comments of two years ago when he observed that "we go on multiplying examples" and that "it is time for us to analyze our analyses and formulate methodologies and theories."³ I am in full agreement, as a result of this survey, with his first statement but I am not so sure whether we are ready for the second task; for what the examples cited and the papers perused also indicate - and I think that this is a much more serious matter - is our lack of wide-angle vision and the absence of a sense of comparison. It is, in fact, a rare and quite refreshing occurrence when Arthur Beringause, in his study of Shmuel Yosef Agnon's Soil of the Land of Israel, states that "like Faulkner, Agnon is artistically serious in his treatment of names. As in the works of Faulkner, names identify cousins, relatives, and friends in various stories, and serve as guideposts to motifs, symbols, and themes."⁴ Most scholars seem to be so preoccupied with the "onomastic strategies" and the "attitudes to names" of their own chosen authors that they fail to consider whether another author's "strategies" or "attitude" might be illuminatingly helpful, either through similarity or contrast. "Dickensian" and "Shakespear-

ean" seem to be the only comparative and evaluative epithets that investigators tend to use to describe their author's usage, but otherwise comparisons are hardly ever present, not even by implication.

What is perhaps even more significant and, to my mind, disappointing is the observation that we do not seem to be listening to each other or not to be reading each other's publications; for in the first seven volumes of LOS there is hardly a cross-reference to anybody else's work (Len Ashley is a noble and almost unique exception). I have the feeling that disregard of each other's work is not the result of disrespect but rather of preoccupied neglect. But are not papers read to be heard and articles published to be read? If I had the opportunity to use the P.A. system of the good ship Onoma ploughing through the seven seas of literature, I would therefore tell my fellow passengers something like this:

(1) Let us be more mindful of each other's work and benefit from the thinking and the conclusions of other scholars in our discipline, not just within the context of this conference but also in the framework of national and international scholarship, for in certain other countries, too, the study of names in literature has begun to excite scholars.

(2) Let us be less concerned with what Literary Onomastics can do for the study of literature and let us be more attuned to what it can do for the study of names.⁵

(3) Let us put less emphasis on taxonomics, categories and lists, and let us pay more attention to the ways in which authors speak to

their readers through names and constellations of names. Let us be less mesmerized by the products and more aware of the processes.

(4) Let us be more subtle, precise, delicate, well, yes, more elegant in communicating our ideas and in reporting our glimpses into literary onomastic workshops.

Would such adhortation help us to study names in literature better, or at least give us a more compelling reason for that study? Obviously, it is my hope that it will, but in the meantime I am not so sure that the real answer to the question "Why Study Names in Literature?" does not lie somewhere else, at least for me. Does it not perhaps rather lie in the pleasure of occasionally and revealingly discovering in the course of one's reading that the creative authors whom we try to analyze and interpret are in some disconcerting way ahead of us in the onomastic game and know not only their craft but also the whole business of names much better than we, their interpreters, do?

In order to illustrate this point let me give you, in conclusion, two examples which delighted me when I first came across them and which I have savored ever since. In the first chapter of his novel Die Geschwister von Neapel, translated into English as The Pascarella Family,⁶ the German novelist Franz Werfel introduces the reader to the several children of the family portrayed by commenting on their names and personalities:⁷

It is sometimes claimed that the name of a person stands in profound relationship to his nature. Maybe this is

mere thought play, maybe such an inter-penetration of person and designation really happens - in the case of the brothers and sisters Pascarella at least the names were quite well suited to their bearers. Iride had the glistening and the unreliability of the rainbow, Lauro the gentleness and the dark stillness of the laurel. And Gracia was well derivable from the graces or from grace. But here this rash allegory has already to come to an end. For, even with the best will in the world it is not possible to bring the other three into harmony with their names, without torturous constructions. Ruggiero, the youngest and liveliest brother, who attended commercial school, bore at least a nickname, "Orso," bear, through which his astonishing physical powers and their clumsy application found expression. But after what ministering and humble saint would Annunziata have to be called, since she had to carry the whole burden of the order imposed by her father? As the eldest, she was responsible for the running of the household. But not only that. As she had overtaken the others by far in years, her own path seemed to be already on the decline, without fulfillment. For some months her face had taken on a repellent pallor and leanness. If Placido had indeed been named after the Roman general Placidus,

then the theory of the kinship between name and character stands on very shaky foundations. For Placido was absolutely no man of action but a poet.

Would it be fair to say that Werfel might well have smiled at those name scholars who claim, on the basis of plausible examples, that the names which author X gives to his characters are "appropriate" and that such names are an "integral" part of his art? Is there not delectable irony in discovering the analyst analyzed and the interpreter interpreted and perhaps proved smilingly just a little off the right track?

The other example comes from Faulkner's Light in August and is more than just knowing comment on our onomastic endeavor; it provides one of its very foundations:⁸

The newcomer turned without a word. The others watched him go down to the sawdust pile and vanish and reappear with a shovel and go to work. The foreman and the superintendent were talking at the door. They parted and the foreman returned. 'His name is Christmas,' he said.

'His name is what?' one said.

'Christmas.'

'Is he a foreigner?'

'Did you ever hear of a white man named Christmas?' the foreman said.

'I never heard of nobody a-tall named it,' the other said.

And that was the first time Byron remembered that he had ever thought how a man's name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can be somehow an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning in time. It seemed to him that none of them had looked especially at the stranger until they heard his name. But as soon as they heard it, it was as though there was something in the sound of it that was trying to tell them what to expect; that he carried with him his own inescapable warning, like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle. Only none of them had sense enough to recognize it. They just thought that he was a foreigner...

Not "just the sound for who he is," not just name as identification, then, but carrying its very essence "like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle." Can any of us claim that a lifetime of research could have come up with a more convincing definition of what a name is, and how it is omen and portent as well as label? That is why, although I fully support and am personally committed to, recent demands for greater rigor in our discipline, for higher standards, for more articulated theory, and for a satisfactory methodology, I would also just as strongly urge greater sensitivity, and more, well, more love, certainly at least more sympathy and more understanding, even more vulnerability, so that we will no longer

be smugly content with dissecting the names we study and with exposing them to the cold glare of the arc-lamps of science and to the invasion of the microscope, but that sometimes we will cup our hands around them to enjoy their beauty and their fragrance, or beat them with a stick to eliminate their serpentine hurt or venom. For names are that, too, aren't they, promise and threat, caress and bruise, delight and dismay, healing and destruction.

Perhaps, for me, that is the most important reason why I study names in literature.

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NOTES

¹This paper was first read as an after-dinner address at the opening of the Ninth Annual Conference of Literary Onomastics Studies, on June 1, 1981. Despite a thorough revision, I have not tried to conceal the tone which this original presentation asked for.

²The published outcome of this self-confessed addiction consists of the following (so far): "Place-Names in Traditional Ballads," Folklore 84 (1973) 299-312, reprinted with slight revisions in Literary Onomastics Studies (LOS) 1 (1974) 84-102; "Names as Verbal Icons," Names 22 (1974) 104-110; "The Place-Names of Wessex," LOS 2 (1975) 58-82; "The Place-Names of Barsetshire," LOS 3 (1976) 1-21; "Desert Island Onomastics," LOS 5 (1978) 110-151; "Recognition and Identity: Place Names as Keys and Disguises in the Regional Novel," Onomastica 53 (June 1978) 1-9; "Ordering the Chaos: Name Strategies in Robert Kroetsch's Novels," Essays in Canadian Writing 11 (Summer 1978) 55-65; "The Toponymy of Literary Landscapes," LOS 6 (1979) 75-104; "Literary Names as Text: Personal Names in Sir Walter Scott's Waverly," Nomina 3 (1979) 29-39; "'When I First Remember Talcottville ...': Place Names in a Recollected Landscape," Names Northeast 1 (1979) 17-27; "Masks and Illusions: The Function of Names in Robertson, Davies' 'Deptford Trilogy'," Onomastica 58 (December 1980) 1-12; "Über Namen in der Literatur," Namenkundliche Informationen 38 (1980) 13-25; "Personal Names in Traditional Ballads: A Proposal for

a Ballad Onomasticon," Journal of American Folklore 94 (1981) 229-232; "Inverlochy: Place Names as Ruins," LOS 8 (1981) 27-38; "'A Colony for New England': New York Places and Their Names in Timothy Dwight's Travels in New England and New York," Names Northeast 2 (1980) 100-111; "Robinsons as Namers," The Scope of Names (ed. Fred Tarpley), South Central Names Institute Publications 7 (Commerce, Texas, 1981) 1-9.

³Leonard R.N. Ashley, "Names and Words, and Other Examples of the Possibilities of Expanding the Boundaries of Literary Onomastics," LOS 7 (1980) 3.

⁴A.F. Beringause, "Shmuel Yosef Agnon's Soil of the Land of Israel: An Onomastic Examination," LOS 2 (1975) 7.

⁵See also Ashley, loc. cit., 2: "... we have been talking in these conferences more about the literature and less about the onomastics than we ought."

⁶First published by Paul Zsolnay Verlag, Berlin, Germany in 1931; English editions: New York, Simon and Schuster, 1932, and Viking Press, 1935.

⁷Since the English edition has remained stubbornly unavailable to me, the passage which follows is my own translation from the German original (Chapter I).

⁸William Faulkner, Light in August, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1960, Chapter II, pp. 26-27. First published in 1932.