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Speaking of No One: the Logical Status of Fictional Proper Names

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"Call me Ishmael," the voice begins, inaugurating thereby not only a story, but a project to name someone, a narrator who exists and can only exist simply *as* voice: a voice that speaks only within our own hearing. In a sense, this voice thus invites us to an act of creation, but what kind of creation is it? What do we create here, and with what materials? Such questions apparently need not be asked of non-fictional names, which appear simply to index the subjects of clearly non-onomastic constitutions, individuals who would exist whether we name them or not. Therefore, the fictional proper name can only be a mere pretense, a secondary usage modelled after the "true" proper name, without any true referent at all.

And yet, we tend to respond to fictional names just as we respond to non-fictional names. Indeed, the very example I have taken here from Melville prompts us to wonder what our narrator's "real" name might be, since "Ishmael" is apparently an alias of some kind. But how can something that doesn't exist have an alias, or, at least, cause us to ponder its possibility? To whom, or to what, might such an alias refer, and can we really ask? Wouldn't this be rather like numbering Lady Macbeth's children?

To seek a solution to our dilemma within the literature of referential semantics, to search, that is, for a logical account of the fictional proper name, does appear at first glance to be a self-frustrating procedure. If we look, for example, to John Searle's study of "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," we find the fictional proper name relegated to the status of a "pretended reference" that functions only to "the extent that we share in the pretense."[1] Similarly,

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[1] John Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," in *Contemporary Perceptions in the Philosophy of Language*, eds. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), p. 240.

in his own account of the logical necessity of onomastic designation, Princeton's Saul Kripke remarks that he has nothing to say about the "truth values of statements mentioning objects that do not exist in the actual world."[2] And Gottlob Frege, the German logician whose work in referential semantics set the stage a century ago for the whole course of contemporary logical debate, simply observes that "it is a matter of no concern to us whether the name 'Odysseus,' for instance, has meaning, so long as we accept the poem (in which it appears) as a work of art."[3] For such philosophers, the fictional proper name is simply a form of logical make-believe, a pleasant sort of diversion lacking the seriousness of "true" proper names. Proper names identify real subjects whose reality the fictional proper name can only mimic.

But can we really distinguish proper names from fictions so easily? Are they really so logically distinct? To ask such questions is not to imply the fictionality of all names, but to question the very opposition itself. Isn't it possible that, *as names,* both fictional and non-fictional designations share a certain logical identity, a common conceptual ground? Is not each nominal kind the product of cultural decisions whose content may vary, but whose onomastic identity and structure do not? For names, whether fictional or non-fictional, do not occur spontaneously, but are constituted according to procedures that can be seen to be logically identical in their ultimate motivation. And to see how this is so, we might begin with an examination of that most natural of apparent indexes: the christened child.

So let us say that a certain child is born, prompting his parents to call him by a certain name. Now, the fact that we name this child at all can be taken for granted, but is the situation really so determinant? First of all, there are rules, established not by nature but by social convention, governing the very form of the names we give. In America we assign a "first" name, a "middle" name, and a "last" (or family) name. This procedure is, historically, relatively new and even within our own country may be further refined. In Christian families, for example, firstborn male offspring are often named after their fathers, while in Jewish families naming is organized to perpetuate the names (or initials) of the deceased. It appears then that culture

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2 Saul Kripke, "Identity and Necessity," in *Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds,* ed. Stephen Schwartz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 68.

3 Gottlob Frege, "On Sense and Meaning," in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege,* trans. Peter Geach and Max Black (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowan and Littlefield, 1980), p. 63.

itself determines for us in advance the very conditions for our own naming, constituting those rules by which naming may not only proceed, but actually begin.

And yet, isn't it the birth of the child that makes naming possible in the first place? Certainly culture does not govern parturition? No, indeed it does not, but culture still determines just which births are "worthy" of naming. That is to say, the name we give to a child has its motivation not in the actual child alone, but in a social decision as to which beings shall be granted proper names. We do not ordinarily assign proper names to inanimate objects or to non-domestic animals. And even our pets are not named as our children are named. All this seems to be natural enough, obviously determined by the circumstances, but consider how a human subject *may be* denied a proper name. What happens when we call a grown man "boy," or refer to individuals solely on the basis of their class identities ("*that* Papist," "*that* Communist," "*that* Jew")? Hasn't more transpired than the simple denial of a name?

We feel the pain of such denials because to deny a human being a name is to deny his humanity. That is, to name someone is to ascribe to him a certain property on the basis of which he may be included in the "family of man." Thus, before we name something (or someone), we must first classify that individual, and this classification cannot be taken for granted. Consider, for example, all the recent speculation about the linguistic capacity of whales or primates. Do whales "have" language? Do apes? The questions are not at all trivial, because any absolute determination that these "lower animals" do use language would have a profound effect on our treatment of them. We would, in fact, have to treat them "as if they were human"—and in a very real sense they would be, because the capacity for language defines one of the key properties we ascribe to that class we call "humanity." No wonder that for every researcher who finds such a capacity in animals there is another to deny it: suddenly our biblical inheritance has been qualified; maybe the earth belongs to these others as well as to "us."

My point here is that even natural proper names must be constituted according to conceptual procedures on the basis of which the world may be organized and named. And the classifications that we so determine are not simply waiting for us in "nature," but represent our own interpretations of experience specified according to given cultural ends or purposes. Even our world of "objectively" discrete objects can be seen to be nothing more than a conceptual de-

cision, a strategy for an organization of experience "adopted...in the childhood of our race in order to meet the necessities of life."[4] In other words, the very classification "discrete object" can be seen to represent not a description of the way things "really are," but a goal-oriented interpretive description, a kind of cultural text, that can be strategically applied. What is "common sense" for the rest of us, Herbert Dingle has written, is quite another matter for the scientist, whose particular "method of correlation" can be quite different from our own:

> In the scientific method of correlation, an original molecule consists of what we may call atomic experiences of the same kind—e.g. of sights and sounds. To see how this differs from the commonsense method, let us take an example. Here are two commonsense physical objects—a billiard ball and a piece of sugar. The first is a spatio-temporal association of red color, round shape, hard feeling, horizontal movement, and such things; and the second is a similar but differently located association of white color, hard feeling, cubical outline, sweet taste, and so on. Now, as a scientist...I find that these two associations are useless. I therefore break them up and make a different set of associations. I put the horizontal movement of the disintegrated billiard ball with the perpetual rest of the disintegrated piece of sugar, and form a general concept called "motion" which includes them as examples. Similarly, I take the red color of the one and the white color of the other, and make them up into a molecule covered by a concept "light."[5]

The scientist, then, interprets reality according to his needs, and then names his interpretation with a conceptual term. But what the scientist does is logically no different from what we all do in naming the objects of our experience. All classifications involve the codifying of a certain association of properties which functions as a kind of descriptive formula according to which an object may be included in the classification, and therefore named. The class itself, of course, is not an object, but a group of predicationally related phenomena—in brief, a concept. So, when I recognize an object and speak of it, my spoken or written reference is not to the unique percept, but to a conventional taxonomic organization that has made my recognition possible in the first place. If I speak of a "whale," for example, my reference is not to an isolated particular, but functions as a kind of abbreviated description, a composite sign "linked to the complex object it corresponds to since the signs (or predicates) it is composed of

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4 Herbert Dingle, *Through Science to Philosophy,* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 70-71.

5 Ibid., p. 75.

refer to the entities the object is composed of."[6] Thus, in naming a whale, I look for the descriptive predicates "warm-blooded," and "gives birth to living young," as well as "aquatic animal shaped like a huge fish," in order to be certain that this *is* a "whale." In a very real sense, then, we ourselves constitute the references for our names as we interpret our world, rendering experience itself a kind of text. And I shall suggest that this is precisely the case when we come to apprehend a fictional proper name, for fictions too, and the names they include, are not simply waiting for us to passively receive them. Here again the meaning or reference of the name must be determined conceptually and directed towards some interpretational decision.

Consider again our original paradigm: "Call me Ishmael." In this injunction to name someone, a project appears, a challenge to us to somehow account for this name and to motivate it in the text. But where is this text by which the name is to be motivated? If the cultural text (or conceptual field) on the basis of which a certain child may be named is essentially indeterminate, how much more so must be the narrative text? "What is this story about?" we like to ask, but find that there are many answers. Still, interpretive diversity, either in the natural or the narrative world, does not mean interpretive incoherency, for the concepts according to which we organize, and therefore constitute, a nameable world are not determined haphazardly, but represent certain interpretive decisions against which our concepts themselves must be judged.

For example, if we choose to regard *Moby Dick* as a whale story, a seaman's yarn, we have classified it in such a way that we will not even be on the lookout for any potential onomastic resonances. What does it matter what "Ishmael" means so long as we recognize it as the name of the narrator of our story? The tale's the point, not its "symbolic" significance. But even here, we have granted to the name a very real conceptual significance: we have accepted it as a name precisely because we already know about a class of fictional narrators who all share the same properties as our "Ishmael." That is, Ishmael can be classified as a sailor-storyteller because he too "tells a sea story" "that has such and such shape" and "that shares such and such story-telling conventions." Each description is a kind of predicate that relates each disparate narrator as a member of the same class, a class

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[6] Herbert Hochberg, "Things and Descriptions," in *Essays on Bertrand Russell*, ed. E. D. Klemke (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970).

of yarn spinners that may constitute, in this conceptual interpretation at least, the only reference for our name that we really need.

But say we begin otherwise, and constitute a different context for our name, beginning this time an intertextual search by which we relate *this* Ishmael with the biblical Ishmael: what might this tell us? Here we might find the common predicative property "outcast son" and thus constitute an interpretive conceptual class for both names to refer to. *Moby Dick* will now assume a new interpretive dimension, prompting us to be sensitive to any detail in the story that might relate to this new concept. A biblical texture emerges that is missing from our "yarn-spinner" interpretation, and which *becomes* the context and conceptual background for our fictional name. This conceptual organization may well be readjusted as our initial expectations suffer reversals and surprises through the reading process, but our shifts will be from one conceptual motivation to another, and not out of conceptuality itself.

In other words, while no particular interpretive choice may be objectively necessary to account for a given fictional name (consider the many valid possibilities for "Ishmael" that I have not mentioned), some kind of choice will always be made in the course of a reading precisely because the referential motivation for the name can only be a descriptive concept. That we constitute this description rather than simply "find" it suggests thereby that the interpretive concept is an open rather than a closed set. Its predicated values may change according to the circumstances of a reading, but the reference for the name remains a description, just as today's "whale" is no less an interpretive association than yesterday's "big fish." We might say, then, that the literary proper name constitutes (and is constituted by) a kind of "speaking description" whose function is both conceptual and classificatory; that poetic onomastic referentiality is not a null set; and that the essense of the fictional proper name is in our own emotional *and* cognitive apprehension of the world.

An esthetic text can thus be seen to be an active force in cultural semantics. As Umberto Eco puts it, "to change semantic systems means *to change the way in which culture 'sees' the world.* Thus, a text of the aesthetic type which was so frequently supposed to be absolutely extraneous to any truth conditions (and to exist at a level on which disbelief is totally 'suspended') arouses the suspicion that the correspondence between the present organization of the content and 'actual' states of the world is neither the best nor the ultimate. The world could be defined and organized (and therefore perceived

and known) through other semantic (that is: conceptual) models."[7] In other words, a literary text invites us to rearrange our conceptual apprehension of experience, to organize new classes with new members associated in ways that culture cannot dictate. Literature presents us with a world in which American sailors, for example, can be seen as outcast "orphans" in a society set adrift, causing us to reinterpret our own culture even as we constitute the conceptual schema into which our readings may fall. And, of course, we are not required to constitute orphans: other conceptual schemes, derived from other predicated associations, can determine vastly different interpretations and descriptions, interpretations that will equally affect, *and be affected by,* our own cultural apprehension.

The use of a proper name in fiction, in this sense, cannot be said to be a mere pretense, a mimicry of a "true" usage upon which the fictional use is parasitical. The distinction, it should be remembered, is not between some autonomously "poetic" conceptuality and an "ordinary" one: the structures of conception are continuous. If there is any distinction between poetic and ordinary conceptuality, it is simply in convention: the tacit agreement in ordinary discourse to conceal the traces of its own conceptual contingencies. The interpretation and constitution of poetic concepts and reclassifications could equally be fixed by a rigid code of prescriptive literary criticism, but the fact that we do not often countenance such prescriptions suggests that we find it more rewarding to allow this one special function of our language the freedom to unsettle our dominant (or "ordinary") conceptual codes from time to time.

Thus, it is not only the literary reader who must constitute a conceptual context for his reading in order to determine its meaning and reference. As Teun Van Dijk has written, to understand any text "basically requires that a language user, i.e. a hearer or reader, assigns a semantic structure to the respective units of the text. He thereby gradually constructs a semantic or *conceptual representation* of the text in memory."[8] And while a fictional proper name may be one such contextual "unit," it is not therefore cognitively unique, for we cannot understand any text until we have constituted for it its refer-

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[7] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 274.

[8] Teun Van Dijk, "Cognitive Processing of Literary Discourse," in *Poetics Today,* v. 1, Number 1-2, Autumn 1979, p. 145.

ential *context,* and this context can only be determined on the basis of conceptual decisions.

In this sense, then, all names, whether logically "proper" or "taxonomic," fictional or natural, share a certain identity. Every name is determined by a context, and every context constitutes a conceptual field. To say this, however, is not to insist that the world itself is a text that has somehow been "written" before us. Rather, we constitute our world in the very act of naming it. Associating one experience with another, we constitute an interpretive "meaning" for each, and whether that experience is the naming of a child or the apprehension of a fictional voice, the structure of our apprehension will remain the same. No wonder, then, so many readers so often respond to fictional characters "as if they were real," because in a cognitive sense they *are* real. To weep over the death of a little Nell, or to collect "genuine" Sherlock Holmes paraphernalia, is not to engage simply in naive behavior; it is to respond to a kind of experience that we can recognize, and therefore apprehend, precisely because we have experienced it before in the "text" of our lives.

Thus, we can name general objects and particular ones, sometimes crossing from one category to the other in order to generalize particularly named individuals, or, conversely, to assign personal names to hurricanes, ships, and Kentucky rifles. By thus changing the text, we alter the context, and with it our entire apprehension of the named phenomenon. We do not ordinarily respond to violent storms as if they were persons, and yet women's groups do insist that there be a few "hisicanes" with masculine names to balance such "feminine" viragoes; and a few years ago a great deal of feminine sympathy went out to a particularly successful racing mare. Such episodes are not really nonsensical, because even if performed in a tongue-in-cheek spirit they represent apprehensions structurally identical to any other apprehension—if less culturally established in their conclusions. To personify something is to reclassify it, to endow it with human characteristics as the result of a "transfer of semantic features from a predicate normally associated with humans," as Samuel Levin writes, "to a noun (typically functioning as a subject) that designates something nonhuman."[9]

Still, we may want to say that, after all, *proper* names have exis-

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[9] Samuel R. Levin, "Allegorical Language," in *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol,* Harvard English Studies, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 24.

tential referents and fictional names do not. If "no one thought about Hamlet," Bertrand Russell has remarked, "there would be nothing left of him," but "if no one had thought about Napoleon, he would have seen to it that someone did."[10] And yet, while Russell's remark affirms an unimpeachable truth, his very phrasing opens up a possibility for an adjusted onomastic theory according to which each kind of name, fictional and proper, may be said to have referents which, in spite of their existential difference, still share a certain identity. That is, to say that the referent of "Napoleon" might "have seen to" something or other, is to ascribe to that referent a certain power, a capacity to act or effect. And certainly this is so. But fictional characters also have this power, else we wouldn't respond to them as we do. The difference inheres in the origin of this power, for if the power we might ascribe to "Napoleon" is, initially at least, biological in nature, the power of a fictional character is wholly in its conceptual identity. Thus, there is no question that the power of the fictional referent is less determinate than that of the non-fictional one, but the difference so established is finally one more of degree than of kind; for even "Napoleon's" ability to act is circumscribed by his social, and therefore conceptual, environment. As we have seen, the very fact that a proper name has been granted to the individual represents a communal definition of "humanity" which brings with it such perquisites and powers that we deny to those individuals who are not to be included in the class.

In other words, not even personal power can be taken for granted. We speak of "human rights" (or the powers allowable to "men"), but define other animals as property, chattels, *cattle* (just a century ago certain human beings were defined as property by our own Supreme Court). In saying this I do not mean to question the biological existence of the referent for the proper name, but simply to suggest that the very fact that we have granted that name has its basis in a conceptual decision. We do not create our world by conceiving it, but we do determine the terms by which we will apprehend, and thus respond, to it. And this world too, the world we determine by our own conceptual decisions, is in almost as much flux as the fictional worlds that our readings produce. Species are constantly in a state of redefinition, our very relationship to our environment is subject to concep-

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[10] Bertrand Russell, "Descriptions," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Language,* eds. Jay Rosenberg and Charles Travis (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 168.

tual change. One of the great shocks of Darwin's revolution was that it told us that the earth no longer belonged to us, but that we belonged to the earth, that we, too, have been shaped by its processes. And whether or not we subscribe to this revolution is really not the point, because in either case the very way we will live in this world will be effected by the manner in which we define it and our place therein.

Thus, there is a logical link between our apprehension of "reality" and of "fiction," for in either case our understanding is founded in conceptual determinations. One can be solemnly told that *Moby Dick is* only a whale story, but if we respond that this is not what the text "says," we might remember that we cannot really be certain what *we are,* and that our own "text" is often quite baffling. Literature and experience both, as apprehended phenomena, subsist in their organization, and so conceptualizing is peculiar neither to poetry nor to science. It is for this reason that we often treat the fictional proper name as if it were a non-fictional name, because each is determined by conceptual decisions. In fact, the majority of the non-fictional proper names with which we are acquainted quite literally come to us in texts (e.g. newspapers, journals, books, and so on), and so most of our experience of them will usually be remarkably similar to our experience of fictional names. That fictional names are so often responded to as if they were non-fictional ones is therefore neither very surprising nor epistemologically naive. To do so is not to fail to "suspend one's belief" precisely because the reading of the fictional name does not really involve such a suspension. If anything, to read is to become more conceptually alert, and is not to surrender one's cognitive prerogatives.

"Why *Ishmael?*" we might ask of a novel beginning with this name—and as we would not question a personal acquaintance—"why does he call himself *that?*" And if this isn't "really" his name, what might his "real name" be? To ask such questions is to begin a search for the conceptual motivation of this name, to seek to determine a contextual reference on the basis of which we might respond to its as-yet-undetermined power. We may restrict our search to the narrative in hand (which itself involves a conceptual determination that the "true" way of reading is always intratextual), or we may launch an inter-textual investigation into the literary "Ishmaels" at large. But in either case (or in their combination), our search is never passive. Whatever evidence we might bring to bear in support of one interpretive decision or another will itself have to be constituted *as evidence* in the first place, and is thus itself a part of the conceptual

design we determine for the referent of our name. And the proof of this is that different interpreters accept different criteria for evidence, essentially classifying *this* datum (e.g. the intrinsic text) as critically acceptable, and *that* datum (e.g. the author's biography) as critically unacceptable, or vice versa.[11] (Both determinations, by the way, have marked famous movements in the history of literary criticism.)

My point is not that one criterion is right and the other wrong, but that both (and any others one might determine) have been constituted in the same way. And the "Ishmael" that the biographical conception determines will be quite a different character than the "Ishmael" of the anti-biographical school. In other words, the means by which we determine the meaning for a name *is a part of the meaning.* It too is a part of the conceptual field by which we place a reference. It too cannot be taken for granted.

That we interpret our world in the act of naming and conceiving it suggests that the line between "fiction" and "fact" cannot, therefore, be so clearly drawn. Our conceptions must be conditioned by our experience, but the very shape of that experience will be equally conditioned by the form of our conceptions. We often find what we expect to find in experience, and our expectations are determined often by the names we give to things. And the same is true for the literary experience, for here too the text we discover is the text we help make. We do not put the words on the page, we do not name the protagonists; but what the words will mean to us, what kind of characters we will experience, will have much to do with our own conceptions and experiences. For example, for John Milton, living in a climate of ideas in which obedience was a primary value, Satan was the villain of *Paradise Lost* because of his disobedience; while for William Blake, living in more revolutionary times, Satan was a hero—and for precisely the same reasons. The simple fact, then, of the appearance of the fictional name, is only the beginning of the matter, for what that name will signify will have to do with the interpretive, and conceptual, assumptions of its reader. Is "Satan" a hero or villain? There is no "right" answer (though there might be a right answer for Milton *and* a right answer for Blake) because any answer must be guided by the conceptual predisposition of the interpreter. What "Satan" means, what

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[11] Please see Stanley Fish's detailed analyses of the question of interpretive pre-assumptions as presented throughout his collection of essays *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

motivates his appearance in the poem, involves conceptual values that we cannot find solely in the name nor in what is said about the name. Indeed, the very question "who is the hero of *Paradise Lost*?" cannot even be asked without our having some conception of narrative heroism to begin with.

What this implies is that the meaning of the fictional name is logically similar to that of the ordinary proper name. This is not to say that there are no proper names, or that all proper names are really fictions, but that all names share a certain nature. To name is to conceive and to be guided by conception. It is true that the *content* of our conceptions with respect to the proper name and the fictional name will usually differ (i.e. the properties we assume for the referents of ordinary proper names include "flesh-and-blood" characteristics that are not a part of our fictional conceptions), but the fact of the conception itself, of the organization that makes naming possible in the first place, does not differ. One might say that the meaning of the name is relative to the system in which it appears, but onomastic systematicity itself is not. Proper names do not cancel out fictional names, and fictional names do not cancel out proper names; rather, both are onomastic kinds whose values are relative to the kind, but whose final conceptual identity *as names* ultimately obscures the distinction between them.

So "what's in a name?" In a sense, everything, for the names we give to things say a great deal about our own values and assumptions, even of our hopes. To name a fictional "Satan," or to give a child his father's name, is to inscribe a certain desire, to act upon a belief. Is it any accident, then, that when we try to account for our own origins, one of the first acts of our scriptural "father" was to distinguish himself from "the beasts of the field" precisely by naming and thereby assuming authority over them? To name something is to exercise a certain power over it, to control by organization and definition. *How* we name a thing and *why* will have a great deal to do with how we treat it. But at the same time, to name is to be equally affected by power, by the power of a world that we do not make to stimulate in us the cognitions and emotions by which we may react upon that world. To conceive is to simultaneously act and be acted upon: it is neither a question of the one or the other. There are no clear distinctions. So it is little wonder that fictional names and proper names can be so difficult to tell apart, and why we so often sympathize more closely with the figures we meet in literature than with those we meet in life. Sympathy itself is a product of our own conceptions and is expressed

in direct proportion to the intensity of those conceptions. And here, perhaps, is the reason that literature has so often been defined for its moral value: not so much because it teaches us how to behave, to instruct us by delighting us, but because it enables us to enjoy the leisure of full conception, in fact demands our conceptual attention to an extent that "ordinary" experience, which has been named and organized for us so thoroughly in advance, cannot. Literature, and the fictional names of its texture, requires us to begin the task of naming things ourselves, conceiving them fully, and therefore understanding them as we rarely understand those things that are simply presented to us already made. Is it so surprising then, that we often understand our favorite fictional acquaintances better than our non-fictional ones, and perhaps even like them better? We may do so because we have taken the time to conceive them more fully, to experience them as knowledge all the more precious because we have constituted it. Indeed, the full experience of the fictional name is to make us all rather like Adam, allowing us not only to name the beasts of the field, but to put them there.

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