Hooray For Hollywood: Onomastic Techniques in Bemelmans' "Dirty Eddie"

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> A New York actress has just got back to Broadway after a year in Hollywood. She says that she has been so long among the false fronts and papiermaché mansions on the set that nowadays she finds herself sneaking a look at her husband to see if he goes all the way round or is just a profile.
>
> —Sir P.G. Wodehouse, *Performing Flea*

Given the propensity of some curs, canine or human, to bite the hand that feeds them, it is not surprising that a lot of satirical barbs have been flung by writers at the dream factories of Hollywood where so many of them have labored. There is a long list of obscure plays about Tinsel Town: *Hey Diddle Diddle* (Cormack), *Schoolhouse on the Lot* (Fields and Chodorov), *The Greatest Find Since Garbo* (Birchard and Buchner), *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* (Boothe), *Hollywood Be Thy Name* (Fagan), *Stars in Your Eyes* (McEvoy), and the list goes on. The Spewacks' *Boy Meets Girl* and Kaufman and Connolly's *Merton of the Movies* are still remembered. The fiction has done even better: think of Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* and Bud Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* And, of course, the movies have kidded and congratulated themselves.[1] But here I want to examine some straightforward techniques of satirical names functioning in a more genial send-up of Hollywood and in a novel that deserves renewed attention, *Dirty Eddie* (1947) by Ludwig Bemelmans (1898-1962).

Bemelmans wanted to be a painter and claimed that he wrote his more than forty books because he had insomnia, but the world—which he regarded as "a curiosity"—always seemed to be presenting him with

wonderfully wacky characters and hilarious situations, and the world of Hollywood was particularly colorful. That he did more than record the lives of the *gamine* Madeleine (of his famous children's books) or the eccentrics of his *Hotel Splendide* is nowhere more evident than in the satirical names he invented for the novel *Dirty Harry*, his comic, trenchant, carefully contrived study of overpaid actresses, underpaid screenwriters, and overbearing and overreaching directors in the movie capital.

Himself an Austrian immigrant, he was amused by the real names of the talents that had flocked to Hollywood after the movies of Europe began to be overshadowed by The Industry in America's golden west.[2] For his novel he invents Vanya Vashvily, "not the run of insensible producers" but a kind and talented man who, on the side, writes pop music (such as "Lost is Love," "Bird of Paradise," and "Au Revoir at the Gare St.-Lazare") under the name of Danny Spellbinder (which manages to sound both Jewish and self-promoting while it hides both his religion and his shyness). Other people at grandly-named Olympia Studios are Vogelsang ("famous composer of background music"); Moses Fable ("last of a race of mammoth men," the Jewish studio head); Wolfgang Leibstod ("head of our musical department"); Raoul de Bourggraff ("head of the art department," who can build you a full-size Gare St.-Lazare and, when necessary, change it overnight to the La Salle railroad station of Chicago, or turn a chic Hollywood office into a replica of a sleazy New York hotel room so that a writer can feel at home enough to write); Sandor Thrilling (a director of the Hungarian persuasion); Bob Evervess (bubbling darling of the "story department"); Mr. Envelove ("of the legal end"); and such screenwriters as the efficient Valerie Sinnot, the dashing Maurice Cassard, and the bearded left-winger from that sleazy New York hotel (Hotel Wolff on West 44th Street) who is lured to Hollywood to write and does not put a word on paper, "the great writer"—everyone and everything in Hollywood is "great" because it makes everyone feel more confident—with the very assimilated forename and the very apt surname, Ludlow Mumm.

Ludlow Mumm rapidly gets an agent (Arty Wildgans of the Wilgans Chase or wild-goose-chase Agency), a secretary (Miss Prinsip, who is a first-rate manager), a script to work on (*Will You Marry Me?*), a star to adapt it to (first a policeman's daughter from Chicago named Marie O'Neill, who is renamed Belinda and groomed as a "Serena Blandish"

type, later the discoverer of the new star of the picture: a black piglet she dubs Dirty Eddie), and helpful (Maurice Cassard) and rival writers (Valerie Sinnot and the dependable hack named Jerome Hack). He meets other agents (such as Al Leinwand, "head of a hawk on a sparrow body"), actors such as leading man Buddy van der Lynn, Sir Gerald Graveline "the distinguished actor" on his last legs, the silent-movie star Betsy Allbright ("one of the uncrowned queens of Hollywood," now on her fourth husband, manly and phony Lt. Casey McMahon), and Belladonna (a female piglet, "a professional, with some stage experience" that gets into the act when Dirty Eddie's owners get difficult). There is also a group of chauffeurs and butlers and other servants with names such as Joe, Ernie, Toni, Walter, George, Tom, Auguste, and—the most unusual—Arthur Nightwine, who turns out to be not just a perfect butler but a retired thief—with a script he wants you to read.

There is a host of other characters around the fringes of this strange society in its "glass houses," from a florist (Mr. Nircassio) to a prostitute "with a small clientele" (Beverly, who winds up as Mrs. Copfree and retires from the business) to "Nighty" Nightingale (a young man who has "lit up the garden" for one of Betsy Allbright's cheap but lavish parties). Their names fly, and create the atmosphere of bustle. Sometimes a real name is not known, as would be the case in real life: a woman at a party who is described as resembling Chancellor Hindenberg in drag is "Mrs. Hindenberg" to a cruel observer.

The social status and the familiarity or unfamiliarity of characters with the milieu is tested by the restaurants they frequent (Romanoff's and Chasen's on the Coast, The Colony or The Stork Club in New York, Fouquet's in Paris)[3] as much as by the places where they live (Santa Barbara residents are dismissed as "Barbarians"). The large cast is economically characterized by the names of the places they shop (May Company or Sak's Fifth Avenue in New York), of the people who design their clothes (Adrian, Domenick Punaro), of the art they own (Braque, Vlaminck, Utrillo), of the pianos they play (Blüchner), the soda they drink (Dr. Brown's Celery Tonic), the hospitals they go to (Cedars of Lebanon, "Mayos," meaning the Mayo Brothers' clinic), the cigars they buy (Mumm arrives treating himself in his new-found wealth to the expensive ones and, as he departs broke "His finger moved slowly from the Cuban corner" of the display case "back to the Robert Burns Panatelas"), the left-wing pub-

lications they read (*PM*, the *Daily Worker,* the *American-Soviet Review* for Mumm, who takes time off from doing nothing in his office to take his turn on a picket line), the nicknames they give others (Cassard calls everyone *amigo*, though he is French), the cars they drive (Ford, Cadillac, Lagonda), the places they publish ("You must do a profile for the *New Yorker.* A serial for *Redbook.* Or visit a foreign country. The *Saturday Evening Post* is sending you to Peking."), the movies they make (*The Hound of the Baskervilles, Snowy Night, The Count of Monte Cristo, Two-Gun Lucy* (a western), *The Mountain King* , about Ludwig II of Bavaria and —they have him mixed up with a heterosexual forebear—Lola Montez, not to mention *Er riecht nach Knoblauch* "an old European film...that had a pig in its cast", *The Mount,* which is a life of Christ, otherwise described as "something in Galilean homespun," named *Carnival in Bombay* , formerly *Week End in Calcutta* formerly *A Tale of Two Cities*).[4]

The characters in the novel are acutely aware of making a name for themselves, living on the street with the right name (such as *Chrysantemum Drive*), keeping their names before the public, and of the many ways that names can be used: "the Idiot at the end of the corridor," a piglet described as "an actor," a night with a whore put down in the expense account as "research," a female worker in a wartime factory being called "Rosie, the Riveter," and the blackening of names by scandal in a town where everyone, it is alleged, is a "procurer" or "a heel" or "a talker."

One has to try to get one's name into the studio head's head—or the Hollywood *Reporter.* Moses Fable can get away with calling the Jewish magnates at the carefully unnamed other studio "Kikes," but no one else would dare. Maybe the end of World War II will lead to "the absence of labels," as is suggested, but don't count on it.

Even the furniture has names. Mumm rejoices in "an intelligent piece of furniture," a self-adjusting chair called "King of Ease," which does some pretty funny things.

If Mumm meets a lot of people with very odd-sounding names, that's not remarkable, he thinks:

> Mumm shook hands without surprise. In a town that contains forms like Utter McKinley, the undertakers; a real estate firm of Read and Wright; two Prinzmetals; a LeRoy Prinz; a Jack Skirball; a Jerry Rothschild; a law firm by the

> name of Dull and Twist; and musicians called Amphitheatrof and Bakaleinakoff, he had become accustomed to unusual and distinctive names.[5]

These real names are accompanied in the book not only by invented ones (*Delores Tarant* for a Mexican actress and *Joe Malnatti* for a Chicago gangster, *Kitty Cat, Pussy Cat,* and *Mike* for a maharajah's feline pets, etc.) but by ones from real life that create the scenery and set the tone (*Wilshire Boulevard, Sunset Boulevard, Topanga Beach, Ventura Boulevard, Palm Springs*) and nicknames (*the Chief* is the Super Chief—in those days people took the train across country if they did not want to fly) and house names (*X'Isle* is a hideaway, if not in reality than at least one in the actual tradition of rather cutesy names for country retreats). The names of real people, from "the Armours of Chicago" to Arthur Freed and Louis B. Mayer of Hollywood's power elite, are there with the names of Walter Winchell, Red Skelton, Emil Coleman (a musician, like Skelton overpraised by the author), Gary "Coop" Cooper, Gable, Carson, Lana Turner, Lassie. Perhaps intimidated (as many were in her day) by that horrendous harridan in the hat, Hedda Hopper, Bemelmans calls her merely "the famous columnist and oracle."

The jacket has at the end of the blurb:

> The author states: "The characters in this novel are fictitious, and any resemblance to living persons or pigs is pure coincidence."

But clearly satire needs to have (as Lord Byron said of poetry) some twig of fact to which to attach what the writer has spun out of his own guts, and a *roman à clef* about Hollywood as an idea did not wait to spring full-blown from the brow of the author of *Valley of the Dolls*.

Whether one is able to connect the characters and events in this satirical novel with real life people and happenings is a question to be examined elsewhere, if (at this time in history) at all. But here we can stress that the nature of real-life Hollywood names played into the hands of the satirist and the admixture of real names with the names that Bemelmans contrived to score points in the fiction and fun makes the whole fantasy that much more convincing and effective.

Dirty Eddie

On nearly every page of *Dirty Eddie* the writer of comedy can learn a trick or two and the reader of satire can chuckle appreciatively. Bemelmans is a master of names.

Moses Fable has, for instance, kept his forename proudly (and is still leading the herd to The Promised Land). The family, however, seems to have picked up *Fable* fairly recently. Moses has an uncle (Adam Fable) who runs a department store in New York, though maybe it would have been more realistic for him to have been in the "rag trade" on Seventh Avenue. There is also an Irma Fable, and her name has made her well-off: if it weren't for that, "she'd be slicing salami at the schtickle-for-a-nickle joint." *Mispoche* counts! In fact, it used to be said that the famous Holywood initials *MGM* stood not for "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer" (when Sam Goldfish became Sam Goldwyn) but for the Yiddish for "my whole family", for *mispoche* is the Jewish equivalent of sociological jargon's "extended family."

Throughout, whether a woman is named Adrienne or Henrietta, Bemelmans is right on target with age and origin. When a trivial starlet is mentioned – Cassard asks Moses Fable, "What's her name?" – the dismissive reply is "Laura, Lena, Lorna, something like that." When Cassard is flying high (and tipping big), the door is opened at Romanoff's (a restaurant run by some Jew who was pretending to be from the czarist royal family, no less, but Hollywood liked the *chutzpah* or gall of it) with "And how are you today, Mr. Cassard?" When Cassard hits the skids, he is lucky to get a curt "Hello." When someone hears *Nightwine* he exclaims "What a perfect name!" When someone senses impending storm, it's "a Brontë mood," challenging the reader and upgrading the character with a literary allusion. When Belinda mentions poinsettias, Cassard says, "Don't tell me the name....I detest them – they look like handkerchiefs in which people have had a nosebleed." When we meet the vet "whose practice extended, besides pet dogs, to turtles, deodorized skunks, coati-mundi, and to all the vast menagerie that are employed in pictures," we hoot as we discover he is Dr. Grippenwald. We like the way that Fable (from his Olympian heights) surveys but refuses to name "them" at the rival studios or their products, the way that when Billy Rose (a stenographer turned impressario, nameless here) is mentioned in passing it is only as the perpetrator of nameless "underwater pageants."

Ashley

A few of the jokes are dated now. Some were always rather caviar for the general—those little touches that clever writers like to put in to keep the wittier readers on their toes. One of the difficult allusions now is that to the former reputation of the *rue Blondel* (Paris), though the meaning is still clear enough in context. But why, we ask, was a cocktail made of a jigger of grapefruit juice, two jiggers of gin, and one-third of a jigger of Cointreau, "served very, very cold," appropriately called "a 'Lady Mendl Special' "? It's beyond the abilities of most readers (and critics) today to recall that Lady Mendl was a society decorator who perpetrated symphonies in beige and also once had a black-and-white period from which some of the houses of the Sweet Young Things never quite recovered.

Far safer, if one has one's eye on posterity, are the undatable and unabashed onomastic tricks such as we see in Belinda's naming the piglet that becomes a star who steals her movie simply Dirty Eddie—and Bemelmans' tease in calling the novel *Dirty Eddie*, because the piglet doesn't get knocked down by Cassard's car, or picked up for the movies, until the novel is reaching its conclusion. You may have been wondering if Dirty Eddie was going to be some gangster from Belinda's birthplace, Chicago. But, no, Dirty Eddie is that black piglet and stars with Belinda, "a girl from Chicago [who] plays a girl from Chicago. That alors, is a miracle!"

The piglet winds up getting a seven-year contract to star at $5000 a week, unstoppable even by *force majeure* or acts of God or the film unions, much to the profit of Farmer Weatherbeat (whom Vanya calls "Mr. Farmer" when he cannot recall his name and comes to have to coddle as "Mr. Weatherbeat" when Dirty Eddie becomes a "hot property," as they say in "show biz"). Dirty Eddie ("what a ham!") becomes the "personality pig," Cassard and Belinda marry, Mumm goes quietly back to New York, Betsy Allbright goes triumphantly forward, and all's well that ends well.

The common people—the John and Marge and Jack and May and Bob we hear about on a party line one time—are just ignored. It's not their story. They are not the ones who get Command Performance invitations to Betsy's dinners, dinners at which the guests have to listen to her tell all about her old lovers and her old silents (*Snowy Night* is her favorite because she played in it with Dennis Calhoun, back in the days when lots of people used their own names as screen stars—think of Florence Lawrence

and Helen Twelvetrees and even Bessie Love). And they don't have to drink Betsy's *Sonny Boy* (a California claret that a pompous idiot mistakes for a Château Lafitte) or "the special Santa Monica brandy from Thrifty's."

The common people are the principal ones who eat Le Noodle Soup (as today they drive Le Car and carry Le Bag totes – Bemelmans was prescient) and, once upon a time, went to the movies every time the program changed, making the days of which Bemelmans wrote the "fat years" of Hollywood, the time when all this foolishness never had to be subjected to the scrutiny of money-men's accountants, those hard and bottom-line taskmasters.

The Hollywood of *Dirty Eddie* was a crazier but a more colorful place than anywhere films are made today. The tone the names create is a light-hearted one, and apt. The novel might have dealt with Communists in Hollywood, but it just took a crack at left-wing Mumm in passing. It might have concentrated on the dismal army-wife/army-life world of Boonton, a wartime military establishment where an impetuous first marriage to a soldier takes the girl who is later to be Belinda the star. Bemelmans does a little bit of satire on that rich topic, but he moves on to more amusing things, to people who are glamorous and wear "Tabu, the forbidden fragrance." But even there he makes little of the darker side: Dennis Calhoun keeps a pornographic book locked up, but his own dark soul is left pretty much locked up, too.

Dirty Eddie was designed to be a funny book, and it is, not a scathing satire but a smiling one, not a political polemic, not a sensational exposé, just Bemelmans' own special brand of droll entertainment. Nothing serious, and "cut to the chase," keep it moving.

Dirty Eddie achieves its entertainment value very significantly from its clever use of onomastic devices. Though Cassard may get names wrong, as when he says he cannot play "Jimmy run" when he means *gin rummy*, the artist with words, Ludwig Bemelmans, never gets any names wrong. To study how he does it is to learn a great deal about how names can create not only humor and satirical points but also how the pleasure that onomastic tricks can give the reader creates, between reader and writer, a kind of complicity in delight.

That warm relationship established in such a way between reader and writer enables the writer to get by without much of that high serious-

ness that true satire is often said to require. *Dirty Eddie* is a charming rather than alarming book. It almost sounds like reportage. (Bemelmans always claimed he had no imagination). At its wildest, we *want* to believe the story, and we love the characters.

I have written on Bemelmans elsewhere and declared my opinion that "his delightful humor disarms criticism," which was a rather sneaky way of handling that critical assignment (109). Bemelmans, however, would have enjoyed the deviousness. This time, in this onomastic criticism, I feel I have actually come to grips with what he does in one of his most neglected and most delightful books, which is to use names to provide both the distracting patter and the rabbit in the hat.

Notes

1. By the time of Bemelmans' novel, Hollywood as a film capital was about 35 years old and known worldwide. It had already been praised in films such as *Hollywood, Going Hollywood, Hollywood Cavalcade,*and *Hollywood Boulevard.* Leslie Halliwell says that "satire had already struck in such films as *The Last Command, Merton of the Movies, Show People, The Lost Squadron, What Price Hollywood, Lady Killer, Something to Sing About, Once in a Lifetime, Stardust, Hollywood Hotel, Stand In, A Star is Born* and *Boy Meets Girl.* The moguls didn't seem to mind the film city being shown as somewhat zany, as in *The Goldwyn Follies,* Disney's *Mother Goose Goes Hollywood, The Cohens and Kellys in Hollywood, Abbott and Costello in Hollywood, The Jones Family in Hollywood, Movie Crazy, Never Give a Sucker an Even Break,* and*Hellzapoppin;* but they preferred the adulatory attitude best expressed in *The Youngest Profession....*" Television has recently (May 1988) revived *Once in a Lifetime.*

Bemelmans' *Dirty Eddie* misses a number of opportunities to be scathing and lacks the bite of movies that followed it, such as *The Star, The Bad and the Beautiful, The Big Knife, The Goddess, Two Weeks in Another Town, The Carpetbaggers, The Loved One, The Oscar, Valley of the Dolls, My Favorite Year,*etc. Bemelmanns is content to jibe gently and *Dirty Eddie* is no more an attack on the zaniness of big studio life than the Jerry Lewis comedies like *The Errand Boy, The Ladies' Man* and *The Patsy.* Bemelmans' work is hard neither in construction nor in comment, as critics have noted before.

2. In Bemelmans' day actors (and then we used to say "actresses," too) tended to change their names for the screen. See "Flicks, Flacks, and Flux:." *Dirty Eddie* makes little of the humor of performers' real names or the sometimes odd ones they assumed. Ashley mentions chiefly the foreign names that were usually retained by directors—Jews might fix up names a little: Stroheim added a "von" and Moishe Stiller became Mauritz Stiller—and by music directors, art directors, et al. The names of music directors such as Constantine Bakaleinikoff (1898-1966) at RKO, for example, did not have to be pronounced or readily remembered by the general public. Art directors included André Andrejew, Lazare Meerson, Walter Rörig, and Hermann Warm, and in that lot a name such as that of Richard Day or Cedric Gibbons was unusual, as was that of Edith Head among costume designers.

3. Restaurant names help to characterize also in recent novels, such as Bret Easton Ellis' *Less than Zero* (1985).

4. The use of names and brand names to characterize has been noted by many critics of Tom Wolfe's bestselling novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and by the critic (Wendy Wasserman) of *Complications* (by "Prince Charming," actually Roseanne Darryl Thomas) who heads her review "The Brand Name Guide to Life." The effect of such names in *Dirty Eddie* must at first have been to make it seem very "in" and contemporary, but the up-to-date soon

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