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LITERARY THEORY – AN ESSENTIAL TOOL
IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERARY ONOMASTICS?

Abstract. The purpose of this essay is to advocate the use of literary theory into the study of literary onomastics. The author suggests that the future development of the study of names in literature will be dependant on a closer cooperation between onomasticians and literary critics. This particular field of research is truly interdisciplinary, and thus it is necessary to call on theories from both sides of the subject, literature as well as onomastics. The theories must of course be chosen with a view to the literary genre of the works in question. By argument and example the author shows how this method will make it possible to compare the works of different writers and find similarities and differences in their strategies for the use of names.

There has been an ongoing discussion of how to develop a theoretical and methodological basis for further research into the discipline of literary onomastics. The investigation into the function of names in individual works by individual authors is always a source of new knowledge, but we need to reach a point where we can get a broader view of the field of literary onomastics, a view which gives us the possibility to compare the works of different writers and find similarities and differences in their strategies for the use of names.

What I aim to do in this paper is to show how literary theory can help mapping out the onomastic landscape in a novel or an authorship. The theory must of course be chosen with a view to the literary genre of the work in question, and since I am working on a thesis on the use of personal names in the works of the early 20th century Norwegian author Sigrid Undset, who is an outstanding representative of the literary tradition of Realism, I will, as a matter of course, mostly refer to Realism and realist discourse and theory.

My original plan for the thesis was what Bill Nicolaisen has referred to as “the bread-and-butter issue” of our field: I wanted to examine the use of names in the works of Sigrid Undset. Had she chosen the “right” names for her historical novels, did they match time and place? Were there any obvious “redende Namen” in her contemporary novels? Would I be able to find a pattern in her use of names? Could I possibly find some sources of inspiration for her choice of names? These are all well-known

issues for anyone with an interest in literary onomastics. But still I felt that something was missing. It was a bit like trying to balance on one leg, which can be rather tiresome after a while.

The other leg appeared when a professor in French literature encouraged me to look into the theories of realistic discourse. In that moment literary onomastics became to me what it really ought to be; a multidisciplinary field of research with strong elements from other subjects, and with literary science as the maybe most important support for the work of the onomastician. The theories of literary critics like Roland Barthes and Philippe Hamon provided the tools needed to organize the material which the methods of the literary onomastic brought about, and suddenly it became possible to draw a clear map of the landscape of names and characterizing epithets, nicknames, endearments etc. that is to be found in a novel.

The function of names in the text will of course vary through the different epochs and genres. In the comedies of Molière and Holberg, the characters had more or less fixed names, signalling to the audience what kind of persons they were meant to represent. The literary characters were not depicted as individuals, but as types, and thus the names may be regarded more or less as suitable “labels” for their main characteristics.

But the breakthrough of Realism, however, changed this naming practise. An important feature of Realism is that the role of the literary character changed from the representation of universals into the representation of the individual, and one of the most important tools of the author in creating this change, is the use of names.

The function of names in literature has been given an outstanding place in Barthes’ theory of “The realism effect” (Barthes 1968). He regards personal names as well as geographical names as one of the author’s most important instruments in the construction of an illusion of reality and credibility. Barthes even attaches such a great significance to names and naming that he claims that it is impossible for an author to start writing a novel before he or she has found the right names for their persons. In his opinion, Marcel Proust would never have been able to write *Remembrance of Things Past* had he not been fortunate enough to find the names which made his creative talent flow freely.

The more realistic and “ordinary” the names in a novel are, the more they will help make the reader feel that this is in fact a description of something that has really happened or, at least, of something that might have happened. But if Barthes is right in claiming that names play an essential part in the construction of an atmosphere of reality and credibility in the literary work, they can also be used for the opposite intention – to create an impression of legend or fairy tale. I would like to illustrate this

through examples from the works of the famous Swedish writer of children's books, Astrid Lindgren.

In two of her books, *Mio, my Son* and *The Brothers Lionheart*, Astrid Lindgren has chosen a combination of realistic, authentic personal names and fictitious names in order to draw the lines between the part of the story that takes place in the real world, and the part that belongs in an imaginary fairy tale world. In the beginning of both of these books we as readers are presented with the realistic picture of an ill or unhappy child, and in this part of the story all of the personal names are realistic and quite ordinary, not in any way conspicuous. But then the child escapes into a fantasy world to find the strength to deal with the difficult situation of his life, and the names that we meet in this imaginary world, are fictitious and more or less unrealistic. In *Mio, my Son* the fairy tale atmosphere is mainly created through the personal names (*Mio, Pompoo, Nonno, Millimani*), and while all the "good persons" have fictitious names, it is interesting to note that the one representative of evil in this fairy tale, a knight by the name of *Kato*, has been given a realistic name. In *The Brothers Lionheart* it is mainly the surnames and nicknames (*Lionheart*) and the place names – *The Wild Rose Valley* and *The Cherry Valley, Nangiyala* and *Nangilima* – that indicate that we have left reality behind and entered a fantasy world.

Roland Barthes ascribes three essential attributes to the personal name as such. It has the ability to emphasize by pointing to one and only one person. It has the ability to report because it is possible to highlight each and every essential detail hidden behind the name only by mentioning it. And last, but not least, it has the ability to unfold. You "unfold" an anthonym in the same way as you would "unfold" a memory. Barthes compares personal names with metonyms, claiming that "each name contains several 'scenes' that in the beginning come into existence in a discontinued and unstable way, but which ask for nothing more than to be assembled in a little tale. Telling tales really means to connect a limited number of units in a metaphorical process" (Barthes 1967).

The French critic Philippe Hamon explains this process in a slightly different way. In his opinion, personal names are originally devoid of semantic meaning, but as the story unfolds, they will gradually be filled with information about the characters. He sees the family in literature as a sort of "motivated", "transparent" derivational field, wherein the surnames somehow play the role of a linguistic root or stem conveying a particular piece of information (hereditary facts, etc.) while the first names act as a kind of inflection, offering complementary information structures, then, functioning as a sort of "grammar" of characters" (Hamon 1992).

While Roland Barthes emphasizes the importance of names and nam-

ing in literature without developing a consistent theory, Hamon has made what he himself refers to as “a very detailed ‘inventory’” of the different tools and procedures which constitute the criteria for realist discourse. This inventory consists of 15 items and as many as eight of these concern the use of and function of names in the literary text:

1. An account of the descent of a person or family, the chronological presentation of ancestors whose lives or characters will be of importance to the future of the literary characters.
2. Family names or surnames.
3. Christian names or given names.
4. The combination of Christian names and family names.
5. The use of historical names and authentic geographical names entwined with the fictitious onomastic landscape of the work.
6. Scenes in the novel where the characters are given the opportunity to comment on names, for instance in connection with births, deaths, christenings, stream of consciousness triggered by the introduction of a new acquaintance, discussions of names etc.
7. Names as titles, which is a true indicator of the “realist” genre.
8. The use of names as allusions to earlier texts (known as intertextuality).

I will now examine each of these items a little closer, in order to establish their interest to the literary onomastician.

1. A solid family history fully equipped with named ancestors and places of origin gives the main characters of a literary work a firm mooring point in the fictitious society. At the same time the author gets the possibility to play on rules for naming children after ancestors, superstition in connection with names and naming and so forth.
2. Information of family names or surnames serves as a kind of classification of each character. Hamon maintains that the surname plays the role of a linguistic root or stem conveying a particular piece of information, hereditary facts, social background etc.
3. The first names, that is the given names, can give supplementary information or hints of the characteristics of each character, or of his or her function within the plot.
4. Together the Christian names and the surnames function as a sort of “grammar” of the characters, divide them into groups, suggest their function in the literary work, serve as an indication of their destiny within the plot and as Hamon points out, form a suitable *locus* for the circulation of knowledge destined for the reader.
5. Historical and geographical proper names which refer to stable semantic entities guarantee mooring points and constitute an overall effect of reality, a validated extra-text providing the fiction with a solid foundation and the reader with some sort of recognition.

6. Scenes where the literary characters discuss names, argue about names, comment on names or think of their own feelings in connection with one or more specific names are very important. In my opinion such passages present the author with the possibility to reveal his or her own view of names and naming. I am confident that a high rate of thoughts and utterances about names and naming in a novel is a proof of the author's interest in names and also of the amount of consideration he or she has put into the names and naming of the characters. If my supposition is true, the author whose novels constitute the material for my thesis, Sigrid Undset, must have taken a great deal of interest in the names of her characters. There is a total of 102 comments on names and naming throughout her authorship, some of them quite long and thorough with evaluations of more than one name. There are fewer of these comments in her earliest production, with a pronounced increase further on. This may indicate that Undset's interest in names and her conscious use of names and naming is strengthened as she matures as a writer.
7. Personal names as titles of novels emphasize the importance of the role of the individual, which is very essential in realist discourse. At the same time the name in the title will often contain some sort of clue or key to the understanding of the thematic structure of the novel or the personality of the main character. The most famous work of Sigrid Undset, which brought her the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1928, is the trilogy of *Kristin Lavransdatter*. The title has never been translated into English, but it means *Kristin, the daughter of Lawrence*. Kristin is the main character of the novel, and her full name – first name and patronym – gives quite a lot of information about her. *Kristin* means “she who belongs to Christ”, and points out the direction of her life, be the road ever so long and winding before she reaches her haven. The patronym, *Lavrandsdatter*, is of course the common way of identifying a person in the fourteenth century, but it also conveys that she is her father's daughter and will keep up his values in the end, even if she opposes him on several important decisions in her youth.
8. The use of intertextuality – names as allusions to earlier texts – is a most essential element in the strategy of most writers, and provides a sounding board which elaborates on the various layers of the literary text. Again *Kristin Lavransdatter* serves as an example. The trilogy is a historical novel about life in the Scandinavian countries during The Middle Ages, very realistic and historically correct. The name of the protagonist, *Kristin*, is equally historically correct; it fits the time and the place where the story takes place. But *Kristin* is also a much used name in several old Norwegian ballads in which a young girl is lured into the mountain by a troll or by the little people living inside the mountains. The girl can only be brought back to the real world if her relatives bring the church bell up into the mountains and ring it there. The female protagonist in *Kristin Lavransdatter* is not spirited off by a troll, but by a man. Her love for this man causes her to turn her back on her father, her family and the standards of her own upbringing for many years, before she at last comes to peace with herself again through her Christian faith. Thus the author's choice of name reflects not only the real-

ism of the novel, but through intertextuality also reveals an important part of the thematic structure of the novel.

It may be claimed that these items contain nothing new, nothing that onomasticians have not known and applied on literary texts already. This is probably right, but even so this theory is new and important because it is not put down on paper by an onomastician, but by a literary critic. It is most important that literary science and literary onomastics both recognize this field of research as equally important, and that they share the same vision for the future of the discipline. This has not been the case in the past, but I look to the future with a great deal of optimism.

Through his 8 items Philippe Hamon has provided a kind of literary standard for the use of names and naming in realistic discourse, and thereby given onomasticians something with which they can compare the naming material of the literature. And I have no doubt whatsoever that there will be useful literary theories accessible for other literary periods and genres, if only we start looking for them. Equipped with this knowledge of the literary strategies behind the author's choice of names, we have the possibility of establishing patterns for names and onomastic landscapes in realistic discourse, and – what I consider equally important – we can discover exceptions from the standard. And as soon as these patterns and standards emerge, we can begin to draw comparisons between the works of various authors, which in my opinion will mean a great step forward for literary onomastics as a discipline.

Literature

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