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USES OF NAMES IN FICTION

Ladies and Gentlemen,

this is a very special occasion for me, for three main reasons. In the first place, it is a great personal honour for me to have been invited by the organisers of this conference to address you today; secondly, the very fact that your Society exists and, in addition to its other activities, holds regular meetings like this one is tangible proof, if proof was needed, that the study of names in literature has, on a very sophisticated level, come of age; and thirdly, the unmistakable indication that, in the very act of extending special invitations to scholars from other countries to share their visions with you of what has internationally become known as “Literary Onomastics”, you are not limiting your own interests to national, regional, or parochial approaches and subject matters but keep looking beyond all sorts of imaginable boundaries. So much for the positive aspects. On the negative – or shall we say, less positive – side, my pleasure in being here today is strangely mingled, above all, with deep regret that I cannot speak to you in your own language and therefore come to you as an undeniable linguistic outsider with a different window on the world, but also with the humbling realisation that what I have to say may well be neither new nor informative to you and that, in addition to carrying the proverbial “Owls to Athens”, I am running the risk of imposing on myself the arduous but clearly redundant task of carrying souvenir-sized “Leaning Towers” to Pisa. Please, be patient with me for both these reasons.

From an autobiographical point of view – and people of my age have difficulty in disentangling personal concerns from matters of principle – my own involvement in the study of names in literature happily coincides with a tremendous growth in that field of study in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and if I were to trace the development and the shaping of my own attitudes towards, and preoccupations within that field, it would soon become apparent that these have largely mirrored what has been happening in the discipline as a whole; by that I mean a movement from an almost exclusive focus on the roles names play in

individual works by individual authors to the distillation of general, much less restricted and restrictive, essential principles (NICOLAISEN 1995b). Naturally, the initial focus has continued to be employed and must not be abandoned in its task of providing more and more evidence for more flexible, more open-minded, and more sophisticated approaches but even the investigation of onymic inventories as texts within literary texts has had to undergo, and has, I believe, already largely undergone, a shift from primarily descriptive methods to a much greater stress on analysis and interpretation.

Such changes have taken place parallel to what has been happening in onomastics in general, and the study of names in literature has benefited greatly from an ever-increasing awareness on the part of students of names of the urgent need for a deliberate, rigorous pursuit of theoretical issues and for a search for patterns and systems. More than anywhere else in this world of ours which is structured and made habitable by naming processes, is the fruitful notion of “onomastic fields” more acutely and persuasively applicable than in the realm of fiction (NICOLAISEN 1982). The widely accepted dictum that names thrive chiefly through their relationship with other names, whether in loose clusters or in more systemic groupings, and that consequently the notion of a single name is a *contradictio in adjecto* since identification relies as much on what something or someone is as on what they are not, experiences a special flowering in works of fiction. There may well be a small core to that fictive field around a central named protagonist, augmented by more peripheral characters, as well as a toponymically determined innermost setting supported or contrasted by named locations elsewhere but whether sparsely or lavishly displayed, both the names of people, i.e. the society of the fiction, and the names of places, i.e. the topography of the fiction, are severely limited, hardly ever including superfluous names which are not in some way or other related to relevant aspects of the unfolding story.

Such narratives do not usually encompass the world *per se* but a world selectively willed and named by an author; and it is this authorially controlled naming process and the nomenclature resulting from it that provide students of literary onomastics with the matter that guides and nurtures their particular – one might even say peculiar – intellectual endeavour. For this reason, it is imperative never to lose sight of this authorial, almost divine, creative act and commitment, in addition to other, fundamentally literary and onomastic factors, although situations may well arise in which an author’s control over his or her choice

of name is purely nominal. Take, for example, Sir Walter Scott's introductory statement at the very beginning of the very first chapter of the very first of his series of *Waverley Novels* (NICOLAISEN 1980):

The title of this work has not been chosen without the grave and solid deliberation which matters of importance demand from the prudent. Even its first, or general denomination, was the result of no common research or selection, although according to the example of my predecessors, I had only to seize upon the most sounding and euphonic surname that English history or topography affords, and elect it at once as the title of my work, and the name of my hero. But alas! what could my readers have expected from the chivalrous epithets of Howard, Mordaunt, Mortimer, or Stanley, or from the softer and more sentimental sounds of Belmour, Belville, Belfield, and Belgrave, but pages of inanity, similar to those which have been so christened for half a century past? I must modestly admit I am too diffident of my own merit to place it in unnecessary opposition to preconceived associations; I have, therefore, like a maiden knight with his white shield, assumed for my hero, WAVERLEY, an uncontaminated name, bearing with its sound little of good or evil, excepting what the reader shall hereafter be pleased to affix to it.

This statement may be read as a fledgling novelist's, i.e. a beginner's, conscientious though still groping attempt at getting it right first time with the choice of name for his first protagonist, the search for the 'white shield' and for lack of contamination or prejudice, but it will never do to underestimate, belittle or ignore altogether the ludic element in all this, the playful posturing, the sophisticated simplicity of the quest. This becomes apparent in Scott's seeming inability to bring his search to a successful conclusion when, in the course of the novel, Waverley is revealed as a genuine waverer, a straw in the wind, one whose indecision is a strong factor in moving the plot along. In contrast to the author's stated intentions, the shield is anything but white and the inherent, secret contamination of the name shapes the character who bears it, anticipating the potential reader's response to which Scott refers in his last sentence.

The fact that, in this instance, the author not only loses control over his carefully chosen name by mistakenly and hopelessly imbuing it with a kind of semantic neutrality but, as a consequence, also succumbs to its moulding forces in the development of the character for whose individuation he had purposefully selected it, should not lead us to the conclusion that in the world of fiction names are in general stronger than their authorial namers. As the example of Waverley demonstrates, such role reversal is more likely to occur when a name, deliberately or accidentally, displays, or is thought to display, lexical meaning.

It was, of course, the quest for the discovery of semantic transparency that set off early adventurers into the realm of names in literature, in the hope of making “redende Namen” (to use a German term) speak again. Undoubtedly, such names exist and must not be overlooked; it would, however, unduly and distortingly limit the analysis and interpretation of the function of literary names if it were to occupy itself solely with their re-lexicalisation, however tempting such an undertaking might be. The title of the presentation to which you are currently subjected was intentionally and, as Professor Porcelli knows, in a process of gradual emergence, chosen to reflect what, in my view, is not only the most significant but also the most fascinating facet of literary onomastics – the systematic search not for the meaning and not even for the role and function, but for the variety of uses to which names are put by authors in works of fiction. As in extra-literary or non-literary contexts, usage is the key element and driving force which characterises the very essence of names as tactical devices in the literary texts in which they are embedded and of which they are an integral part; it matters little whether that usage is iconic, emblematic, symbolic, metaphorical, typifying, representational, message bearing, ornamental, structural, or serves in one of the ways which I want to highlight in the following, as long as its treatment recognises the nature of names as names.

Before we head in that direction, it is only fair that I should declare my basic position regarding the status of names, especially with regard to their relationship to words, by which I mean the fundamental difference, sometimes even opposition, between lexical and onymic items, because this informs not only everything I have said so far but also what is to follow; without wishing to deny that words and names share several surface properties, although these are often language specific, I am convinced that both their chief function and their semantic status make it impossible to categorise names simply as a sub-class of words (NICOLAISEN 1976a; 1995a). Without going into detail, the function of words is, on the whole, connotative and therefore inclusive whereas names function denotatively or exclude as part of their individuating strategies. Semantically, words, in order to function adequately, must have lexical meaning whereas names, more often than not, do not have to mean lexically in order to fulfil their essential function but, despite their semantic opacity, must have onymic contents. The recovery of lexical meaning is therefore not necessarily the task of the student of names, including the student of names in literature, but usage based on

contents is. Names may, of course, have lexical meaning, frequently residually, in addition to onymic contents but the one does not of necessity influence or interfere with the other. So much for my onomastic credo! In the following I hope to show how these premises and suppositions enable or facilitate certain name uses in fictional contexts.

Even faced with the risk of being accused of stating the obvious and of delaying the real point of this presentation even further, I wish to reiterate the axiom that the investigation of names in individual works of fiction by individual authors will remain the backbone, the *sine qua non*, if you like, of all onomastic research in literary environments, as long as it is regarded as the necessary beginning and not the ultimate end of such endeavours. We cannot do without it but we must not limit ourselves to it. In that respect we have, as in so many other of our undertakings, the full support of the practising, name-conscious author, as Thomas Hardy, in the 1912 Preface to his novel *The Woodlanders*, first published in 1887, proves without a shadow of doubt (HARDY 1912):

I have been honoured by so many inquiries for the true name and exact locality of the hamlet 'Little Hintock', in which the greater part of the action of this story goes on, that I may as well confess here once for all that I do not know myself where that hamlet is more precisely than as explained above and in the pages of the narrative. To oblige readers I once spent several hours on a bicycle with a friend in a serious attempt to discover the real spot; but the search ended in failure; though tourists assure me positively that they have found it without trouble, and that it answers in every particular to the description given in this volume. At all events, as stated elsewhere, the commanding heights called 'High-Stoy' and 'Bubb-Down Hill' overlook the landscape in which it is supposed to be hid.

Note again the playfulness of his comments which assign the place names and the features they designate to the novel itself or to their rightful place 'within the covers of a book', as he expresses it elsewhere, when he refutes the claim made by readers that Christminster is identical with Oxford. Such denials on his part did, however, not prevent the growth of an "industry" in which local historians and literary critics alike vied with each other in their attempts to equate names in the fictitious landscapes of Hardy's fiction, in his Wessex, with names of places in the "real" world outside that fiction, thus creating the bizarre impression of two alternative nomenclatures one consisting of the original names, the other of their thinly disguised toponymic parodies. In order to avoid such simplistic thinking and procedural pitfalls, the attention we pay to Hardy's place names therefore has to be first

and foremost within their locus in their primary embeddedness, their literary “home” so to speak.

Please allow me at this point to insert a couple of illustrations which show some of the avenues which open up when one interrogates a text or a group of texts (like the works of an individual author) closely and without prejudice, simply asking the question ‘How does this particular author *use* names in this particular work or cluster of works?’ The answer to the question can be quite surprising if one is willing to be open-minded. Both my sets of findings are the result of recent research of mine which has not yet been published: a few years ago I decided to examine the uses of place names in some of the novels of the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, in connection with the commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of his death. Stevenson is one of the great storytellers of the nineteenth century, and most of you may be familiar with his tales of adventure, *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. While *Treasure Island* and the central role that the map of the Island plays in the tale are a rich source for name enthusiasts, I concentrated in my study on the latter, with the aim of paying special attention to the relationship between its inventory of place names and the progress of the story. Since these will form the substance of a separate paper (NICOLAISEN, in press), allow me to make only some summarising comments. When assessing the use of place names in *Kidnapped* it is important to realise that this novel is essentially the narrative of a journey. My former colleague at the State University of New York in Binghamton, the late John Gardner, author of, among others, *Grendel* and *The King’s Indian*, claimed that there are only two basic plots in the world: either someone goes on a journey, or a stranger comes into town. The plot of *Kidnapped*, like that of many other novels, is probably a mixture of both of these. Very much in the tradition of folktales, the journey in *Kidnapped* operates on two levels: on the surface, it takes the protagonist, one David Balfour, through actual landscapes in which trees are trees, streams are streams, rocks are rocks, and heather is heather. On a metaphorical level, on the other hand, David’s journey is a projection of his maturation, of a boy turning into a young man, of someone becoming who he is supposed to be, and since he cannot achieve this by himself – again a common folktale trait – he has a trickster helper by his side. On this journey which, like all journeys, is movement through space in time, place names, whether actual or invented but mostly the former, assist in the creation of a spatial framework, in mapping out the protagonist’s travels, in foregrounding as ad-

ventures the hazards and pleasures of growing up, of becoming oneself. In particular, they pace and space the journey he has undertaken, however unwillingly, mostly as destinations which become new points of departure: from Queensferry past Dysart north to the Northern Isles and then south again past Hebridean islands and west coast promontories to the Torran Rocks and Earraid, the Ross of Mull and Torosay. back to the mainland at Kinlochaline and through Appin and Glencoe and over Ben Alder, across Loch Errocht, past Loch Rannoch by Kippen to Balquhiddy, and in the end to Queensferry again.

These names which to most of you may sound as fictitious as those invented by Stevenson – and the fictionalisation of factual names which goes hand in hand with the fictionalisation of fictitious ones, may well be a theme worth exploring in another paper – are, at first glance, a static element in the narrative, designating location with definite, intersecting degrees of latitude and longitude, i.e. cartographically verifiable. In their fixity, they create a constant measurable space, an identifiable and recognisable topography, an important ingredient in what is often termed “setting”. There is nothing new about this observation, and if that were all I had to say on this subject, I would be wasting your time.

I do, however, want to take us one step further by suggesting that most of the place names incorporated in *Kidnapped* also have a dynamic dimension which not only moves the plot forward but also becomes a significant, active part of the plot itself, some helpful, some unhelpful, some kind, some cruel, and so on; thus they are condensations of key elements in landscapes that are actively involved in the journey upon which David Balfour and his helper have embarked. The semantics of this toponymic text, within the larger narrative one, exists independently of its lexical meaning, and it is practically irrelevant that the names Queensferry and Limekilns are English, Torosay and Eriskay Norse, and Coire na Ciche and Glencoe Gaelic. For the life of David Balfour they take on a meaning unconnected with their etymological roots, historical significance, or linguistic ascription, thus becoming the toponymic iconography of a journey in search of self, severely focused on the paraphernalia of living, of fear, promise, companionship, pain, obstacles to be overcome, hopes dashed or realised and ultimate rejoicing – all this, of course, within the literary artefact called *Kidnapped* and nowhere else.

In a curious, roundabout way, I found this usage of toponymic items confirmed in the novels of a Glasgow Jewish author, Chaim Bermant (1929-1998), although in his fictions place names are not so much land-

scape forming as stylistic devices to assist in the localisation of rites of passage which in Bermant's novels almost inevitably involve change of location, especially when young men and women cast their moorings in the parental harbour, or elderly persons move from a place of work to a place of retirement or into the loneliness of widowhood, such as a young rabbi moving from London to a place in Scotland, called Auchenbothor, or a retiree leaving London for Crocus Hill by the sea-side near Brighton. Sometimes repeated travel to and from a number of named places is required, and the linear progress, in addition to its obvious geographical dimensions, also turns into a means by which the plots are structured and consequently also the novels themselves. Even if a character's virginity is to be lost, home territory is an inappropriate setting, and he has to go to Frankfurt or she to Leeds, although this is understandably not the primary purpose of their journeys. As one of his Jewish characters, quoting a Talmudic saying, comments: «A change of Place is a Change of Fortune» (NICOLAISEN, forthcoming).

Both Stevenson and Bermant, like many other authors, take the risk of intermingling real and invented names. If successful, this onomastic strategy undoubtedly increases the degree of verisimilitude in the stories they tell but it also makes these narratives more vulnerable to misunderstandings and interference in the stimulation of audience responses insofar as the elusive reader may well bring his or her own interpretations to the contents of names she or he already knows in the "real" world. It is therefore well worth remembering that, as we have already hinted, all names and the places (or persons) they designate are fictitious in the products of creative writing, London as much as Auchenbothor or Crocus Hill, and it does not matter whether we see this process as an integration of the mappable world into a cartographic fiction or as an infiltration, a smuggling of fictional places into the interstices of the mappable world (NICOLAISEN 1983).

Not unrelated is the authorial tactic of expanding the intra-textual function of names into inter-textual usage by appropriating another author's names and their contents for one's own purposes. Two of the best known instances of this procedure are Angela Thirkell's 1930s persuasive adaptation of Anthony Trollope's *Barssetshire* (NICOLAISEN 1976b) and William Golding's conscious transfer of the names of the boy castaways in R.M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island* to the three protagonists of his *Lord of the Flies* (NICOLAISEN 1978). Inter-textuality may primarily be a literary concept but, in addition to intra-textuality and inter-contextuality, it is without a doubt also an onomastic one or is

often achieved with the aid of onomastic devices (NICOLAISEN 1986). Again, one can only comment within the framework of this paper on the desirability for further exploration of this fascinating topic.

I am very much aware of the fact that I have so far disappointed those of you who had expected from me a contribution to the main theme of this conference: the role of names in shorter fiction, especially in the short story. Permit me, therefore, to make at least partial amends by commenting in some depth on a story by the stylistic master craftsman, Graham Greene (GREENE 1982). As its title *Under the Garden* indicates, the narrative invites us to accompany, through the skilful use of fictions within fictions, a seven-year old boy in his imaginary adventures underneath the surface of the world, the garden, in which we live and have our being. In this subterranean world he encounters an old couple, he a crotchety old man, she an inarticulate woman with no roof to her mouth. In the course of a series of verbal interchanges (one can hardly call them conversations), the problematic nature of names comes up.

‘You can call me Javitt’, [the old man said], because it’s not my real name. You don’t believe I’d give up that, do you? And Maria’s not Maria – it’s just a sound she answers to, you understand me, like Jupiter.’ ‘If you had a dog called Jupiter, you wouldn’t believe he was really Jupiter, would you?’ ‘I’ve got a dog called Joe’ [said the boy]. ‘The same applies’ [said the old man] and drank his soup.

On a later occasion, Javitt, the man who never existed and whose name is not Javitt, brings up the subject of names again:

In the beginning you had a name only the man or woman knew who pulled you out of your mother. Then there was a name for the tribe to call you by. That was of little account, but of more account all the same than the name you had with strangers; and there was a name used in the family – by your pa and ma if it’s those terms you call them by nowadays. The only name without any power at all was the name you used to strangers. That’s why I call myself Javitt to you, but the name the man who pulled me out knew – that was so secret I had to keep his as a friend for life, so that he wouldn’t tell me because of the responsibility it would bring – I might let it slip before a stranger. Up where you come from they’ve begun to forget the power of a name. I wouldn’t be surprised if you only had the one name and what’s the good of a name everyone knows? Do you suppose even I feel secure here with my treasure and all – because, you see, as it turned out, I got to know the first name of all. He told it me before he died, before I could stop him, with a hand over his mouth. I doubt if there’s anyone in the world except me who knows the first name. It’s an awful temptation to speak it out loud – introduce it casually into the conversation like you might say by Jove, by George, for Christ’s sake. Or whisper it when you think no one’s attentive.

While this world below the garden is recognisable because it contains essentially the same features as the world above, their similarity is deceptive and superficial: what looks familiar and commonplace, is really full of otherness and enchantment. It offers experiences and provides confrontations never heard of in the world above. The world under the garden also confounds us if we regard names solely as words with peculiar additional properties; it is, to use the appropriate scholarly terminology, the world of the onomasticon in contrast to the world of the lexicon.

Continuing this line of thought, let me try to persuade you that Javitt's arguments, however befuddled or deliberately obfuscating they may seem at first hearing, are not far removed from those advanced in Plato's dialogue *Kratylos* which also concerns itself philosophically with the age-old question of the nature, function, and meaning of names. In a sense, they also, in their own maverick way, underpin John Searle's proposition of names as 'the speech act of identifying reference' (SEARLE 1969, 174). Calling Maria 'just a sound she answers to', Javitt denies, as Socrates does, any direct relationship between the name itself and the person who bears it. There is nothing inherent in the trisyllabic sequence MA-RI-A which means the old woman so called; in fact, unless traced back to the Biblical Miriam and then properly etymologized this sound sequence has no meaning whatsoever on the lexical level and therefore cannot function as a word; it is only provided with contents on an onomastic level, contents which might have been given utterance by virtually any sound sequence, as long as it essentially satisfies the basic cultural expectations and traditional qualities of a name suitable to call a girl by. The old woman could have been called Ruth, Margaret, Violet, Anna or any other name that fits the category, by those who named her, and she only is her name as much as we are, to the world at large, our clothes, our outward image, and to such an extent as we grow into our names, so to speak, in our lifetime, filling their sounds and spellings with the contents that is us.

The author's almost parenthetical reference to dogs called Jupiter and Joe helps to underline the fundamental thrust of Javitt's main argument by bringing into play – and I am using that term advisedly – the much neglected phenomenon of the intra-onomastic transfer of items which have already crossed the threshold from one name category to another, from lexicon to onomasticon – both Jupiter, the name of a divinity or planet, and Joe, the name of a human male, have become names of dogs. Practically everything, it would seem, is grist to the namer's mill.

Javitt's more than incidental reference to a person's tribal name, to his name used in the family, and that presented as a false front to strangers also casts legitimate doubt on the often voiced view that names identify uniquely under all circumstances, and serves as a reminder of how register-bound our names are and how important a role appropriateness plays in their application. Graham Greene, in the persona of Javitts, warns of the essential vulnerability which befalls us when anybody learns our real name – the Rumpelstiltskin syndrome, if you like; but perhaps we are not quite as unaware of the power of names as he claims, as long as we remember that it is knowing names that confers power, not understanding them, which is the job of the etymologist whose task it is to reduce names to the words they once were, divesting them of their onomastic contents and restoring their lexical meaning. So much for my token contribution to the literary onomastics of short stories.

How does one round off such a sequence of almost unconnected musings without leaving you justifiably dissatisfied. Lest someone else points it out first, let me declare my own realisation that by trying to say too much I have probably said too little. By that I mean that during the last fifty years of involvement with the study of names, half of this period with research into names in literature, I have discovered, in the sense of "uncovered", for myself so much that is fascinating, stimulating, revelatory about names that I have become almost too eager to convey my enthusiasm for all matters onomastic to others so that they, too, might share this enriching experience, without enquiring first whether you really want to have this enthusiasm thrust upon you instead of the sobriety of scholarly rigour. If, however, you have not been put off by my way of doing things, let me simply finish by saying that what we have highlighted in the last 45 minutes or so, are some of the uses of names in literature and by concentrating on usage have paid some passing attention to what is probably the most promising branch of name studies – socio-onomastics (NICOLAISEN 1985).

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