

## The Destiny in the Name

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### Abstract

*The Namesake* – the novel by the 2000 Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction Jhumpa Lahiri – was made into a film in 2006. In Italy the movie was released – and enjoyed great success – in 2007 with the title *Il destino nel nome* (*The Destiny in the Name*), an interesting transformation of the original title. What most appeals to me is the concept of homonym of which the namesake is a particular case. This will be my starting point in examining instances in which names have played crucial roles in masterpieces of western artistic tradition, while revealing their ties to a wider multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic world. Three examples: 1) *Gogol* as a character name in Jhumpa Lahiri's postcolonial novel; 2) Vittore Carpaccio created one of his best-known and most powerful paintings because of his misunderstanding of the name of a certain holy martyr in the famous cycle *Legend of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins*; 3) in the opening lines of the tragedy *Emilia Galotti* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, a homonym is the device that provides the first hint of the Prince's tyrannical character. Through such case studies I will consider the intriguing way in which homonyms have been used as a powerful discourse-shaping factor and rhetorical device and so push further the theoretical framework of the reflections on names in Ingeborg Bachmann's essay *Der Umgang mit Namen* (1959/1960).

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### 1. The *aura* of names

Let me start by raising the name of Ingeborg Bachmann. In the Winter semester 1959/60 this Austrian author was at the University of Frankfurt and gave five lectures on poetics which are known as the “Frankfurter Vorlesungen”; the fourth one bears the title *Der Umgang mit Namen* (Bachmann 1978). It is a very admired and oft-quoted essay. In the early 1980's, for instance, Dieter Lamping placed at the beginning of his book some lines from it, as a *motto* for his research on the name in the narrative (Lamping 1983); Friedhelm Debus often refers to it in his work (Debus 2002); he is the German scholar to whom we owe so much in the field of our onomastic research, particularly for the accurate and patient attempt to provide us with a general systematic framework within which to consider names in literature. Still, I am not sure, if in this paper, I am following a course Professor Debus would approve of, since he stated that: “Gleiche Namen verschiedener Träger desselben sind daher nur äußerlich–formal gleich, dem Inhalt nach besitzen sie Einmaligkeitscharakter” (Debus 2002: 24). It is exactly that sensitive, ticklish field of homonymy I am focusing my attention on – and I am not sure if, in my exploration, I can maintain the firm and sure distinction Professor Debus is asserting with his statement.

I try to explore homonymy in the light of the onomastic *aura*, a concept Bachmann proposed in her essay; the method I follow is that of the *exempla*, i.e., examples or case studies in contemporary language and practice.

Bachmann intertwines in her discourse powerful theoretical issues with a rich texture of precise examples from western literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> and (more frequently) the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She makes her first poetological move analysing the curious name *Lulu*, the creation of Frank Wedekind which supplied the subject to Alban Berg's opera: a playful, childish, cosy, alliterative

name for an ominous character endowed with primordial, basic needs and wishes. Bachmann uses, in her analysis, the Latin word *aura*, made well known by Walter Benjamin from his 1936 essay on the *Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. The German word with which Bachmann chooses to translate *aura* is *Strahlkraft*. It is my intention in this paper to pay homage to that enlightening concept and this fascinating essay by this Austrian author. Following an old tradition of the *exempla*, or case studies, I will resort to three: all of them taken out from literary and figurative fiction (film narrative, painting and drama): *Gogol* as a character in Jhumpa Lahiri's postcolonial novel and the film the director Mira Nair based on this novel; *Undecimilla* as one of the two major characters of the medieval legend of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins; *Emilia* as the eponymic heroine of Lessing's drama *Emilia Galotti*. I cannot pursue this undertaking, however, without applying Caffarelli's notion of "the *idea* of onomastics as an interdisciplinary science – crosswise connected to many topics while never identifying itself exclusively with any of these" (Caffarelli 2004: 63). I also want to acknowledge that the echo of Bachmann's theoretical proposal in Professor Grant W. Smith's *Names as Art* (Smith 2005) encouraged me on this research endeavour.

### 1. *The Namesake*: The novel by Jhumpa Lahiri

*The Namesake* – the novel by the 2000 Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri – was made into a film in 2006 by Mira Nair. Released in the United States of America in 2007, it was screened at film festivals in Toronto and New York. In Italy it was released that same year with great success under the title *Il destino nel nome* (*The Destiny in the Name*), an interesting transformation from the original title. It seems that the man (the woman?) who conceived the Italian title was able, with a stroke of a genius, to highlight one of the powerful themes of Lahiri's narrative and gave his/her personal version to the bundle of problems Bachmann was referring to. In doing so, the unknown title-giver was touching upon one of the sensitive issues running through the onomastic concerns in our post-colonial culture.

In the first chapters of her enjoyable and meaningful popular novel, author Lahiri tells how it could happen that the major character in the novel, a USA citizen, son of two west Bengali immigrants, was given the name of Gogol, the major Russian author of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

How he loses it, or how he gets free of it, that is another part of the story: the one which we could properly call a *Bildungsroman*. An admirer of Lahiri as I am, I don't want to spoil the pleasure a first-time reader derives from this apparently simple, in reality sophisticated, in any case accurate story. With a notable ability the author leads the reader to know, feel and appreciate the different ways of approaching such a delicate decision as that of choosing a name for a human being in two different cultures: a western one, such as the one of New England, and an eastern one, such as the one of India. Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, the immigrant parents, are from Bengal. Lahiri's parents are also from Bengal: she was born in London, England, and raised in Rhode Island. What Lahiri accomplishes in this vivid novel, as well as in her short stories, is an astonishing work of mediation between different cultures which she knows first-hand. She certainly is a great post-colonial second-generation author.

As the story proceeds, the name theme goes through a series of developments until, at the very end, the protagonist, now a young successful architect in his thirties, by the name of Nikhil, orphan of his father, will eventually open an old book, his father's present for his birthday in 1982: *The Short Stories of Nikolaj Gogol*. " 'For Gogol Ganguli' it says on the front endpaper in his father's tranquil hand [...] 'The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name' is written within quotation marks." Let's go to the next page: we find the protagonist who "turns to the first story. *The Overcoat*." Surprise? Not at all: we all come from Gogol's *Overcoat*, according to Dostoevsky's widely known and much quoted sentence.

As moving and convincing as the reading of this novel can be, still what I find particularly intriguing and admirable is the way in which Lahiri makes narrative use of the name of one of the most celebrated Russian writers. She plays with name and surname in so many different tunes to the point of making out of a serious – and highly considered – family name, Gogol, the pet name of a baby. A clue that confirms this interpretation of the novel is that the author chooses exactly an onomastic particular case: the namesake, as title for her work.

There is another reason for finding that onomastic rhetorical device relevant. The cross-cultural mediation of Lahiri's narrative of which I have spoken is greatly, if not mainly, accomplished in the basic task of explaining how different feelings and customs are in the limited but primary important field of personal names. This appears clearly in the scene in the Boston hospital where the "Baby Boy Ganguli" is born, and also in the scene of the New England cemetery, where all schoolchildren, with the exception of Gogol Ganguli, find their names on the tombs. There is a strong cultural reason to consider the very name Gogol a sort of public declaration of commitment to the best, highest tradition of western narrative art: *Gogol c'est moi*. But there is more to it.

## 2. Homonymy and Ambiguity

If we dare to tread the uncertain terrain that lies at the border between poetics and linguistics, where polysemic utterances present themselves with different gradations of pertinence and significance, we can find some surprising hints about one of the basic figures of the poetic discourse in ancient India. We certainly will not take it for granted, but just keep it in our tool-box to better understand how a cultural work works. What in Sanskrit is *alamkāra* (ornament of the poetic language), we can identify with homonymy (Mazzarino 1991:11):

Si chiama *śliṣṭa* [lett. "unito, intrecciato"] un enunciato che ha più significati, ma una sola forma.

It is called *śliṣṭa* [literally "united, interlaced"] an utterance which has many meanings, but only one form.

What seemed to be (and surely is) a great cultural homage to the father of Russian Western narrative and at the same time a playful allusion to a maternal-baby language with its cute alliteration ("gogo" sort of "dada": we will not omit recalling the occurrences of this cosy name for Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) turns out to be a resumption of an ancient traditional Eastern Indian rhetorical figure.

It really seems probable that Lahiri knew what she was doing when she wrote her post-colonial novel. In order to go further this way we should reconsider some hints coming from the seven types of ambiguity suggested by William Empson – but that is beyond our scope in this paper.

## 3. Name and Identity

Jean-Marie Benoist, the French scholar who in 1974–1975 organised the interdisciplinary seminar on "identity" directed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, in the first paper of the meeting considered and illustrated many ways of understanding and approaching the notion of identity. He declared:

C'est évidemment à propos de la question du *nom propre* qu'elle se pose de manière privilégiée: le nom propre, lieu de l'inscription sociale du groupe sur le sujet, est à mettre en rapport avec le type de référence que le signifiant opère sur l'illusoire identité à soi de la personne (Benoist 1977: 17).

I am glad to have the opportunity to mention here one of the texts which can be considered of pivotal interest in building a framework for any anthropological consideration of the function of names.

When we read among the seminar papers of 1974–75 the one by Françoise Zonabend on how things went with names in a French village of Burgundy between 1836 and the 1970's, we have a sort of “aha-Experience”, since it brings us so close to the experience of the Ganguli family.

Let me quote one of the enlightening remarks by Zonabend (1977: 267):

La littérature ethnologique sur les sociétés dites exotiques avait montré depuis longtemps qu'il existait une discontinuité dans l'appellation de l'individu: à chaque changement d'état correspondait une dénomination différente et toute la vie de l'individu était jalonnée d'identités où le nouveau nom donné chassait le précédent. Il semble bien que l'on soit en présence d'un phénomène analogue dans cette société paysanne. On assiste à l'échelle de la biographie à ces mêmes changements de noms, mais avec en plus une accumulation d'identités.

Another remark taken from Benoist's comment on Zonabend's essay and the surprising facts she describes can be relevant and easily applied to the case of “Baby Boy Gangul” (Benoist 1977: 18):

On voit l'ethnocentrisme primaire se relativiser grâce à la fonction du nom propre comme opérateur de cette détotalisation, stratégie indispensable à la position de la question de l'identité.

The namesake can be useful or not, can bring luck or not, and in any case it is not without relevance: sometimes it is the product of a choice, sometimes of chance, sometimes of multiple factors.

#### 4. The legend of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins

The second case of homonymy I wish to present is problematic and puzzling in a very peculiar way. It comes from an old, almost forgotten, story (de Tervarent 1931: I, s.p.): “Familière aux hommes du moyen âge, la légende des Onze Mille Vierges est tombée dans l'oubli.” The prominent iconologist Guy de Tervarent has devoted an outstanding study to this legend and its representations in medieval literature and art. One of the best known among these representations is the cycle of the eight “teleri” (big painted canvasses) and one altar piece that Vittore Carpaccio painted in the last decade of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, on the threshold of the Modern Age, for the Scuola di Sant'Orsola in Venice. After the fall of the independent Republic of Venice, the nine paintings were moved to the public Art Gallery, nowadays the Galleria dell'Accademia, where they are still hanging and admired.

I will not attempt to describe here either their deep, riveting beauty or their sophisticated elegance, or their extraordinary documentary value in the history of western representation at the figural level as well as at the theatrical one: Ludovico Zorzi accomplished that task some years ago in a seminal study (Zorzi 1988). The legend of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins has been told and retold, written and rewritten many times; de Tervarent tells us that

Si l'existence des Onze Mille Vierges semble à jamais douteuse, un fait par contre est certain: à partir du IX<sup>e</sup> siècle, leur culte se célébrait à Cologne.

Jacobus de Voragine wrote his own version of the story in the *Legenda aurea* (Jacobus de Voragine 1993 II: 256–259), dated about 1260. By-passing the excessive boldness of ignoring crucial differences in the reading process introduced by the invention of print, we could easily call it “a best-seller”: “it has been said that in the late Middle Ages the only book more widely read [than the *Legenda aurea*] was the Bible” (Ryan 1993: XIII). Vittore Carpaccio might have read it in one of the first printed editions, all of them produced in Venice. The story is part of the narratives which accompanied the diffusion of Christianity north of the Alps; it was linked to the city of Cologne, which derives its name from the very fact of being a Roman colony on the river Rhine, at the time a boundary between the Roman (later Roman-Christian) empire and the barbarians. Princess Ursula, the daughter of an English king, was requested as a bride by the

pagan king of Brittany for his son. The request was accepted on some conditions. One was the conversion of the young man to Christianity; another one was a pilgrimage to Rome together with ‘Eleven Thousand Virgins’. On the way back from Rome, together with the Pope, they were all massacred by the Huns: the date varies. The legend presents some aspects which are slightly hard to believe as real events: something existing not in the natural world, but in the wonderful world of culture, where things cannot only be true or false, but imagined too. Jacobus himself points out some historical incongruities. The American translator of the *Legenda* feels compelled to inform the reader in the *Introduction* (Ryan 1993: XVI),

... that most of these narratives were at least partially fictional – or better, the product of generations of oral retelling – in no way diminished their effectiveness.

In one of the very few notes devoted to historical–critical facts (Ryan in Jacobus de Voragine 1993: II, 259) he states that

the confusions, historical and geographical, in this legend are not unusual in the *Golden Legend*, nor in similar literature of the period, and they do not in the least diminish the main point of the story, which is the virtue, sanctity and Christian courage of these virgins, so marvellously multiplied.

About this marvellous multiplication one can harbour some doubts. That the ‘Eleven Thousand Virgins’ have actually been that number is a notion that modern rationalists have some difficulty in accepting. Trying to explain it as a misunderstanding, some hypotheses have been formulated: the misreading of the number written in capital Latin letters, the misunderstanding of a Latin name *Undecimilla*, a single friend and companion of Ursula, mistaken with the number *Undecim Milia* (eleven thousand) of the “puellae”, the girls who were cruelly killed by the barbarians not far from Cologne.

This is the hypothesis Gustav Ludwig and Pompeo Molmenti are referring to in their monumental monographic volume on Carpaccio of 1906. They first summarize the legend in its traditional version; then they observe (Ludwig and Molmenti 1906: 111) in a very concise and sharp footnote that

it is not useless to remind the reader that other hagiographers reduce the huge Ursuline legion to one single virgin, Ursula’s martyred companion, Undecimilla by name; from that very name the legend of Eleven Thousand Virgins would have been generated.

As a matter of fact the contrast between the singleness of Ursula, particularly striking and almost uncanny in the “telero” which is known as *The dream of St. Ursula*, and the crowd of martyrs in the martyrdom and the glory scenes, exercises a powerful function in the images Carpaccio painted for the Scuola.



Vittore Carpaccio, *The Dream of St. Ursula*, 1495



Vittore Carpaccio, *The Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and the Funeral of St. Ursula*, 1493





**Vittore Carpaccio, *The Apotheosis of St. Ursula*, 1495**

Another surprising onomastic aspect of this very peculiar case is pointed out by de Tervarent. He is accurate in tracing the different moments in which the legend took on its marvellous shapes, and he is straightforward in explaining that at a certain point there has been a powerful reason to maintain that the virgins had actually been such a huge legion and their male companions too; suffice it, here, to recall the casual discovery of an ancient Roman necropolis near St. Ursula's Church in Cologne in 1106 (de Tervarent 1931: 21 ff.). Out of that necropolis came human bones and Roman names: an extraordinarily appropriate finding, since bones without the name label would amount to no value as objects of cult. The relics were attributed to the Eleven Thousand Virgins: "Le succès des nouvelles reliques fut immédiat et bientôt universel." Many characters of the legend acquired a name on the spot. The trade of relics flourished.

### 5. *Emilia Galotti*: the drama by Lessing

The third case I present has to do with the classical heritage; we will consider the masterful opening scene of the tragedy *Emilia Galotti* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. First performed at the Court Theatre of Braunschweig on March 13, 1772, it was printed the very same year. The old story, from Roman history, of Virginia, the young girl betrothed to Icilius, who was stabbed to death by her own beloved and loving father in order to prevent her rape by a lecherous member of the Decemvirate, was narrated by Titus Livius and Dionysius of Halicarnassus; thereafter it has been revisited many times. In Lessing's version the characters bear new names – Roman names or names belonging to the new setting: a small state of Renaissance Italy.

Interesting studies on the names in this tragedy have been produced by Eric Schmidt (1899<sup>2</sup> II: 6–13) at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, by Richard Gerber (1965: 573–586) and by Hendrik Birus (1978: 84,133,146) in more recent times.

My aim is different from that of these scholars. I wish to consider names as part of a poetic discourse and to see how productive a case of homonymy can be when used by a skilful author. In the opening lines of the tragedy Lessing, with great dramaturgical ability, uses the device of homonymy to provide the first hint of the Prince's tyrannical character. Not only is the first personal name uttered in the first scene – that of the main character of the drama, who is also the name-giver to the drama itself; not only is it uttered by the tyrannical persecutor, alone on the stage, the one who harasses Emilia and will force her to search for the only way-out in death. The name Emilia, as a matter of fact, generates a double character, Emilia Bruneschi, who will live for the space of the line she is mentioned in; she is a supplicant; “Viel gefordert, sehr viel” [It is asking a lot, quite a lot]: we don't know what she is asking for, and we will never know. “Doch sie heißt Emilia. Gewährt!” [Still, her name is Emilia. It is granted to her] (Lessing 2001: 5). The function of this ephemeral character is one of mere service: being part of the performance in the theatre or reading the text, we are learning by experience, from this episode, that the Prince can do whatever he will, that he is a despot, a tyrant, and a tyrant in love. This Emilia Bruneschi introduces us to the full name of the main character Emilia Galotti, whom we met in a very privileged place of the “secondary text”: the title, but not yet on the stage. In this first act she will appear on the scene in the guise of another double, the portrait painted by Conti, the Court painter. The character itself, Emilia Galotti, will appear in flesh only in the second act; another act, another place: a room in the house Galotti. It has been pointed out that the opening lines of the first scene are modelled on a scene from the second act of *Essex* by Antonio Coello, a tragedy Lessing commented on in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 65<sup>th</sup> part (Bohnen 2000: 928). In that passage, Lessing expressed his admiration for the psychological insight of the Spanish dramatist in depicting the power of a word when it directs the thoughts of a person against his/her awareness. The word there was a feudal title: “Count”; here, it is a personal name, “Emilia”.

The compulsive interest of the Prince in the name Emilia can be interpreted as a symptom of his erotic obsession; since we are considering a dramatic text, we can also accept a sort of affective involvement of the author with the name of his character, which is, to be sure, a beautiful name. It is also a cover-name: we, who belong to a safe and knowing posterity, can intellectually recognize, but I fear not feel, the braveness of the Court librarian as Lessing was at the time. He dared to present on the stage of the Court theatre of the feudal state he lived in a tragedy which was a modern version of one of the basic democratic historical facts of western political development. The historian Alberto M. Banti has been very deft indeed in putting the main character of this text among the ones which embody the figure of the nation in the modern age. The name Emilia serves very well as a cover-name for Virginia. Is it by pure chance that Emilia is the Italian female version of the name Emile, the protagonist and name-giver of Rousseau's pedagogical novel, the model of a new way to conceive human nature?



My philological friends might object that the first mention of *Emilia Galotti* as the title of the tragedy occurs on January first, 1758, while *Emile* by Rousseau was first published in 1762. It is a very good reason to reject the hypothesis; and yet, is it a good enough reason for not considering the *aura* of that name in 18<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe?

I am postulating here the existence of an allusive dimension of the text to be recognised with tools which are not philological ones. Ambiguity is part of the stuff poetic texts are made of. It is a form of knowledge which seems to require other rules, in part still to be invented, in part acquired from cultures other than the western norm.

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