

On Names in Literature¹

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At a weekend in June 1973—June 11–12, to be precise—I attended what, in optimistic anticipation of a series of regular, similar future meetings, was called the “First Annual Conference in Literary Onomastics”, organised by name scholars at the State University of New York at Brockport. This was my first contact with the study of names in literature and, having offered a novice’s paper on “Place Names in Literary Ballads” and having listened to several other presentations on various aspects of the main conference theme, I was captivated by the prospect of being able to combine my long-standing involvement in place-name research and in onomastics in general with a keen interest in literary matters, a fascination which has never left me since, resulting in a considerable number of articles, often in connection with conferences. Many of these have not been very accessible in Britain because they have been published in North America and in European countries (Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Greece); I have therefore decided to collect some of the ideas, expressed in them over the years,

¹ This essay was originally not intended for publication since it merely surveys and highlights some of the writer’s special areas of interest in the field of Literary Onomastics, a fact which accounts for the lack of any detailed references to his previous publications. It had been planned to be delivered by the author as the opening address of the 2008 annual conference of the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland, in Edinburgh. Unforeseen circumstances prevented him from being present in Edinburgh on that occasion but Dr Carole Hough very kindly agreed to present the paper on his behalf. Her presentation was so successful that the editor was persuaded to include the essay in the Society’s journal, *Nomina*. Its new status required at least a general indication as to which of the author’s previous publications had been utilised, sometimes verbatim, in its composition, although these form only a small proportion of his writings on the subject of names in literature. A selection of these are listed in the Appendix at the end of this article.

in this presentation, though running the risk of duplicating a few of their thoughts for those of you who, in this era of global communication, are, as expert surfers on no longer distant or even hidden shores, fully aware of what has been published on the other side of the Atlantic, the Channel and the North Sea.² To those I owe an apology.

About the time of my introduction to Literary Onomastics, it was to become scholarly practice to pay close attention to the function of names in literary texts, in a climate in which the chief aim of the investigation of names in general was the re-establishment of their original word meanings, their etymology. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that such a perspective was also transferred to the study of names in literature so that semantic considerations and quests became the dominant activities in the recently discovered, one might almost say invented, field of study. Coupled with a concentration on individual texts by individual authors, this led initially to approaches and ultimately to publications which explored the meaning of names which authors had chosen for their fictitious characters or places in a certain short story, novel, poem, or play, usually in conjunction with the examination of that purported meaning, in relationship to certain qualities of the characters or locations so named, or to the plot of the narrative in question. There must have been hundreds of papers read at learned gatherings and later revised and turned into articles the titles of which took the form: the meaning of names in literary work X by author Y; and it would be regarded as considerable progress when this meaning, once it was said to have been recovered, was first distinguished from and then linked to the function of the names investigated in that selfsame work X by author Y.

Even when the scope of the interrogation of names in literature had been extended, when new and challenging questions were beginning to be asked which, while sometimes incorporating the quest for lexical

² An informative discussion of the concept of "Literary Names" in German scholarship is to be found in Ines Sobanski, *Die Eigennamen in den Detektivgeschichten Gilbert Keith Chestertons: Ein Beitrag zur Theorie und Praxis der literarischen Onomastik* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1999), 35-85.

meaning on the way, widened the horizons of the onomastic investigation, the activities involved and the central focus still remained intratextual. What is this particular name doing in this particular text, and why did the author choose this particular name for this particular character or location? This kind of questioning was not just ascribable to the beginners' fumbling attempts at coming to grips with new material and new methods because from an authorial point of view there were good reasons for scholars restricting themselves to intratextual manoeuvres and strategies since, as Thomas Hardy once pointed out, a literary name and the place it designates exists only between the covers of a book, in this case *The Woodlanders*, that is in the mental landscapes of the imagined realities of authors and readers of a particular literary work, and not anywhere else.

Thus Hardy comments, tongue in cheek, in the Preface to the 1912 edition of his novel:

I have been honoured by so many inquiries for the true name and exact locality of the hamlet 'Little Hintock', in which the greater part of the action of this story goes on, that I may as well confess here once and for all that I do not know myself where that hamlet is more precisely than as explained above and in the pages of this narrative. To oblige readers I once spent several hours on a bicycle with a friend in a serious attempt to discover the real spot; but the search ended in failure: though tourists assure me positively that they have found it without trouble, and that it answers in every particular to the description given in this volume.

Students of names in literature would do well to listen to the authors of their fictions on the subject of name choosing or name making. The beginning of the very first paragraph of the very first chapter of Sir Walter Scott's very first novel is an instructive case in point:

The title of this work has not been chosen without the grave and solid deliberation, which works of importance demand from the prudent. Even its first, or general denomination, was the result of

no common research or selection, although, according to the example of my predecessors, I had only to seize upon the most sounding and euphonic surname that English history or topography affords, and elect it at once as the title of my work, and the name of my hero. But, alas! what could my readers have expected from the chivalrous epithets of Howard, Mordaunt, Mortimer, or Stanley, or from the softer and more sentimental sounds of inanity, similar to those which have been so christened for half a century past? I modestly admit I am too diffident of my own merit to place it in unnecessary opposition to pre-conceived associations; I have, therefore, like a maiden knight with his white shield, assumed for my hero, WAVERLEY, an uncontaminated name, bearing with its sound little of good or evil, excepting what the reader shall hereafter be pleased to affix to it.

If this account is genuine—and there is no reason to believe that it is not, in spite of Scott's love of misleading buffoonery—then it is a rich source for the name scholar who simply cannot but rejoice in this confession, affording us, as it does, a glimpse into the novelist's workshop not usually available in such revealing fashion.

In these two quotations, the author as author, or as purported author, appears to take the reader into his confidence in a double role as both creator and commentator. In other examples, and there are many, the fictitious characters themselves make onomastic statements, as for instance in Graham Greene's short story *Under the Garden* of 1982. As its title indicates, the narrative invites us to accompany, through the skilful use of fictions within fictions, a seven-year old boy in his imaginary adventures underneath the surface of the world, the garden, in which we live and have our being. In this subterranean world he encounters an old couple, he a crotchety old man, she an inarticulate woman with no roof to her mouth. In the course of a series of verbal interchanges (one can hardly call them conversations), the problematic nature of names comes up:

'You can call me Javitt', [the old man said] because it's not my real name. You don't believe I'd give up that, do you? And

Maria's not Maria—it's just a sound she answers to, you understand me, like Jupiter.' 'If you had a dog called Jupiter, you wouldn't believe he was really Jupiter, would you?' 'I've got a dog called Joe' [said the boy]. 'The same applies' [said the old man] and drank his soup.

On a later occasion, Javitt, the man who never existed and whose name is not Javitt, brings up the subject of names again:

In the beginning you had a name only the man or woman knew who pulled you out of your mother. Then there was a name for the tribe to call you by. That was of little account, but of more account all the same than the name you had with strangers; and there was a name used in the family—by your pa and ma if it's those terms you call them by nowadays. The only name without any power at all was the name you used to strangers. That's why I call myself Javitt to you, but the name the man who pulled me out knew—that was so secret I had to keep his as a friend for life, so that he wouldn't tell me because of the responsibility it would bring—I might let it slip before a stranger. Up where you come from they've begun to forget the power of a name. I wouldn't be surprised if you only had the one name and what's the good of a name everyone knows? Do you suppose even I feel secure here with my treasure and all—because, you see, as it turned out, I got to know the first name of all. He told it me before he died, before I could stop him, with a hand over his mouth. I doubt if there's anyone in the world except me who knows the first name. It's an awful temptation to speak it out loud—introduce it casually into the conversation like you might say by Jove, by George, for Christ's sake. Or whisper it when you think no one's attentive.

With the arrival of the concept of intertextuality in all its nuances and variations, on the scene of literary criticism, it was inevitable that questions should also begin to be asked regarding the intertextual role of names in literature. As a consequence, several attempts have been made over the years to start writing an onomastic chapter in the grammar of

intertextuality.

In its simplest form the function of names as intertextual devices is not much more than a kind of shorthand reference to specific aspects of another literary work evoking certain associations, perhaps of a ludic kind, or drawing illuminating parallels between the two texts involved, thus creating a special intertextual vibrancy through the use of onomastic allusions, similes and metaphors. At the other end of the scale, onomastic ingredients of one work of fiction are sometimes transferred to other, later literary productions, as when Angela Thirkell, in the thirties and forties of the last century, borrowed the fictive reality of Anthony Trollope's nineteenth-century Barsestshire as the setting of her own series of novels; William Golding, too, in his novel *The Pyramid* (1967) makes playful use of Trollope's creation, and in his most famous novel *The Lord of the Flies* (1984) adopts the names of his youthful protagonists as well as the idea of an island setting from the Scottish author's R.M. Ballantyne's adventure story for boys, *The Coral Island* (1857).

Largely onomastic devices are also frequently employed to provide invented continuations or create derivational extensions or interludes to earlier novels, with some degree of credibility, by later authors. The range of possibilities in this specific form of onomastically based intertextuality between two literary texts is, of course, considerable and is still being given some attention. Names do, however, serve in another, so far hardly investigated, role to cross the boundaries of a literary text, and that is through the inclusion of names of real places or of real, more often than not historical, persons into a work of fiction.

When viewed from one angle, what we witness in this process is a strategy by which an author inserts fictitious onymic designations into the interstices of real landscapes and societies, although when we look a little harder we soon discover that the realities of the so-called real names of places and persons are much less trustworthy than one might have expected. The Glasgows of Sir Walter Scott's *Rob Roy*, George Blake's *The Shipbuilders*, William McIlvanney's *Laidlaw*, McArthur and Long's *No Mean City*, Robin Jenkins' *A Would-Be Saint*, or Chaim Berman's novels about middleclass Glasgow Jewry are all different Glasgows but, in the process of becoming part of a work of fiction, the

name of the city has become as fictitious as those names which derive from authorial inventiveness. In a sense, all named entities in works of fiction are fictive texts embedded in other fictive texts, and it is often irrelevant whether they exist outside those texts as well. With their aid, the extratextual world has been drawn into, has been incorporated into the intratextual world, has been revealed itself as fiction. It is within these overlapping landscapes and elusive boundary zones, and the unpredictable associations that readers bring to them, that the quest for etymologies loses practically all purpose, for it is the content of a name that matters here, not its lexical meaning. Most names can therefore be regarded as empty shells to be filled with contents more or less at will, a thought which brings me to the last of the observations which I would like to make in this context: the knotty question of what constitutes a literary name.

I have already hinted at my own answer, but in general the subject has been mostly debated among German-speaking scholars. One position which has emerged from these discussions is that not all names which are to be found in literary works are 'literary names'; from this point of view all names of authentic persons and objects inserted in a text are sometimes declared to be 'non-literary', a position which is on occasion expressed by contrasting 'literary names in a narrow sense' and 'literary names in a wider sense'. It is therefore necessary to re-emphasise that in principle all names in the onomasticon of a literary work are 'literary names' and are as such components of the fiction conveyed by that work. In this connection, I have already made the point today that the multiple use of the same 'authentic' name, like Glasgow, by several authors of fictional narratives produces multiple fictive names are, in spite of the seductive identity of name, different fictive 'Glasgows'.

Conversely to this fictionalisation of fact, the process of factualisation of fiction is, for instance, demonstrated by a number of places in the United States called *Waverly* [sic!] after the protagonist of Scott's first novel, with the additional transformation of a personal name into a place name, a phenomenon which has produced such North American river names as the Hudson and the Mackenzie and the popular county name *Jefferson*. A telling extension of this change is the

conversion of such British place names as Washington, Dallas and Churchill into surnames of prominent politicians only to be re-converted into place names in new transatlantic locations.

These examples also serve as reminders of the flexibility and richness in name usage, illustrating the fact that names are by no means always created from words but can be coined through intra-onomastic switches from one category to another. They also move our main argumentation closer to its conclusion for, if a persuasive definition of a 'literary name' is 'any name that can be found in a literary work', regardless of its ultimate origins, then this includes personal names and place names, as well as names of boats, houses, and other objects; 'literary names' are therefore not to be included in the same taxonomic chain as personal names and place names, and it is this incompatibility which creates the awkwardness, uncomfortableness and general difficulty associated with the placing of chapters on literary onomastics in handbooks, and, of course, with any other attempt at an orderly and ordered overview of name studies. One simply cannot satisfactorily produce a classification like Personal Names, Place Names, Literary Names ... because, in contradistinction to the frequently proposed division into literary and non-literary names or, in extension, into Literary Onomastics and Non-Literary-Onomastics, any kind of name is, can be or can become a literary name, regardless of its origins. In other words, any name can become a fiction. What that means is that, apart from the literary criteria of the work of literature in the text of which they are embedded or of which they form an integral part, literary names have to be treated like any other names, and together with these in parallel, though otherwise identical approaches. It is the combined application of the strategies of the literary critic and the tactics of the name scholar that makes Literary Onomastics possible and believable as a creditable intellectual pursuit.

Nevertheless, in spite of the emergence of a discernible intellectual endeavour called Literary Onomastics, it has continued to be considered both legitimate and productive to interrogate literary texts without paying attention to any inventories of names incorporated in them as onymic texts, and also to investigate names in non-literary environments without making any reference to their potential and actual literary

usage; what I suggest here today is some kind of radical rethinking in this respect. In fact, what is proposed here is an approach which would, at least occasionally, reroute these habitual research strategies by taking into account, on the one hand, non-literary uses of personal names, place names, house names, boat names, etc. when studying them in literary contexts, and taking into consideration their application as literary devices when examining personal names, place names, house names, boat names. etc., primarily in non-literary situations. It seems to me that this may well be an effective means of eliminating the constant and usually uncalled for need for literary names, or for Literary Onomastics, to be thought of as additions, as appendices to what have been taken to be more central pursuits of onomastics by its scholars, and thus to avoid them being placed in final or at least peripheral positions in what are often inappropriate taxonomic sets.

Please allow me one post-scriptum to this apologia. While it should never be forgotten that the red-blood of literariness flows through all the environments in which names in literature nestle and flourish, it is equally essential to remember that it is their nominality, their existence as names, that shapes their very, unmistakable being. Whereas it is comparatively easy to observe and laud the mediating bridge-building characteristics of literary onomastics (and we have done this ourselves), it would probably be more revealing to regard the dual nature of the names in question—onymic features on the one hand, and literary phenomena on the other—as the supporting pillars on opposite banks, and assign the bridging of the river that flows between them and is therefore both their separator and their connector, in the first place to the creative, imaginative activities of the writer and, secondly, to the response of the reader. Without either of these, separately or combined, there would be no literary onomastics, no study of names in literature; without a river there would be no need for a bridge stretching from pier to pier on opposite banks, or even for a ferry to ply between the two banks.

**Appendix: Select Bibliography of
the author's work on Literary Onomastics**

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- 'The Place Names of Barsetshire', *Literary Onomastics Studies*, 3 (1976), 1–21
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- 'An Onomastic Vernacular in Scottish Literature', in *Scotland and the Lowland Tongue*, edited by J. Derrick McClure (Aberdeen, 1983), pp. 209–218.
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