# *WHAT'S IN A NAME? SYMBOLISM AND IMAGES OF THE SELF*[1]

***Abstract:*** *The study of names, having onomastics as its main research field, implies, beside the discussion about the linguistic status of names, an investigation of symbolic reference, characteristic for the philosophy of language. Names are woven into the identity of the person, being even perceived as «double d'une personne» (B. Clarinval). They may constitute a key to a realm of imaginary, as, through the agency of words, one shapes fantasy and images, including those of the self. Fabulous monsters or heroes of fairy-tales, in particular, often bear names associated with a reality of a certain type, within even an ontological imaginary. The image of the ugly old woman that embodies the evil in Romanian fairy – tales, e.g., is expressed by words (gr. 'mouma' – 'witch'), that become tools of imaginary. On the other hand, a name may construct a certain reality, as according to the Latin "Nomen est omen", marking out one's identity, in a positive or negative meaning. Beyond the heroes of literature, an art of words created by man, there are names connected to a reality of another philosophical depth. Certain examples from Greek, the par excellence language of philosophy, show the symbolism and the power of names. Man, 'anthropos' in Greek, is meant to be 'the one who gazes and moves towards the above' – 'ano athrein'. The name of a certain man, Adam, reveals the unity of the four cardinal points denoted by their initials in Greek – East (Anatoli), West (Dysis), North (Arktos) and South (Mesimbria). Therefore, dealing with names leads to (de)constructing of images of the self and, by extension, of the world, as paradigms of reality or of imaginary.*

***Key words:*** *onomastics, names, symbolism*

In his struggle to acquire knowledge and namely to further comprehend his identity, man often explores realms of both reality and imaginary, as far as the process of constructing or deconstructing reality through the agency of myths and fantasy, in general, provides, in the final analysis, a key for the perception of the self. The present paper focuses upon a series of onomastic resorts, pointing out names of an imaginary origin, as well as names taken out of a reality rich in symbols.

The process of mythmaking is also, beyond any shadow of doubt, attended by symbols, in the form of symbolic names. From this point of view, name studies have led to the idea of names as *"double d'une personne"* (Clarinval, 1967: 29), according to the French linguist B. Clarinval. Proper, personal names outline an image of the bearer, but likewise, images of the self are pointed out by the use of names as tools of a personalized imaginary. Richard Barber, author of *A Dictionary of Fabulous Beasts,* writes in the *Introduction* of his work about "the conscious or semi-conscious process of mythmaking", referring also to the American «*jeu d'esprit*» (Barber, Riches, 1971: 5). The relation between naming and game is not of slight interest, as in dealing with fantasy, man becomes, from *homo cogitus* actually *homo ludens* – the one that plays and therefore discovers his capacities, his power and his expectations.

The *Dictionary* we mentioned deals with creatures of all sorts, among others, with a fantastic beast called *"Bishop fish"*. Its description suggests the idea of playing with real and imaginary elements, combining them, as proper to a world order of another type:

> These curious fish emphasize a medieval tradition that everything in the air or on the earth had a double in the sea. The bishop fish had a mitred head, a scaly body, with two claw-like fins in the place of arms, and a fin-like cloack. Its legs appeared to be clad in rubber waders (Barber, Riches, 1971: 29).

[1] Maria-Cătălina Muraru, University of Bucharest, catalina_muraru@yahoo.com



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The idea of double, as far as creatures are concerned, does not seem to be an uncommon one. Monsters are often half-man, half-animal, or, in any case, a combination of a certain type. Thus, *Ichthyocentaurus*, as the name itself suggests, is presented as "a winged creature, half-fish, half-horse" (Barber, Riches, 1971: 89). The latter name uses, probably due to its origin, the Greek term for 'fish' – gr. «ichtys». Symbol of the water, as sources inform us (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1993: 773)[1], the fish is also connected with images of another type. Images of a reality that is comprised through the agency of iconography, for example, as the fish symbolizes Christ.

> Le poisson a inspiré une riche iconographie chez les artistes chrétiens: s'il porte un vaisseau sur son dos, il symbolize le Christ et son Église; s'il porte une corbeille de pain, ou s'il est lui-même sur un plat, il représente l'Eucharistie; aux Catacombes, il est l'image du Christ (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1993: 774).

On the other hand, the name itself, understood as an acronym in Greek shows the religious linkage with Christ. Each letter is, therefore, the beginning of a certain word – [Ι]ησούς [Χ]ριστός [Θ]εού [Υ]ιός [Σ]ωτήρ – Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. The name *«ichthys»* was perceived, beyond its common noun status, as a Christian recognition mark. The name, the mere shaping informed that the one who used it, in the form of drawing etc., belonged to the community of Christians. This symbolic code is characteristic for the primary Christian era, as the quote formerly mentioned, from the Dictionary of Symbols, *Dictionnaire des Symbols,* makes reference of the Catacombs.

*Centaurs,* on the other hand, as particularly creatures of the imaginary, this once, "are perhaps most famous of the fauna of Greek mythology" (Barber, Riches, 1971: 37). In the respect of these creatures, the portrait of the beast is replaced with more noble traits:

> They combined human and animal form, being most commonly human in front, merging with the body and hind-legs of a horse. […] The centaur was dignified and noble and was not associated with most other monstrous forms. […] The centaurs were certainly renowned for their benevolence, hospitality and wisdom (Barber, Riches, 1971: 37).

As for the name, «κένταυρος» in Greek, the etymological debate includes the hypothesis of a compound formed of the verb «κεντῶ» (*to embroider*) and the noun «αὔρα» (*breeze*), but with an uncertain semantic coverage. Mythology localizes them in the mounts of Thessaly – a concrete geographic space which served for developing a different imaginary *topos.* But there are also real places that challenge the imaginary. Such places are to be found in a work signed by Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places,* in French translation – *Dictionnaire des lieux imaginaires.*

*Entre-les-mondes (Between –the- worlds)* is one among the depicted places of this dictionary. Its name mirrors its characteristics, creating the image of a sort of fairy-tale place – a forest proper for dreaming, lacking life of any sort or even shadows of birds or animals, where only the light gives the impression of an eternal morning:

> «Bois paisible, propice a rêve, où il n'y a ni movement, ni bruit, ni l'ombre d'un oiseau ou d'une bête. On n'entend que le bruit des arbres qui poussent. Tout paraît baigner dans la chaude lumière verte d'un matin perpetual» (Manguel, Guadalupi, 1998:135-136).

[1] «Le poisson est bien entendu le symbole de l'élément Eau, dans lequel il vit».



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The realm between the worlds is by far common feature of fairy-tales. In her study, *The Ordinary and the Fabulous. An Introduction to Myths, Legends and Fairy Tales,* Elizabeth Cook notes down:

> In a sophisticated, urban and secular society the ordinary is often divorced from the fabulous; people either day-dream, or else attend to the hard-facts. Throughout my argument, I have tried to emphasize that fabulous stories illuminate the ordinary world (Cook, 1975: v.).

Rejecting the perspective of a "world of day-dreaming" for the fabulous one, may not lead to cutting out the dream mood that stories in general induce. The use of dreaming, as opposed to reason and realistic interpretations comes across as a free play of imagination. As far as fairy-tales in England throughout the history are concerned, we learn that "[…] as early as the Middle Ages, fairies had been associated with the powers of darkness and evil, an idea which Hobbes picked up in the *Leviathan*" (Moss, 1979: 15).

Embodiments of the evil have various appearances and names in fairy-tales. A representative one, at least for the Romanian area of fantasy, appears to be the ugly old woman, living or better said ruling over forests. In this case, the *Mother of the Forest,* with her supernatural powers is a common hero of fairy tales that represents the Evil in its battle against the Good. This opposition and moreover the final triumph of the Good upon the forces of the dark, as outlined by fantasy, strengthens human possibility to attain a certain degree of knowledge, upon the surrounding world, upon the self etc. The forest as a realm and the use of the term 'mother' as correlated with the Greek one «μοῦμα» - 'witch', according to G. Murnu[1], show the capacity of words to illustrate man's inner representations. Furthermore, this fantasy world seems to be governed by laws of a certain type, laws that, one may say, hide a philosophical approach upon life in general.

In her PhD thesis on British fantasy, *Children and Fairy Tales: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Fantasy,* Anita Wess Moss also discusses the "possible theories of language in the fantasy", referring to the well-known creations of Lewis Caroll, having Alice as protagonist – *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or *Through the Looking Glass.* She stresses "the nature of identity, reality and language, and their relationship to each other" dealing with particular names in Caroll's works:

> Caroll introduces several possible theories of language in the fantasy. In the Garden of Live Flowers the Daisy suggests that the name of a thing is somehow intrinsically connected with its essential nature. The tree in the middle of the garden, according to the Daisy, «says 'Boughwough'… That's why its branches are called boughs» (Moss, 1979: 201).

In connection to the idea of dream and identity, reality and language, the author offers other quotes from the fairy-tale.

> Tweedledum and Tweedledee – characters of Caroll's work - raise profound questions about the nature of reality, dream and Alice's identity: «He's dreaming now», said Tweedledee: «and what do you think he's dreaming about?» […] Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream! «If that there King was to wake, […] you'd go out – bang! – just like a candle»". Later in the fantasy Humpty-

[1] Murnu, *Lehnw,* 32, DEX, 1998 < www.webdex.ro/dex/35973/mumă, accessed June 8, 2012 .



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> Dumpty causes Alice to question the meaning of her name, and he suggests that language itself is only a set of arbitrary sings" (Moss, 1979: 202-203).

Arbitrary as the language of the imaginary in the fantasy may be, name studies also suggest, in opposition to this theory developed by Lewis Caroll in his creations, a well determined philosophy of language. Anita Wess Moss talks about

> Caroll's awareness that names and language impart an orderly comfort to our lives but also create painful barriers, isolating us from other beings. […] Do we experience reality or merely our artificial linguistic constructs of it? It is a question which Caroll does not answer (Moss, 1979: 202).

Another sort of comfort may, on the other hand, be achieved, by the significance of the name itself, as revealing one's identity and vocation. Subsequently, the Greek name of man – gr. *«άνθρωπος»* - reveals, according to some etymological solutions the one who gazes and moves towards the above – « ἄνω» + «θρώσκω» (*to spring*) + «ὄπωπα» (ancient Greek form of the verb «ὁρῶ», *to see*). This interpretation, among others, defines the vocation of man to attain the knowledge of God, and to become god, in other words to rise to the noble condition that he had lost after the fall of Adam in Heaven.

Adam, this once a proper name, is perceived, as some researchers show, as an acronym of the four points of the horizon. The four cardinal points are in Greek: [A]νατολή - [Δ]ύση - [Ά]ρκτος - [M]εσημβρία, respectively East – West – North – South. The information is to be found in *Oracula Sibyllina.* Among the inspired prophetesses of the Antiquity, there is mentioned the Cumaean Sybil, presiding the oracle of Cumae, a Greek colony located near Naples, Italy, in the sayings of who, aspects of Christian interest are to be traced. An aspect is also the one concerning the name of Adam, as a notaricon for creating the above discussed acronym, with the initials of the four cardinal points: «αυτός δη θεός έσθ *ο πλάσας τετραγράμματον Αδάμ*/τον πρώτον πλασθέντα και ούνομα πληρώσαντα/*αντολίην τε δύσιν τε μεσημβρίην τε και άρκτον*//»[1].

Moreover, the Greek expression «όνομα και πράγμα» - "name and fact" seems to represent a code for the general symbolism of names. Used to designate human beings, creatures or things, names may inform upon one's potential, considering that potentiality could result in facts.

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[1] Oracula Sibyllina: Oracula, Section 3 Line 24, < http://www.sakketosaggelos.gr/Article/914/, accessed June 8, 2012.



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