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‘CHANGE ALL THE NAMES’:
A SAMUEL BECKETT ONOMASTICON

Abstract. If the question – ‘Why a Samuel Beckett onomasticon?’ needs posing at all, then the simplest response is to refer the questioner to the titles of Beckett’s novels in their sequence of composition: *Murphy*, *Watt*, *Mercier and Camier*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. Naming, and the search for a ‘real’ name, constitutes a crucial component of Beckett’s literary project. He famously claimed that he had nothing to express, but that nothing which he nonetheless expressed is none other than the name-negation, succinctly encapsulated in the French homophone pair of *nom* and *non*.

The title of my book, *Change All the Names*, comes from the addenda to *Watt*, where this gnomic 4-word imperative appears, intended either as an exhortation to the reader or as a memo from the author to himself. I decided to take Beckett at his word and to seek (and find) hidden meanings in virtually every act of naming that he engaged in. My own project, begun as a doctoral dissertation on naming in Beckett’s fiction, and completed out of pure love with work on his plays, has the aim of identifying and analyzing all the characternyms that populate the world that Beckett named. The term ‘characternym’ therefore explicitly excludes toponyms, but includes animal names (e.g. a dog called Teddy and a parrot called Polly) and the names of entities which may or may not exist (e.g. Godot and the Obidil). The names of figures from history, mythology, literature etc. (e.g. Pythagoras, Job, Swift) have also been excluded. However, Belacqua, the name of the protagonist in *More Pricks than Kicks*, is most definitely included, even though his name ultimately derives from history and literature. This is because, although the ‘original’ of Belacqua is undoubtedly the 13th-century Florentine lute-maker featured in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, Belacqua Shuah (unusually for Beckett’s anti-heroes, he has a forename and a surname) is a Beckettian characternym, a heavily reworked palimpsest of the earlier (and now intertextual) Belacquas. There were, needless to say, other such methodological and definitional problems to address, but in the end almost 650 names passed through my critical filter, this being the impressive roster of animated or quasi-animate entities in the world that Beckett named. Those 650 names have in turn generated, in my published work, nearly 400 pages and 200,000 words of analysis.

The 40-page introduction, divided into 10 smaller chunks, offers a variety of ways into the work: for Beckettians who are non-onomasticians; for onomasticians who are not Beckett specialists; for the general reader seeking to get a grasp on both literary onomastics and the broad scope of Beckett studies. Having mapped out the terrain to be covered, the book then looks in turn at Beckett's published fiction, then drama. This bipartite division also makes a rough chronological divide, with the majority of the fiction being written coming out before about 1952 and the drama being mostly from 1952 on. Within each major section individual works are dealt with in strict chronological order of composition (which does not necessarily match the order of publication). *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, for example, written in the early 1930s, only appeared in print in 1993, four years after Beckett's death, whilst *Mercier et Camier*, written in 1946, languished in a bottom drawer until 1970 and only appeared in Beckett's own English translation in 1974. This last fact raises one of the trickiest questions of all in dealing with Beckett's works – his curious status as both a bilingual writer and self-translator. I believe that my own approach to this matter has been both clear and consistent. Regardless of the language in which Beckett originally wrote a particular work, if he was involved in its translation from English to French or vice versa then I treat both versions as primary. Naturally the wordplay that he engages in with respect to naming draws freely on both English and French, irrespective of the language of the surrounding text. However, the necessity of the approach I adopted becomes fully apparent when one realizes that a number of names are changed, or even eliminated, between one version and another (e.g. Conard/Cunard and Poinçon/Puncher in *En attendant Godot/Waiting for Godot* and Louis, a.k.a. Lambert in *Malone meurt/Malone Dies*). This latter example is particularly interesting, as it is only by putting the French characternym Louis together with his English counterpart Lambert that one reconstructs Louis Lambert, the eponym of a famous novella by Balzac, which provides a fruitful intertextual allusion.

Within each chapter there is an onomastic introduction, alerting the reader to the principal naming patterns within the particular work. Sometimes these involve *all* the tokens that occur in the work in one elaborate name-game (as in *How It Is* and *Come and Go*). The introduction is followed by an alphabetical, dictionary-like listing which might run, as in the instance of *Molloy*, from 'A' (an emblematically named male figure) to 'Zulu' (a black dog) or, as in the case of the late play *What Where*, merely from 'Bam' to 'Bom' via 'Bem' and 'Bim'. What? No 'Bum'?! A highly self-conscious omission on the part of the author who once said his work

involved fundamental signs, no pun intended! Works of scant onomastic interest are grouped together in catch-all chapters at the end of each section, though still preserving the principle of dealing with the names in an individual work as belonging to a discretely named microcosm.

The concluding chapter looks at the remarkable cline from naming to non-naming in Beckett's later works, particularly the late fiction, and devotes especial attention to the quasi-name Bing/Ping, which I view as being that of the final, named Beckett agonist. I use the term 'quasi-name', since Bing (French) or Ping (English) is only capitalized when it occurs as the title of the piece in question or in sentence-initial position, making its status as a name radically uncertain. This was, of course, all part of Beckett's intent to disconcert and confound the reader's expectations. Finally I address the question as to whether Beckett's work is actually underpinned by any onomastic theory and conclude, drawing on detailed textual evidence, that is most certainly is. At the end of *Molloy* (a novel which is, for many, his greatest single work) he both expounds his theory and majestically demonstrates it in practice (albeit heavily disguised as a disquisition on bees!), and in so doing pre-dates and upstages the theoretician Derrida by some 20 or 30 years.

To appreciate the internal organization of the work, I have taken, virtually at random, a single name entry – Winnie, the female protagonist of the play *Oh les beaux jours/Happy Days*.

Winnie (138)

The partially-buried, garrulous, fifty-ish female protagonist; **Willie's** wife. She is addressed by Willie as Win.

Etym.: Diminutive of Winifred. Probably from the Welsh name Guinevere meaning 'white mane', but altered by association with the OE elements *wynn* ('joy') and *frith* ('peace') (DFN, 326).

S.1: The most obvious interpretative starting-point with this name is the element 'win', which would seem to be ironically attributed or a deliberate misnomer for a character whose diminishing being bespeaks loss. Such an approach to naming is by no means alien to Beckett, and we need look no further than to **Lucky** in *Waiting for Godot* for a close parallel. However, Winnie's seemingly indomitable optimism in the face of her terrible plight suggests that the human spirit may triumph over adversity, though such an uplifting message seems alien to Beckett's outlook and there is no reason

to suppose that Winnie does finally achieve redemption, salvation or release. Whatever the promise of the ‘win’ element of this name, it is dashed by the second element, *nie* being analysable as both the German for ‘never’ and the French for ‘deny’.

S.2: The irreconcilable tension between positive and negative is even inscribed in the monosyllabic pet name Win which Willie uses to address his wife. Read in French it can be analysed as *oui + n*, i.e. yes and no.

S.3: As with both **Milly** and **Willie**, this name suggests breaking down into constituent elements, by association with the verb ‘to winnow’, i.e. to separate the chaff from the grain by means of the wind. Such a mental sorting procedure is often engaged in by Beckett’s protagonists, quite explicitly in the case of Krapp: “Sat before the fire with closed eyes, separating the grain from the husks.” (217)

S.4: Exploring further lexicographic associations, Winnie may be described as both ‘winsome’ – a word derived from the OE *wynn* (‘joy’) and meaning ‘cheerful or pleasant’ (Chambers, 1563) – and *winzig*, German for ‘diminutive’, with Winnie still dwindling to an ever diminished state of lessness.

S.5: Returning to the ultimate derivation of Winnie from Guinevere (see *Etym.*), the note on Winnie’s hair in the stage directions: “blonde for preference” (138), seems to indicate a concern on Beckett’s part that the character should have a white mane not merely in name.

S.6: Since the names of the two protagonists are obviously very similar, it is worth paying close attention to both the shared and the divergent elements. Both names begin and end ‘w...e’ and contain within that ‘we’ ‘i...i’. Symbolically therefore, within their marriage two individual identities (I and I) have been subsumed within the one flesh of partnership (we). The distinctive elements, ‘ll’ and ‘nn’, are generally male and female signifiers respectively in the author’s onomastic ‘alphabeckett’. We encounter duplicated Ls in **Louis Lambert** and **Lemuel** (both in *Malone Dies*) as well as the eponymous **Molloy**, whereas, in addition to the numerous **Anns** (in *Watt* and elsewhere) Moran’s dead wife is christened and summarily despatched with the multiply negating name of **Ninette** (*Molloy*). The alphabetic difference between these opposed letters is the missing M, the Beckettian symbol of transcendence (see General Introduction). Both Willie and Winnie are physically trapped, and Winnie explicitly talks of

her wish to float up into the blue, were it not that the earth holds her down. We can also infer that they are a childless couple and that Winnie's projection of the child **Milly** (i.e. *mille* or M) is a fantasized (and denied) transcendence into the life to come.

See **Helen** in *Mercier and Camier* for more on L, M and N

The featured name is given in bold, followed by a number indicating the first appearance of the name in the text of a specified edition. In this case, being a drama, it is in the *dramatis personae* of the Faber *Complete Dramatic Works*. There then follows an etymology (abbreviated to *Etym.*) which gives whatever information is available about the name's origin and meaning, particularly if cogent to the character so designated. Then I turn my attention to the heart of the matter: the possible meanings or significations (*S.1*, *S.2* etc.) of the name in the context of the work and within Beckett's world. This particular name is moderately polysemous, since I give 6 different readings for it. A few, minor names throw up just one hidden meaning or even, very rarely, none at all. At the other extreme, core names such as Godot, Watt, Molloy and Murphy, to which Beckett undoubtedly gave the greatest care and attention, have generated almost 20 readings apiece, with the longest single entry on a name (Godot) running to 7 pages and over 3,000 words. Cross-references in-text to other names which show related patterns or meanings are indicated by the use of bold, and more extensive discussion of a particular point by the use of an arrow (here rendered by 'see'), usually at the end of an entry.

As an onomastician, I take it to be axiomatic that name choice in a great author's works is a highly controlled and deliberated act. Meanings from the world outside the book are focussed into a name and further meanings then radiate from that name into the text. How though does the author channel that meaning potential to imbue what may be a very common name with his own particular flavours or hallmarks? Given below, and reproduced from my introduction, is a taxonomy of the encoding techniques which I have discerned in Beckett's onomastic practice, and which have served me in decoding the hidden messages.

TAXONOMY OF ONOMASTIC ENCODING TECHNIQUES
IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S WORKS

1. **Etymology** e.g. Celia from *caelum* (Lat.) - 'heaven'; Basil from *basileus* (Gk.) - 'king'; Malone from *Ó Maoileoin* - 'devotee of St. John'.

2. **Biographical association** e.g. William and May (Beckett's parents); Bor, Mercier and Camier (fellow pupils at Portora); Ottolenghi (his landlady in Florence, 1927).

3. **Cultural association** e.g. Murphy (Irishman, potato, stout etc.); Jacques (Frenchman, *Frère Jacques* etc.); Maxwell (the physicist James Clerk Maxwell).

4. **Relexification** i.e. reading names, sometimes with slight changes to the spelling, as regular vocabulary items in a given language (usually English), e.g. Graves, Ward, Weir, Knott etc.

5. **Monolingual paronomasia** e.g. Rosie as *rosée* (Fr.) - 'dew'; Case as *case* (Fr.) - 'square on a chess-board', or *Käse* (Ger.)/*queso* (Sp.) - 'cheese'; Francis Xavier as 'France's saviour'.

6. **Interlingual paronomasia** e.g. Ernest as *er* (Ger.) + *n'est* (Fr.) - 'he is not'; MacStern as *Mac* (Ir.) + *Stern* (Ger.) - 'son of star'; Murphy as *meurt* (Fr.) + 'fee' - i.e. 'the fee for his death'.

7. **Metonymy** e.g. Berry for 'testicle'; Cream for 'semen'; Cooper for 'barrel', i.e. a container of drink.

8. **Intertextual allusion** e.g. Lemuel (OT and *Gulliver's Travels*); Tom, Sophie, Celia, Murphy (Fielding's *Tom Jones* and *Amelia*); Hermione, Jacques, Kate, Edmund (Shakespeare).

9. **Letter symbolism** e.g. 'N' as in Nell, Nixon, Ninette, Dan - symbolizing negation.

10. **Number symbolism** e.g. Cox (CX) as 110; Miller (*mille-r*) as 1000; Vincent (*vingt/cent*) as 2000.

11. **Anagram-mar** e.g. The Obidil as the 'libido'; Neary as 'yearn'; Madden as 'damned'; Tom as *mot*.

12. **Paragram-mar** e.g. Neary as nearly 'nearly'; Arthur as 'author'; Lemuel and Hackett and 'Samuel' and 'Beckett'.

13. **Hypocorism** i.e. child-like namings, e.g. Bibby; Lulu; Blackey and Whitey; Bim, Bom and Bum.

14. **Split or combined names** e.g. Miss Fitt; Miss Carridge; Con + Art as *conard* (Fr.) - an untranslatable term of abuse meaning roughly 'idiot bastard'.

15. **Intratextual mutation** e.g. Molloy (mutated to Moll-oc, Moll-one etc.) appears to subsume both Moll and Loy, to bleed into Moran and Malone and to seep into the surrounding text in vocabulary items such as

'moil', 'molest' and 'moly'.

16. **Rebuses** e.g. Molloy as 'Beckett myself'; Arsy Cox as 'St Peter'; Otto Olaf bboggs as *eau de toilette* and 'portrait of the artist as a young man' etc. (qqv for analyses of these complex encodings).

17. **Nonce-naming** e.g. Saposcat, Fitzwein, Ptoto, Toffana, Smeraldina. The recognition of nonce-names (maximally intentional acts of naming) is but the first step towards analysis. Any or all of the above techniques may be required to unpackage what is almost certainly a condensation of meaning-potential.

The variety of such techniques is truly remarkable, and they provide a useful model for any future, comparable literary onomastic studies. Amongst the most significant trends within Beckett's naming practice I have discerned repeated references (under a wide range of disguises) to his mother, himself and God. Beckett plays with the linguistic putty of names to translate or pun in every language at his disposal, those being English, French, German, Italian, Latin and Greek, with odd forays into Hebrew, Spanish, Czech, Chinese and Gaelic. He draws on a wealth of intertextual references including Shakespeare, the Bible, Dante, Joyce, Fielding, Dr Johnson and Homer. He uses anagrams, paragrams, alphabetic, mathematical and musical symbolism to create rebuses and riddles in names, many of which have, until now, gone entirely unnoticed by Beckett scholarship. When the perfect name can't be found 'off the shelf', he invents them to fit the bill, and thus we find such enigmatic coinages as Nackybal (anagrams of Caliban and 'cannibal') and the Obidil (a mirror image of the libido).

To convey something of the flavour of my work, and to provide a hint of Beckett's genius as a name-giver, I've taken one key name (the eponym Murphy) and will show 8 different ways in which Beckett plays with this extremely common name.

#1. Murphy is, of course, the Irish Everyman since this is, by far, the commonest Irish surname. Beckett's emblematic figure has no other name – he is simply Murphy – nor any lineal kin. His part-time partner is a prostitute called Celia Kelly, Kelly being – by no mere coincidence – the second most common Irish surname. As far as plot goes, all we need to know is that, for much of the novel, all the other characters are looking unsuccessfully for Murphy, whilst Murphy is, equally unsuccessfully, trying to lose himself. In the end they find him, but only after he has, through death, disappeared.

#2. Murphy is a pun on the Greek *morphe* (shape or form). As Beckett

famously said in a 1956 interview, for him it is the shape of ideas that matters. Murphy is a empty form into which Beckett pours his ideas. Beckett's physical Murphy remains curiously amorphous, imperfectly drawn, hidden by his greatcoat, resistant to analysis. As one observer says of him, "he don't look rightly human." He is also metamorphic, changing to fit in, or to fail to fit in with his surroundings.

#3. From *morphe* we move on to Morpheus, the Greek god of sleep. Joyce had already played on this allusion in *Ulysses*, with his reference to a character 'wrapped in the arms of Murphy' (i.e. Morpheus). Sleep is one of Murphy's favourite states as it temporarily approximates the annihilation he is actively seeking.

#4. From Morpheus to morphology, and specifically the shape or form of words. *Murphy* was written in 1935 whilst Beckett was living in London undergoing a course of psychoanalysis. In 1933 Leonard Bloomfield had published his ground-breaking work entitled simply *Language*, in which he introduced the term 'morpheme' to refer to the smallest unit of meaning in a language. Internal evidence in the novel gives every indication that Beckett was familiar with Bloomfield's terminology since Bloomfield's classification of morphemes into 4 types corresponds perfectly with 4 states of Murphy.

- a) A 'free morpheme' is one that can stand on its own; such Murphy believes himself to be: "as though he were free," we read on the first page of the novel.
- b) However, we then learn that, "seven scarves held him in position"; thus he is bound, like a 'bound morpheme' (i.e. one that cannot occur in isolation).
- c) The 'embedded morph' (as in the past-tenseness of 'slept') corresponds with Murphy's love of sleep (i.e. being embedded).
- d) Finally, the 'zero morph' (a missing, uninflected first-person-ness in English verbs for example) corresponds with Murphy's final state when, after death, he is cremated and his ashes are strewn over a pub floor – zero Murphy.

#5. Murphy begins with the letter M, Beckett's personal siglum which stands for, *inter alia*, man, mother, me, music, millennium, one thousand and water (the fundamental meaning of the grapheme in the earliest known alphabetic system, Proto-Sinaitic). M is also the Greek *m* (mu) and its homophone 'mew'. We learn on the first page of Beckett's novel that Murphy lived in a 'mew' (i.e. a former stable) and that he felt caged (i.e. 'emmewed'). Also on the first page he hears street cries (otherwise known as 'mews') and is described as having eyes like a gull, an alternative name for which is a 'mew'. In this way, Murphy's fictive being is paradoxical.

cally constituted by the deconstruction of his own name.

#6. A quite different set of puns and allusions leads us to the French *meurt* (he dies) and the English noun 'fee' – a sum of money given for a service. Not only does Murphy die (as announced by his name), but we learn the cost of his cremation, the fee paid by Neary (and not, we are told, by his companion 'Judas Wiley') being precisely 30 shillings, i.e. 30 pieces of silver. From this little clue I could pursue at some length the parallels between Murphy and Christ.

#7. A curious piece of Beckett bio-data throws up the interpretation of Murphy as an ante- or anti-Beckett. Before meeting his future wife, May, Sam's father (Bill Beckett) had fallen in love with a Catholic girl called Eva Murphy. His staunchly Protestant parents would not allow him to marry her. Had permission been granted, had there not been a sectarian divide in Ireland, there would undoubtedly have been more Murphys born in the world, but no Samuel Beckett, thereby effortlessly affording the author the non-being for which he seemed to be striving throughout his long life.

#8. Finally, the one English dictionary entry under 'murphy' tells us that this is a slang term for a potato, so named because murphies were once the principal root crop of Ireland (before the disastrous potato blight and famine of the mid 19th century). And what are the properties of potatoes? Well, they come in all shapes and sizes. Vegetable murphies are also metamorphic and thus hard to pin down or describe. Murphy (the man) is at one point described as a 'surd' – a mathematical term for an irrational number, such as the square root of -1 . So, Murphy is an irrational root, which is, *mutatis mutandis*, also a pretty accurate definition of a potato – another irrational root! As Beckett wittily noted in *Murphy*, "In the beginning was the pun."

At the heart of Beckett's obsession with naming (for it is nothing short of that) are his own given and family names, which naturally repay the closest attention. There are numerous oblique allusions to Barclay (his middle name) through references to either the name or the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley. The etymology of Beckett from the Old English 'bee-cottage' or bee-hive surfaces very tellingly in *Molloy* and actually provides the key to decoding the author's fascinating onomastic manifesto. However, it Beckett's principal given name of Samuel that seems to have been the springboard for his relentless pursuit of the ideal name. That name is of Hebrew origin, and in its form as Shemuel, has the meaning 'name of God'. The element Shem or Sam (the name by which Beckett was known throughout his life) means simply 'name' and, as such, may be seen as merely a place-marker, an empty space awaiting the unnamed entity's true

name or, indeed, the real name of God. The Hebrew letter *shin*, which is the first letter of the name Shemuel, has a tridentine form, and its rotations to form the Greek *sigma* (S), or the English M and W, provide us with the initial letters of nearly all Beckett's fictional protagonists. And even those who are not 'M' men turn out to be 'B' for Beckett lookalikes. The naming of self is, for Beckett, inextricably linked with the naming of God and there are at least a dozen such encodings in key names throughout the *oeuvre*. For example, Beckett's first fictional persona was Belacqua, also referred to as Bel. In ancient history, Bel was the chief Babylonian deity (also Ba'al), but those three letters can equally well be deconstructed into B for Beckett and '-el' from Samuel (*el* being the Hebrew name for God).

My relentless focus on the motivation behind naming in Beckett's work has resulted in countless new insights, some of which call for significant reappraisals of entire books. My reading of *Watt*, for example, as a highly heterodox Third Testament was only made possible by a meticulous decoding of the hundred or so names in that novel, which the author explicitly exhorts us to change. Numerous earlier critics have dabbled in Beckettian onomastics, but none has given the topic the attention it most richly deserves. I believe that my own study shows that within Beckett's works the proper name truly is (to borrow Barthes' phrase) 'the prince of signifiers', and that, in skilled hands, name choice really does constitute the quintessential act of the literary artist.

References

PARROTT J., *Change All the Names: A Samuel Beckett onomasticon*, Szeged: Kakapo Press, 2004.