Naming Day in Old New Orleans: Charactonyms and Colloquialisms in George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* and *Old Creole Days*

WILLIAM W. EVANS

George Washington Cable's interest in personal names that mirror the character of the literary figures they label begins — like his interest in dialect speech — well before the appearance of *The Grandissimes* in 1879, and even before the publication of his earliest short story in 1873.[1] In fact, his involvement with charactonyms — in a certain sense — may well date from the day of his christening, or the christening of his father, whom he was named after. *George Washington*, after all, is a pretty hefty handle for an infant. Cable remarks of one of his characters — the title character in "Madame Délicieuse" — that "she could at times do what the infantile Washington said he could not" (p. 126). It would appear that the infantile Cable, as well as the young adult Cable, literally could not. If Cable, in fact, were a character in *The Grandissimes*, his given names would be a fairly valid charactonym, in some respects. For a long time he looked upon novels with suspicion as fabrications; and attendance at theatrical performances was unthinkable, even when his job as a columnist for the New Orleans *Picayune* called for it.[2] Moreover, Mark Twain,

[1] *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* first appeared in serial form in *Scribner's Monthly*, beginning in the fall of 1879. But all subsequent references to it will be to the edition of the following year (New York: Scribner's 1880). Cable's earliest published short story was " 'Sieur George" (SG). The other collected stories of the 1870's, in chronological order, were "Belles Demoiselles Plantation" (BD), " 'Tite Poulette" (TP), "Jean-ah Poquelin" (JP), "Madame Délicieuse" (MD), "Café des Exilés" (CE), and "Posson Jone' " (PJ). They were all gathered together in 1879 as the volume *Old Creole Days*. In a new edition in 1883, "Madame Delphine," originally published in 1881, was added to the original seven. This edition furnishes the text of the eight stories in Arlin Turner's collection *Creoles and Cajuns: Stories of Old Louisiana by George W. Cable* (New York: Doubleday, 1959). All subsequent references to the stories are to the Turner volume.

[2] Arlin Turner, *George W. Cable: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1966), p. 46.

on the lecture circuit with Cable, made no secret of his frustration at Cable's strict observance of the Sunday Sabbath: there were to be no lectures, no travel, no frivolity until the workaday week began again.[3]

It was when he was a columnist for the *Picayune* at the beginning of the 1870's, however, that his first published involvement with charactonyms seems to have occurred. With Josh Billings and other contemporary humorists in mind, he invented a kind of country bumpkin character — complete with outlandish spelling habits — whom he named *Felix Lazarus*. And the name was a good one, for the character was happy and outgoing, fortunate in his simplicity and the unwittingly shrewd observations he occasionally came up with, and perhaps blessed — with a certain difference from the two men named *Lazarus* in Scripture[4] — by being free of the restrictions of an urban life and free of the conventional linguistic restraints.

Such a name as *Felix Lazarus* suggests that Cable's charactonyms tend to be immediately obvious like *Everyman* or *Christian*, and at the same time exotic — Lazarus being a rare name in the *New Orleans Directory* of the period.[5] But actually a number of his names, while transparent, are fairly common ones. A further check of the *New Orleans Directory* reveals that French surnames like *Fusilier* from *The Grandissimes* and *de la Rue* (TP) and *Lemaitre* (D) from *Old Creole Days* appeared often, and that Anglo ones like *White* (JP) were extremely popular. On the other hand, the German name *Frowenfeld,* given to one of the heroes of the *Grandissimes*, presents a unique subject for speculation. There is only one *Frowenfeld* listed for the decade of the 1870's in New Orleans, but his name is *Joseph Frowenfeld*, exactly the same as Cable's character. The actual Frowenfeld appears first in the year 1872. He is successively a clerk, bookkeeper, and accountant in a business firm, and then appears as one of three, then one of two, partners in a company of commission merchants — the last in 1879, the year Cable was beginning to publish *The Grandissimes*. It seems too much of a coincidence that the fictional Joseph Frowenfeld begins as an immigrant, starts a small pharmacy on borrowed capital, gains the respect and admiration of the important

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[3]Turner, pp. 185–88.

[4]It will be recalled that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, was blessed by being brought back to life (John 11,12), while Lazarus, the leper in the parable of the rich man (Luke 6), was blessed by being transported out of this life and into Abraham's bosom.

[5]There were actually two directories covering this period: *Edwards' Annual Directory to the Inhabitants et al . . . . in the City of New Orleans from 1870–73* (New Orleans: Southern Publishing Co., 1870–73); and *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* . . . 1874– (New Orleans: Soards Directory Co., 1874–)

people, ends up apparently as the principal apothecary in town, and marries a highly desirable Creole heiress. The name *Frowenfeld* might well have served as a kind of local charactonym — limited to readers of *The Grandissimes* in New Orleans.

Cable's charactonyms of a more traditional sort may involve a given name, a surname, or a complete name. *Aurore*, Cable's label for the principal heroine of *The Grandissimes*, is a good example of a significant given name. Intrigued with Creole women in general, Cable creates in Aurore a charmer who lights up the life of the men around her in a manner reminiscent of the effervescence of Madame Délicieuse, the heroine who was lacking in Washingtonian virtue. There could hardly be a more appropriate name for a sunburst like Aurore than that of the goddess of the dawn.

Equally appropriate as a given name is *Delphine,* from the long short story "Madame Delphine." Insofar as it derives from the flower, delphinium, it fits the gentle, fading, yet still attractive, quadroon mother who lives alone with her beautiful fair-skinned daughter in an old house surrounded by wild flowers and fruit trees. The fact that there was a Saint Delphine makes the name that much more appropriate, inasmuch as the mother's principal concern is the future of her daughter, and she ultimately puts her own soul in jeopardy by swearing the girl is *not* her daughter so that she is free to marry the Creole man who loves her.

Among the significant surnames in Cable's early work, *Keene* is particularly well suited to the perceptive and knowledgeable doctor in *The Grandissimes*[6] who guides Frowenfeld back to health and makes him — and the reader — keenly aware of events and personalities in the story. There is a keen sense of irony also in his acute disappointment in love and life, in spite of his penetrating insight into the affairs of others.

The surname *White* in the story "Jean-ah Poquelin" seems to be appropriate in a more subtle sense. Little White is a "mild, kind-hearted little man" (p. 113) who comes to the defense of the title character, an old Creole aristocrat who is being hounded by the Anglo community because he is an eccentric and his property is wanted for land developments. His name has the usual positive connotations of the color white. But it has been suggested that there also seems to be a kind of ironic reversal in regard to the association of white and dark in the story.[7] In spite of his

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[6]Needless to say, the most obvious surname serving as a charactonym in the novel is *Grandissime* itself: there were very few members of the clan who did *not* think of themselves as "the greatest."

[7]Joseph J. Egan, " 'Jean-ah Poquelin': George Washington Cable as Social Critic and Mythic Artist," *Markham Review*, II, No. 3 (May 1970), 7.

personal sympathies, White is an Anglo officially representing the land developers; and his name might be taken as a symbol of the unhealthy obsession of the white — or Anglo American — community with the persecution of Poquelin. On the other hand, Poquelin, who in Cable's words is "bronze" of face and "black" (p. 107) of eye and thus a dark-skinned Latin, is in more than one way an admirable and exemplary figure. The notion of reversal becomes the more compelling in view of the "ghostly white" that is the color of Jacques Poquelin, the leper who has been concealed and cared for by his brother for years.

Agricola Fusilier, one of the principal characters in *The Grandissimes*, exemplifies the use of a complete name as charactonym. He is a landowner and planter, as *Agricola* suggests. Moreover, he is a lover of the land of Louisiana — for the native born French Louisianians, that is. And on that subject he is more of a tinderbox himself than a maker of them — which is what *Fusilier* implies; but the military gun-toting image that is equally implied could hardly be more apt.

Another good example of the total name functioning as charactonym is *Clarisse Délicieuse*, the prevaricating heroine in "Madame Délicieuse." *Clarisse*, diminutive of *Clara*, reflects the character's role as a sun around whom many people cluster. She is clear and bright — and sweetness and light. She is delicious not only in face and figure, but in mind as well, as she brings about — by ingenious manipulation — a reconciliation between a father and son who have been at odds for years, and as she also brings about her marriage with the son, who — like his father — had long since been enamored of her, but who would not ask her to marry him, disinherited as he was. Moreover, her name suggests a sometime advantage — at least for English-speaking readers — in the use of French charactonyms. *Clarissa Delicious* somehow just wouldn't have the delicate air that one feels, or rather hears, in *Clarisse Délicieuse*.

What is particularly striking about many of Cable's charactonyms — and some of his other names — however, is his insistence upon the name as a colloquial act — not something once bestowed and then frozen immutable, but something dynamic and flexible. The implication of flexibility — even fluidity — is often reflected in variant pronunciations of the name and in various kinds of restructuring, or manipulation, of the elements — particularly the words in a multi-word name. Each process frequently has a significant relationship to the interpretation of the character and the character's role in the narrative.

One kind of variation in pronunciation is contraction. This occurs in Cable's names both initially and finally. Both possibilities reflect his awareness of the realities of spoken language, and both are clearly illus-

trated in *The Grandissimes* at moments when the pharmacist is addressed as 'Sieur Frowenfel' by native speakers of French (e.g., pp. 276 and 277). But the same kinds of change may occur with even more significance in some of Cable's other early narratives.

Three of the stories in *Old Creole Days* have titles that are obviously spoken forms of one of the principal characters' names. All of them — "'Sieur George," "'Tite Poulette," "Posson Jone' " — involve either initial or final contraction. The shortened form *'Sieur George* helps to underline the gradual decay of the title character — which is the point of the story. As Cable puts it, the serenaders in the streets first called him *George* "but always prefixing *Monsieur.*" Afterwards, "when he began to be careless in his dress . . . , and the fashion of serenading had passed away, the commoner people dared to shorten the title to "'*Sieur George*" (p. 49).

The parallel shortening of *Monsieur de la Rue* to *'Sieur de la Rue* (p. 91) in the story "'Tite Poulette" has even more pejorative force on the lips of the mother whose daughter is the object of the unwelcome attentions of Monsieur, an unsavory dance-hall manager. His name, with its implications of the "street," obviously suggests his commonness at the same time. The situation is rather different, however, with the form *'Tite Poulette* 'young chicken' in the same story. This is the quadroon mother's pet name for her beautiful, fair-skinned daughter. But when its use spreads, the name becomes questionable — at least to some degree. As Cable says, the "unleashed tongues" of the young Creole lads "never attempted any greater liberty than to take up the pet name . . ." (p. 83). Nevertheless, *'Tite Poulette* is taken up by outsiders, and it remains ambivalent until the whole business is settled by the discovery that the girl is not the quadroon's daughter, and by her subsequent betrothal to an eligible young Dutchman.

Finally, the contracted form of *Jones* in "Posson Jone' " is perfectly natural in the pronunciation of a native speaker of French — a worldly young Creole — who attempts the gulling of a fundamentalist backwoods preacher. Moreover, his contracted form of the preacher's name — along with the preacher's expanded form of his (*Jools*, replacing *Jules*) — underscores in striking fashion the linguistic distance between their two worlds, and by implication their cultural and intellectual disparity.

Another kind of pronunciation variation, then, in Cable's early work is obviously expansion — typically final expansion. Cable's awareness of the spoken language in this respect is interestingly reflected in his reaction to the name of his heroine *Aurore* in *The Grandissimes*. Part way through the novel, he converts *Aurore* to *Aurora* because "it sounds so much

pleasanter to Anglicize her name'' (p. 88). The French form understandably does not have the connotations of the Anglicized form that he is presumably used to. More often than not, however, he has become accustomed to French forms (*Clarisse Délicieuse*, e.g.) and uses them even if English parallels are available.[8]

The expansion of *Jules* to *Jools* is ''Posson Jone'' is, on the other hand, something more than an expression of Cable's phonological preferences. It also demonstrates his efforts to make his narratives authentic in a variety of detailed ways. We might wonder initially how the parson could arrive at *Jools* from the spoken form of *Jules*, in which no *s* is pronounced. But if we look back at the opening of the story, we see that Cable has carefully introduced the complete name — *Jules St.-Ange* — in the preceding dialogue. And from the spoken form of that, the parson could easily infer that the *s* was an integral part of the given name, spoken or written.

Sometimes the variation in pronunciation is neither contraction nor expansion, but rather an internal affair. This internal modification occurs in *The Grandissimes* and in *Old Creole Days,* sometimes to reflect the dialect variation of the speaker. Thus *Professor*, a title frequently given to Frowenfeld, becomes *Profiss-or*; and *Charlie*, the familiar form of Dr. Keene's given name, becomes *Challie*.

On the other hand, a more significant effect is probably intended in ''Jean-ah Poquelin'' when *Poquelin* becomes both *Poquelann* and *Pokaleen* in the speech of some of the Anglos who are trying to dispossess the recluse. Such alterations underline the scorn and general lack of consideration that the speakers have for him. But Cable's irony becomes especially biting when he introduces one of the mispronunciations — *Pokaleen* — as that of the chairman of the board of the land development company, who ''had studied French in Pennsylvania and was considered qualified'' (p. 112), linguistically and otherwise, to negotiate with the old planter. A similar ironic effect is gained by the plausible, but historically inappropriate, modification of *Jacques Poquelin* to *Jack Poquelin*[9] by another Anglo official — additional evidence of a gap between two worlds.

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[8]The matter is more complex than it might seem, however. In the case of Agricola Fusilier, for example, the given name is clearly *Agricola,* with final *-a*. But it is equally clear that this form must reflect a borrowing from the Latin, not an Anglicizing.

[9]While French *Jean* and English *John* (both deriving from Medieval Latin *Jōhannēs)* are alike etymologically, French *Jacques* (from the Latin *Jacobus*) and English *Jack* (from Middle English *Jankin*, diminutive of *John*) are quite distinct. There is a further irony in Cable's choice of *Jean Poquelin* as a name for his central figure, since he was surely aware of the name of the comic playwright Molière. While Cable's character is seen by many members of the Anglo community as comic — and is the object of a shivaree — his situation is clearly more pathetic than comic.

Cable's emphasis on the colloquial aspects of his names is also frequently reflected, sometimes subtly, in various kinds of manipulation that go beyond just pronunciation changes, but sometimes include them as well. The title *Professor,* however pronounced, that is often added to *Frowenfeld* in *The Grandissimes* furnishes a good example of the expansion of a basic name — in this case, by an obvious honorific. *Jean Poquelin* is expanded in opposite fashion, however, when the derisive element *-ah* is added, and the resulting extension becomes a more or less permanent symbol of the thoughtless contempt of the Anglo community for him and the way of life he embodies.

On the other hand, reduction is in operation when the ancestral name *Brahmin Mandarin de Grandissime* becomes the less impressive, but still distinguished, *Grandissime* in later, more egalitarian times. In somewhat similar fashion, the disinherited son in the story *Madame Délicieuse* opts for a reduction of his ancestral name from *Mossy de Villivicencio* to just *Mossy* — a move which his acquaintances find incomprehensible and never tire of talking about. It seems quite clear that Mossy, a physician, drops the *de Villivicencio* because of its etymological overtones of triumphs over towns and of military victories in general. And the doctor, in preferring to be called simply *Mossy,* chooses a name that is not exactly ippropriate — in English at least. For Dr. Mossy — though he has an international reputation for his research — is modest and humble and unaggressive, certainly not the "rolling stone" that his father, the general, was.

One of the most interesting kinds of onomastic manipulation in Cable's early works is replacement, whereby one name — or one element in a name — substitutes for another, either temporarily or permanently. This can be seen in *The Grandissimes* when (before the novel opens) *Aurore De Grapion* becomes *Aurore Nancanou* by virtue of marriage — as might be expected. Manipulation enters the picture as Cable frequently replaces *Nancanou,* in its turn, by *De Grapion* when it is appropriate to stress the ancient and intense rivalry between the De Grapions and the Grandissimes.

More dramatic and complex is the replacement in "Madame Delphine" by which the dominant quality of a character changes and his name changes along with it. What is involved is a shift of focus, in a sense. The complete name of the Creole who ultimately marries Madame Delphine's daughter is *Ursin Lemaitre Vignevielle*. He was brought up by his martial grandfather to be "savage and ferocious" (p. 195). And though Grandfather does not entirely succeed, the boy becomes independent and self-assertive and subsequently a pirate, or rather privateer,

along with the Brothers Lafitte — amply justifying the name by which he was known in his young manhood, *Capitaine Ursin Lemaitre*, master of what he chose to survey and presumably formidable as a bear. But the times changed and the man changed along with them, or at least different qualities became dominant. The pirate became a kindly and benevolent banker. And *Ursin Lemaitre* became *U. L Vignevielle*, hardly ferocious or even formidable, but rather redolent of vines and old gardens — a fitting onomastic mate for Olive, the daughter of Delphine.

Cable's fondness for charactonyms and colloquialisms in choosing his names sometimes goes beyond just the individual person. It is notable that in this early fiction there are several examples of close brotherly or brotherlike relationships and that more than one of them is underlined by appropriate onomastic parallels — a rather complex kind of manipulation.

In the story "Belles Demoiselles," a very proud Creole is closely bound by family ties to a lower class character of Indian descent. And the relationship is insisted upon partly through the essential identity of the names. The Colonel is named *De Charleu*, and his relative *De Carlos*. And Cable pointedly states that *De Charleu* had become *De Carlos* by Spanish contact (p. 64). But De Carlos is commonly known as *Injin Charlie* — a name which insists on the relationship even more strongly by the diminutive form *Charlie* and emphasizes the colloquial implications further by the assibilation that has operated in *Injin*. The colloquial emphasis is also reflected in the name by which the Colonel is called. After pointing out that De Charleu would not speak to anyone who called him *Colonel* since it was a title bestowed by the first American governor (p. 64), Cable proceeds to call him *Colonel* himself throughout the story, as does Injin Charlie — in the contracted form, *Curl*.

In the case of the Poquelin brothers — Jean and Jacques — we find names that are quite distinct in French. But the frequently close relationship between *John* and *Jack* in English will tempt the English reader, at least, to see an onomastic parallel which is of course entirely appropriate, since according to Cable, there was "no trait in Jean Marie Poquelin . . . for which he was so well known among his few friends as his apparent fondness for his 'little brother' " (p. 104).

But the most striking onomastic parallel in this early fiction is surely the identity in name of the two Grandissime brothers — the Creole Honoré and the free man of color, also named *Honoré*. The one is legitimate, the other illegitimate; but before the close of the novel, and before the death of Honoré f.m.c., the two brothers are linked more closely than ever before in the consolidation of the family business under the title *Grandissime Frères*. Cable's device of identical names here constitutes one of his

strongest statements in *The Grandissimes* of the close ties and common concerns of the two races.

It has come to be recognized of late that Faulkner and a number of other recent Southern writers have been anticipated by Cable — particularly in *The Grandissimes* — in a variety of ways, most importantly perhaps in the treatment of relationships between the races.[10] Even a brief and incomplete look at some of the things Cable does with the names of his characters suggests that Faulkner and some other Southern writers also have an onomastic precursor[11] in the author of *The Grandissimes* and *Old Creole Days*. It is clear that Cable's insight into social problems and issues still current is remarkable for his time and equally valuable for ours. In similar fashion, his effective employment of personal names is well worth examining for its possibilities in the contemporary writing, and analysis, of fiction — as well as for its illumination of his own narratives.

Louisiana State University

[10]The matter is discussed, for example, by Louis Rubin, *George Washington Cable: The Life and Times of a Southern Heretic* (New York: Western Publishing Co., 1969), p. 78. In addition to Faulkner, Rubin mentions Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, and Thomas Wolfe, among others, as following along a path opened up by Cable in their attempts to deal honestly with the complexities of Southern racial experience.

[11]Faulkner's names have been the subject of investigation more than once. See, for example, Joseph M. Backus, "Names of Characters in Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*," *Names* VI (December 1958), 226–33; Kelsie B. Harder, "Charactonyms in Faulkner's Novels," *Bucknell Review*, VIII (May 1959), 189–201; and Frederick Burelbach, "Two Family Names: Faulkner and Sartoris," *Literary Onomastics Studies*, IV (1977), 81–93, and "The Name of the Snake: A Family of Snopes," *Literary Onomastics Studies*, VIII (1981), 125–46. And even a cursory examination suggests that Warren, Welty and Wolfe have also dealt in interesting fashion with some of their characters' names.