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Proper names in literature: A "reevaluation of all values"

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Abstract: Parting from Roman Jakobson's insight that "poeticalness is […] a total reevaluation of the discourse and of all its components whatsoever", this contribution intends to show that this reevaluation concerns practically all functions of proper names in literature. Thus, the principal task of literary names is not identification, but the establishment of the literary character. In literature, identification becomes a secondary function in the course of the narration. On the other hand, associations and connotations connected with proper names, such as pre-proprial meaning ("cratylic names"), reference to homonymous literary or "real" characters ("embodied names"), or other associations which are disturbing in real-life communication, in literary texts attain pre-eminent value. Onymic ambivalence and ambiguity are phenomena which in real-world communication are considered as disturbing factors and speakers intend to eliminate them, but in poetic language writers make manifold use of them. Though toponyms in literature predominantly refer to places that actually exist, they are also apt to perform additional functions

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apart from establishing the fictional space. Phonosemantics, sound-symbolism and sound-metaphor can be used by the creative writer or poet, and street-names may indicate the characters' social position. To sum up, in literature, anthroponyms as well as toponyms undergo a total reevaluation of the functions they have in real-life communication.

Keywords: Literary names, poeticalness, theoretical literary onomastics, anthroponyms, identification, establishment of the literary character, characterization, cratylic (talking) names, embodied names, ambiguity, ambivalence, toponyms, constitution of the literary space.

Les noms propres dans la littérature : Une « réévaluation de toutes les valeurs »

Résumé : Partant du constat de Roman Jakobson selon lequel « la poéticité […] est une réévaluation totale du discours et de tous ses composants », nous nous proposons de démontrer que cette réévaluation concerne pratiquement toutes les fonctions des noms propres dans la littérature. Elle explique que la tâche principale des noms littéraires n'est pas l'identification mais l'établissement du personnage littéraire. Dans la littérature, ce n'est qu'au cours du récit que la fonction d'identification devient importante. D'autre part, les associations et les connotations liées aux noms propres, qui dans la vie réelle ne sont que des facteurs perturbateurs, tiennent dans la littérature une importance éminente. Cela concerne les noms possédant un sens pré-onymique intelligible (noms cratyliques) et les noms se référant à des figures réelles ou fictives. Dans la vie réelle, on considère l'ambigüité et l'ambivalence comme quelque chose d'importun et on tente de les éviter ; par contre, les poètes et les écrivains en font un multiple usage. Dans la littérature, les toponymes se réfèrent le plus souvent à des lieux du monde réel, mais ils peuvent accomplir beaucoup de fonctions additionnelles, outre établir l'espace fictif. L'écrivain créatif peut employer la phono-sémantique, le symbolisme et la métaphore du son ; le nom de rue peut indiquer la position sociale du personnage littéraire. *Summa summarum* : dans la littérature, les anthroponymes et les toponymes subissent une réévaluation totale de toutes les fonctions qu'ils ont exercées dans la vie réelle.

Mots-clés : Noms littéraires, poéticité, onomastique littéraire théorique, anthroponymes, identification, établissement du caractère littéraire, caractérisation, noms cratyliques, référence onymique, ambigüité, ambivalence, toponymes, établissement de l'espace fictif.

Eigennamen in der Literatur: Eine "Umwertung aller Werte"

Zusammenfassung: Ausgehend von Roman Jakobsons Feststellung, dass „Poesiehaftigkeit […] in einer völligen Neubewertung der Rede und aller ihrer Komponenten, welcher Art auch immer," besteht, möchte dieser Beitrag zeigen, dass diese Umwertung praktisch alle Funktionen des Eigennamens in der Literatur betrifft. So ist die wichtigste Aufgabe literarischer Namen nicht die Identifizierung, sondern die Konstitutierung der literarischen Figur. Erst im Verlauf der Erzählung wird die Identifizierungsfunktion zusätzlich wichtig. Andererseits erlangen mit dem Namen verknüpfte Assoziationen und Konnotationen, die im wirklichen Leben nur stören, im literarischen Text herausragende Bedeutung; dies betrifft Namen, deren

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vorpropriale Bedeutung aktiviert wird („redende Namen"), oder Namen, die auf wirkliche oder literarische Personen referieren („verkörperte Namen"). Auch onymische Ambivalenz und Ambiguität werden im wirklichen Leben nur als störend empfunden und möglichst vermieden, dagegen machen Schriftsteller und Dichter mannigfaltigen Gebrauch von ihnen. Obwohl Toponyme in der Literatur sich meist auf tatsächlich existierende Örtlichkeiten beziehen, können auch sie vielfältige Funktionen ausüben, abgesehen von ihrer Hauptfunktion, den fiktionalen Raum zu etablieren: Phonosemantik, Lautsymbolik und -metaphorik kommen zur Anwendung; Straßennamen können die soziale Position einer Figur anzeigen. Kurz gesagt: In der Literatur erfahren sowohl Anthroponyme als auch Toponyme eine völlige Umwertung aller Funktionen, die sie im wirklichen Leben ausüben.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Literarische Namen, Poesiehaftigkeit, theoretische literarische Onomastik, Anthroponyme, Identifikation, Konstituierung der literarischen Figur, Charakterisierung, kratylische (redende) Namen, verkörperte Namen, Ambiguität, Ambivalenz, Toponyme, Konstituierung des fiktionalen Raums.

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Proper names in literature: A "reevaluation of all values"

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1. As is widely accepted, names in real-world contexts serve to individualize and to identify individual entities by means of unique reference. It is also generally acknowledged that, with the exception of artificially coined brand and similar names, a characteristic feature of European name-systems is that the single linguistic elements used as proper names at the historic moment of their 'invention' were meaningful, they had lexical content (Coates 2012: 124). Though in the history of their usage most names became etymologically opaque (Anderson 2008: 86), there is still a considerable body of personal or place-names whose members are etymologically transparent and therefore seemingly 'meaningful': surnames like *Butcher* and *Taylor,* given names like *Rose* and *Violet*, place-names like *Longbridge* and *Newtown* (Coates 2012: 135). But in real-life usage these 'pre-proprial' meanings are or should be neglected in the interest of smoothly functioning communication. If they are activated, they can be the source of amazement or amusement, as the author of this paper experienced when many years ago he came across a butcher whose name was *Kotlewski* (German *Kotelett* 'chop'). The same holds true for other culturally acquired connotations of proper names, such as social, regional, or ethnic classification, as well as encyclopaedic information and lexical information "such as gender" (Anderson 2008: 99). But these categories are not reliable, they are based only on "life-experience" (Coates 2012: 127) and often prove false. In real-life communication, where language is simply used as a tool (Mukařovský 1989: 64–65), all these semantic or cultural connotations are irrelevant and even disturbing (cf. Kohlheim 2019: 18–20).

If now we come to literary texts, a fundamental insight, formulated more than half a century ago, should stand at the beginning: "Briefly, poeticalness is not a supplementation of discourse with rhetorical adornment but a total reevaluation of the discourse and of all its components whatsoever." Uttered by Roman Jakobson (1960: 372), these words are still quite valid. This "total reevaluation" concerns, as Jakobson states, all components of the literary discourse and therefore also the proper names used in literary texts. Some of the consequences of Jakobson's observation for theoretical literary onomastics shall be outlined in the following lines.

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2. Nearly all who have worked in the field of theoretical literary onomastics have come to the conclusion that the main task of the proper name in literature is the same as in real-life communication. The example of Debus (2005: 410) may serve for many: "Valid for all names, therefore also for literary names, is the basic function of identification" (my own translation). To test this opinion we shall just look at a typical *incipit*:

> Strether's first question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend; yet on his learning that Waymarsh was apparently not to arrive till evening he was not wholly disconcerted.

In my opinion, one can hardly say that the name *Strether* identifies someone in these first lines of the novel *The Ambassadors* by Henry James (1960: 5). Neither does the name refer here to anyone or anything. In contrast with real-life situations at the beginning of a narrative absolutely nothing is known about the character thus introduced (a different case are historical novels about persons who have really existed). Here the proper name *Strether* is a void, which in the course of the narrative will gradually be filled with properties. Of course, from its linguistic form and its contextual behaviour – Strether reaches a hotel, has a friend, asks questions, is referred to by the personal pronoun *he* – the reader will infer that *Strether* is an English (or American!) surname that here refers to a male human being. This is the first step in the filling of the void *Strether*, the first step in the establishment of the literary character. Thus, the principal purpose of names in literary texts is neither identification nor reference, but the establishment of the literary character (cf. Kohlheim 2019: 25–28). Or, in the words of literary theorist U. Margolin (2002: 108): "I would argue that singular referring expressions [among which Margolin counts proper names] occupy a special place […], since they designate or establish the individual entities that constitute the furniture of the storyworld […]." In the course of the narrative around the proper name *Strether* more and more properties or "personality traits" (Chatman 1978: 127) will be assembled, "culminating with the more or less unified construct called 'character'" (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 39). But still it is the proper name that gives these personality traits their unity. According to Barthes (1974: 190–191), it is the proper name that "enables the person to exist outside the semes [which are more or less Chatman's 'personality traits'], whose sum nonetheless constitutes it entirely. As soon as a Name exists (even a pronoun to flow toward and fasten unto), the semes become predicates, inductors of truth, and the Name becomes a subject."

One might object that there are narratives in which the characters remain nameless, such as parables, some fairy-tales, some short stories and some experimental French novels of the *nouveau roman* type. Thus, in Hemingway's

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well-known short story "Old Man at the Bridge", "cabled from Barcelona in April, 1938" (Hemingway 1962: 7), we never learn the name of the old man and the narrator only speaks of himself as *I* (Hemingway 1962: 76):

> An old man with steel rimmed spectacles and very dusty clothes sat by the side of the road. […]
> 'Where do you come from?' I asked him.
> 'From San Carlos,' he said, and smiled.

However, in shorter texts with limited personnel, a repeated classifying description like *the old man* or personal pronouns like *he* and *I* soon acquire quasi-onymic status and like proper names perform their "cohesive function" (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 40; Kohlheim 2019: 27–28).

3. "The simplest form of characterization is naming. Each 'appellation' is a kind of vivifying, animizing, individuating," say Wellek & Warren (1966: 219) in their *Theory of literature*. And as prototypical characterizing names these authors mention names whose pre-proprial meaning can still be accessed, be it immediately or by having recourse to their etymology. Those "cratylic" (Coates 2015: 32) or "talking names" (from German *redende Namen*) look back to a very old tradition; they can be found as early as in ancient Greek literature, were widely used at Shakespeare's time and also during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, being thought little of at present times (cf. Kohlheim 2018: 359–361). These names are perhaps the most obvious confirmation of Jakobson's afore-cited statement that in poetical discourse a "total reevaluation of […] all its components takes place": the pre-proprial meaning still apparent in the name which is so disturbing and negligible in real-life communication, now attains pre-eminent value. To achieve this "talking" quality most authors use or used semantically transparent names like Fielding's *Squire Allworthy*, Dickens's *Mr and Miss Murdstone*, Trollope's *Mrs Proudie*, Bishop Proudie's dominating wife, or Henry James's *Mrs Newsome*. The "meaning" of these names is immediately understood by everybody, but often only the linguistically informed reader has access to the hidden meaning by exploring the etymology of the name (Coates 2015: 32). To quote a well-known example: in order to grasp the complete meaning of the name of Thomas Mann's confidence trickster *Felix Krull* it is necessary to know that in Latin *fēlīx* means 'happy' and perhaps also that in Polish *król*, pronounced [krul], means 'king'. And indeed, Felix Krull in this novel appears as a happy man who, like a king, is master in all difficult situations.

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4. In real-life communication, Walter Shandy's conviction that there is "a strange kind of magick bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistably impress'd upon our characters and conduct" (Sterne 2003: 47), may well be deemed "bizarre" (Ricks 2003: xvii). In literature however, if we are confronted with "CAESARS and POMPEYS", we can expect that "by mere inspiration of the names", the bearers of these names will behave "worthy of them" (Sterne 2003: 47). Or they will disappoint us, if the name is used ironically. Balzac's César Birotteau (*Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau*, 1838) like his Roman namesake starts out to conquer a world, but fails miserably. This "sort [of names] that is exclusively employed of, and tied down to, a particular person or place or whatever they may be" (Gardiner 1954: 11), is sometimes grouped together with "talking names" as "analogous names" (Rimmon-Kennan 2002: 69). Though there are two kinds of "embodied names", as Gardiner (1954: 11) calls them, they are not always differentiated: theorists speak of "embodied names" if in a novel or a drama appear mythological or historical figures like *Antigone* or *Richard III* (e.g. Birus 1987: 40) as well as in the above mentioned cases, where the name of some everyday hero alludes to an historical or mythological figure. Here, only the last instance is of interest to us. For an example of an embodied name we only need to look again at Laurence Sterne's novel: it is just the reference to the hero of the Arthurian legend that causes Tristram Shandy's father Walter to abhor the name *Tristram*.

5. Whereas in real-world communication ambivalence and ambiguity are considered as disturbing factors and speakers intend to eliminate them, in poetic language they are ubiquitous, especially in connection with proper names. Though *ambiguity* and *ambivalence* in literary theory are used more or less indiscriminately, I have suggested to differentiate between these terms (Kohlheim 2019: 40–55). *Ambiguity* should be used in the sense in which Empson (1966: 1) has introduced the term into the literary discourse, namely designating "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language", in our case to a proper name. Onymic ambiguity can be compared to polysemy in the realm of common nouns. "Talking names" are ambiguous right from the beginning as the reader can never know whether the character's fate is in accordance with the semantic load of her or his name, vd. the above-mentioned *Felix Krull.* Though all the events told in the novel show us a happy character, the first sentences, uttered by the aged, tired, and disillusioned Felix Krull, put the name *Felix* into an ambiguous light.

Inherently ambiguous are many names in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Stephen Dedalus's friend Malachi Mulligan's first name, on the one hand, is an "embodied name" referring to the biblical prophet Malachi, whose Hebrew

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name means ‘my messenger’. On the other hand, it can be derived, like the surname, from Irish *Maolagán/Maolacán* meaning ‘the little bald/shaven one’, ‘monk’, a sense to which the remark that he has – in contrast with his name – “light untonsured hair” (Joyce 1960: 1) alludes. Mulligan’s nickname *Buck* alludes to the sexual potency of the male deer and rabbit, but also to the 19th century meaning of the word *buck* ‘dandy’ and even to its 18th century meaning ‘a man of spirit and gay conduct’. Joyce makes rich use of all of these ambiguities in his novel (Palme 1990: 34–36). Of course, also the name *Dedalus* is rich in ambiguities, reaching from the mythical Greek *artifex* Daidalos, whose name was already a “talking name” (Ancient Greek *daidáleos* ‘skilful’), to the English pronunciation of the name as *deedless* (Palme 1990: 29–30). And Molly Bloom in her famous monologue is reminded by the name *Dedalus* of her former Spanish lovers in Gibraltar because she deconstructs the name and interprets it according to a current Spanish name pattern as *De-Dalus:* “[…] Dedalus I wonder its [sic!] like those names in Gibraltar Delapaz Delagracia they had the devils queer names there […]” (Joyce 1960: 927).

6. In contrast with the definition of ambiguity, which might be compared to polysemy, I suggest that one should speak of onymic ambivalence when there are two interpretations that are mutually exclusive, though this is just the definition Rimmon (1977: x) gives for ambiguity. But our definition is more in accordance with the origin of the term which dates back to psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler (cf. Kohlheim 2019: 42). Thus, the spectator of Oscar Wilde’s comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* has to decide whether the sound sequence [ˈɜ:nɪst] is meant as an adjective or a proper name. Onymic ambivalence appears often in comedy, e.g. in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, 4.1.152–153, where different buildings are mentioned:

> The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself […].

The “great globe” in this climactic enumeration might well mean “the whole world”, but also the theatre “The Globe” (Winter-Froemel & Zirker 2010: 93). Here, the ambivalence between common and proper noun cannot be solved and contributes to the richness of the poetic text.

According to Coates (2012: 125–129), “proper names do not fall into logically secure categories”. In English especially, the connections between given names and gender are rather loose. If, for instance, in the nineteen-twenties a friend of the writer Waugh and his wife had mentioned to someone: “Yesterday I met Evelyn”, one would have to ask: “Him or her?” because the writer and his first wife were both called *Evelyn,* so that “from the start they

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were known as 'the two Evelyns'" (Powell 2001: 153). Again, what in real-world communication can be regarded as a systemic weakness, in literature may be used with gain. Thus, in David Lodge's novel *Nice Work* the managing director of an engineering company expects a male academic when he learns (by telephone call) that a certain *Robin* or *Robyn Penrose* is to "shadow" him for a scientific study whereas actually Robyn Penrose is a young lady. Thus Lodge, who had discovered in a dictionary of names that *Robin/Robyn* was an "androgynous name" (Lodge 2011: 38), was able to make use of this onymic ambivalence in a funny scene when the director actually encounters the young academic and is rather shocked to meet a young, attractive woman instead of a male researcher. N. Vasil'eva (2017: 1) calls the interaction between the "anticipatory work of the reader's consciousness, and the implicitness of [onymic] meanings that are not always subject to logical analysis", "implicatures". In this instance, the onymic gender implicatures connected with the seemingly masculine name *Robin* were not justified.

7. There are considerably more studies dedicated to literary personal names than to literary place-names. The reason for this discrepancy is obvious: whereas – with the exception of historical novels – most literary characters are invented, most literary place-names and their real counterparts are taken from reality. Even invented geographies like Trollope's *Barsetshire,* Hardy's *Wessex*, or Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha County* can be located more or less exactly on the maps of England or the United States (Kohlheim 2019: 162). But be they invented or taken from reality, toponyms perform important functions in the literary text, first of all to establish the fictional space. Let's look for example at another text by Sterne, his *Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768). In this "travelogue" the sense of space and movement is nearly exclusively conveyed by the place-names which are given in the headings of the different chapters: *Calais*, *Montriul*, *Nampont*, *Amiens*, *Paris*, *Versailles*, *Rennes*, *Moulines.* By mentioning these names, Sterne expects his readers to refer to a real map or their mental maps of France in order to constitute the space his narrative is set in. Street-names, on the other hand, reinforce the "reality effect" (Barthes 2006: 171). Therefore, street-names which feature references to "real" space often appear in fantastic literature, from E.T.A. Hoffmann to J.L. Borges. A journalist who interviewed Borges was even led as far as to believe that such a fantastic thing as an *Aleph,* a point in space where everything in the universe from every angle can be seen simultaneously, without overlapping and confusion, really existed, only because Borges had set his story in Buenos Aires' *Calle Garay* (Pauls 2004: 21).

But toponyms are apt to perform many more functions. Thus, in Henry

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James's novel *Washington Square* (1880), Dr Sloper's move from Lower Manhattan to the title-giving square indicates social rise, whereas in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* the Sedleys' move from elegant Russell Square to Brompton symbolizes the family's financial and social downfall (Demetz 1964: 117). Phonosemantics – sound-symbolism and sound-metaphor – extend to toponyms as well as to anthroponyms. In Poe's lines *It was down by the dank tarn of Auber / In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir* (*Ulalume*) the uncanny, Gothic atmosphere of the poem is created by both, the general terms and the proper names *Auber* and *Weir*. Moreover, *Weir* sounds nearly like *weird* and could therefore be interpreted as a cratylic, talking name as well. Thus, just like personal names, place-names, especially invented toponyms, can be talking names like Sinclair Lewis's *Gopher Prairie* (*Main Street*, 1920). Often poets have made use of the rich cultural and historical content of "real" place-names; thus Nielson & Hallen (2006: 5) have found out that Emily Dickinson used at least 162 toponyms in her poetic vocabulary. These place-names "open vistas of metaphor, meaning, emotion, history, understanding, and semantic layering" (Nielson & Hallen 2006: 19). To sum up, in literature, place-names as well as personal names undergo a total reevaluation of their functions.

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